

Think Again: The Muslim Brotherhood

by [Eric Trager \(/experts/eric-trager\)](#)

Jan 28, 2013

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Eric Trager \(/experts/eric-trager\)](#)

Eric Trager was the Esther K. Wagner Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

How did so many Western analysts get Egypt's Islamist movement so wrong?

"They're democrats."

Don't kid yourself. Long before the Jan. 25 revolution that ousted Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, many academics and policymakers argued that his main adversary -- the Muslim Brotherhood -- had made its peace with democracy. This was based on the assumption that, since the Muslim Brotherhood participated in virtually every election under Mubarak, it was committed to the rule of the people as a matter of principle.

It was also based on what typically sympathetic Western researchers heard from Muslim Brotherhood leaders, and what I heard as well. "Democracy is shura," Brotherhood Deputy Supreme Guide Khairat al-Shater told me during a March 2011 interview, referring to the Islamic jurisprudential tool of "consultation." The implication was that the Brotherhood accepted a political system that encouraged open debate.

Yet since the Muslim Brotherhood's candidate, Mohamed Morsy, was elected president in June, the exact opposite has been true. The Brotherhood's only real "consultation" has been with the Egyptian military, which the Brotherhood persuaded to leave power by ceding substantial autonomy to it under the new constitution. Among other undemocratic provisions, this backroom deal yielded constitutional protection for the military's separate court system, under which civilians can be prosecuted for the vague crime of "damaging the armed forces."

Meanwhile, the Brotherhood has embraced many of the Mubarak regime's autocratic excesses: Editors who are critical of the Brotherhood have lost their jobs, and more journalists have been prosecuted for insulting the president during Morsy's six months in office than during Mubarak's 30-year reign. And much as Mubarak's ruling party once did, the Brotherhood is using its newfound access to state resources as a political tool: It reportedly received below-market food commodities from the Ministry of Supply and Social Affairs, which it is redistributing to drum up votes in the forthcoming parliamentary elections.

The Brotherhood's most blatantly undemocratic act, however, was Morsy's Nov. 22 "constitutional declaration,"

through which he placed his presidential edicts above judicial scrutiny and asserted the far-reaching power to "take the necessary actions and measures to protect the country and the goals of the revolution." When this power grab catalyzed mass protests, Morsy responded by ramming a new constitution through the Islamist-dominated Constituent Assembly, and the Brotherhood later mobilized its cadres to attack the anti-Morsy protesters, and subsequently extract confessions from their captured fellow citizens. So much for promises of "consultation."

As the Brotherhood's first year in power has demonstrated, elections do not, by themselves, yield a democracy. Democratic values of inclusion are also vital. And the Muslim Brotherhood -- which has deployed violence against protesters, prosecuted its critics, and leveraged state resources for its own political gain -- clearly lacks these values.

"They're Egypt's evangelicals."

False. While it is certainly true that Muslim Brothers, like America's Christian evangelicals, are religious people, the Brotherhood's religiosity isn't its most salient feature. Whereas Christian evangelicals (as well as devout Catholics, orthodox Jews, committed Hindus, and so on) are primarily defined by their piety, the Muslim Brotherhood is first and foremost a political organization -- a power-seeking entity that uses religion as a mobilizing tool. As a result, the political diversity within the evangelical community, including its quietist trend, cannot exist within the Muslim Brotherhood, which strives for political uniformity among its hundreds of thousands of members.

The Brotherhood achieves this internal uniformity by subjecting its members to a rigorous five- to eight-year process of internal promotion, during which time a rising Muslim Brother ascends through four membership ranks before finally becoming a full-fledged "active brother." At each level, Brothers are tested on their completion of a standardized Brotherhood curriculum, which emphasizes rote memorization of the Quran as well as the teachings of Brotherhood founder Hassan al-Banna and radical Brotherhood theorist Sayyid Qutb. Rising Muslim Brothers are also vetted for their willingness to follow the leadership's orders, and Muslim Brothers ultimately take an oath to "listen and obey" to the organization's edicts.

The Brotherhood's 20-member executive Guidance Office, meanwhile, deploys its well-indoctrinated foot soldiers for maximum political effect. The movement's pyramid-shaped hierarchy quickly disseminates directives down to thousands of five- to 20-member "families" -- local Brotherhood cells spread throughout Egypt. These "families" execute the top leaders' orders, which may include providing local social services, organizing mass demonstrations, mobilizing voters for political campaigns, or more grimly, coordinating violent assaults on anti-Brotherhood protesters.

By channeling deeply committed members through an institutionalized chain of command, the Brotherhood has discovered the key ingredients for winning elections in a country where practically everyone else is deeply divided. For this reason, it is extremely protective of its internal unity: Its current leaders have largely dodged ideological questions -- such as explaining what "instituting the sharia [Islamic law]" means in practice -- to prevent fissures from emerging.

The Brotherhood has further maintained internal unity by banishing anyone who disagrees with its strategy. It excommunicated a former top official, Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh, when he declared his presidential candidacy in mid-2011 despite the Brotherhood's policy at the time against nominating a presidential candidate -- and even after the Brotherhood reversed its own decision, Aboul Fotouh remained persona non grata. It similarly ousted top Brotherhood youths who opposed the establishment of a single Brotherhood party and called on the Brotherhood to remain politically neutral.

To be sure, the Brotherhood's long-term vision is religious: It calls for "instituting God's sharia and developing the Islamic nation's renaissance on the basis of Islam." But the Brotherhood views itself the key vehicle for achieving this vision, which is why it places such a priority on protecting its organizational strength and internal unity. Indeed, far

from approximating a devout religious group akin to evangelical Christians, the Muslim Brotherhood's disciplined pursuit of power -- which includes indoctrinating members and using force against detractors -- makes it most similar to Russia's Bolsheviks.

"They're essentially free-market capitalists."

Not really. In the aftermath of the Muslim Brotherhood's rapid emergence as Egypt's new ruling party, the existence of wealthy businessmen within the organization's top ranks was taken as a sign that it was a capitalist organization that would put Egypt's economic interests first and thus steer a moderate course. The Brotherhood's supposed capitalism was also taken as a sign that it would seek cooperation with the West as it pursued foreign direct investment.

But just as electoral participation doesn't necessarily make an organization democratic, being led by wealthy businessmen doesn't make the Brotherhood capitalist.

Not that the Muslim Brotherhood claims to be capitalist anyway. "It is not," Ashraf Serry, a member of the Brotherhood's economic policy-focused "Renaissance Project" team, told me during a June 2012 interview. The Brotherhood, he explained, believed in striking a balance between "the right to capture...treasure" and "the ethics and values that secure the society" -- whatever that means.

The text of the "Renaissance Project" is similarly ambivalent. On one hand, the platform emphasizes capitalist ideas such as ending monopolistic practices, encouraging foreign trade, reducing Egypt's deficit, and cutting many of the bureaucratic regulations that inhibit the emergence of new businesses. Yet it also envisions a large role for the state in managing Egypt's economy, including price controls for commodities, "strict oversight" of markets, "reconsideration" of the Mubarak-era privatizations of state-owned enterprises, and governmental support for farmers. And of course, there's a substantial Islamist component to the Brotherhood's economic agenda, which calls for establishing governmental Islamic financial institutions and using *zakat* (religiously mandated charity) and *waqf* (Islamic endowments) as tools for combating poverty.

What this hodgepodge of economic ideas means in practice remains unclear, because the Brotherhood has been rather skittish about making economic decisions since assuming power. While the Brotherhood has seemingly overcome its initial objections to accepting an interest-bearing loan from the International Monetary Fund (interest is forbidden in many interpretations of Islam), it has nonetheless postponed signing off on the loan repeatedly. And while Morsy has tried to implement certain policies for cutting government spending and raising revenue -- such as instituting a 10 p.m. curfew for restaurants and shops and increasing taxes on certain goods -- he has immediately backtracked on each occasion under pressure from his own Brotherhood colleagues.

If anything, the Brotherhood's economic policy is ultimately characterized by indecision -- both because of its contradictory economic ideas and the political challenges it faces. As Egypt enters a fiscal tailspin, with cash reserves falling from \$36 billion in February 2011 to approximately \$15 billion today, that isn't going to be good enough.

"They accept the treaty with Israel."

They never will. U.S. President Barack Obama's administration took comfort from Morsy's handling of the November Gaza war: From Washington's viewpoint, the Egyptian president resisted using the conflict as a pretext to break relations with Israel, and instead authorized negotiations with the Jewish state to achieve a relatively speedy ceasefire.

From the Muslim Brotherhood's perspective, however, Morsy preserved the movement's anti-Israel agenda. He stood by his refusal to meet with Israelis by outsourcing those negotiations to Egyptian intelligence officials; the

ceasefire strengthened Hamas, the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood; and the Egyptian government accepted no new responsibilities to stem the flow of weapons into Gaza. Far from yielding to the reality of Egyptian-Israeli relations, Morsy simply deferred their reassessment so that he could focus on his more immediate goal -- consolidating the Muslim Brotherhood's control at home. Indeed, one day after the Gaza ceasefire, Morsy issued his power-grabbing constitutional declaration, and rammed through a new Islamist constitution shortly thereafter.

This is, in fact, the very order of events that the Muslim Brotherhood envisions in its long-term program. As Shater explained during his April 2011 unveiling of the Brotherhood's "Renaissance Project," building an "Islamic government" at home must precede the establishment of a "global Islamic state," which is the final stage in achieving "the empowerment of God's religion." To be sure, consolidating power at home could take years, and the fact that the Brotherhood doesn't totally control Egypt's foreign-policy apparatus will also prevent it from scrapping the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty -- for now.

But the Muslim Brotherhood does aim to scrap the treaty, which simply cannot be reconciled with the anti-Israel and anti-Semitic hatred in which every Muslim Brother is thoroughly indoctrinated. This vitriol was perhaps most apparent in Morsy's now-infamous 2010 remarks, in which he called Jews "the descendants of apes and pigs." Even as president, Morsy's blatant bigotry remains irrepressible: In a meeting with a U.S. Senate delegation in Cairo, Morsy implied that the U.S. media was controlled by the Jews.

And while the Brotherhood's apologists claim that these are idle words on which the movement won't act, its leaders have repeatedly signaled the opposite. In recent months, the Brotherhood's political party drafted legislation to unilaterally amend the treaty, a Brotherhood foreign policy official told a private salon that Morsy was working to "gradually" end normalization with Israel, and Supreme Guide Mohamed Badie has twice called for Muslims to wage a "holy jihad" to retake Jerusalem.

Washington should stop deluding itself: It will not be able to change the Brotherhood's ideology on Israel. Instead, it should focus squarely on constraining the Brotherhood's behavior in order to prevent it from acting on its beliefs anytime soon. As the Brotherhood makes quite clear on its Arabic media platforms, it has no intention of reconciling itself to the reality of either the peace treaty or the very existence of Israel.

"They can't lose."

Expect the unexpected. In the immediate aftermath of Mubarak's ouster, many Egypt analysts took the Brotherhood at its word when it promised not to run for a majority of Egypt's first post-revolutionary Parliament, and many predicted that the Brotherhood would only win 20 to 30 percent of the seats. The Brotherhood's impressive succession of electoral victories and quick assumption of executive authority, however, has led to the rise of a new conventional wisdom: When it comes to the ballot box, the Muslim Brotherhood cannot lose.

Yet the lesson of the Arab Spring is that what appears to be stable at one moment can be toppled at another -- especially if people are frustrated enough with the status quo. The conditions that sparked Egypt's 2011 uprising have only worsened in the past two years: The country's declining economy has intensified popular frustrations, and the constant labor strikes and street-closing protests indicate that the Brotherhood's rule is far less stable than it might appear on the surface. Meanwhile, Morsy's dictatorial maneuvers have forced an anti-Brotherhood opposition to form much more quickly than previously imagined.

Most importantly, a close look at voting data suggests non-Islamists are making critical gains among the Egyptian public. 57 percent of Egyptians voted for non-Islamist candidates during the first round of the 2012 presidential elections, and non-Islamist candidate Ahmed Shafiq won more than 48 percent in the second round -- despite being very unattractive to many Egyptians for having served as Mubarak's last prime minister. Moreover, though the Brotherhood successfully campaigned for the December constitutional referendum and won nearly 64 percent of the

vote, turnout was only 33 percent -- meaning that the movement was only able to mobilize, at most, about 21 percent of the voting public.

To be sure, the Brotherhood is exceedingly likely to win the forthcoming parliamentary elections, and it may rule Egypt for some time. It is, after all, uniquely well organized, while its opponents are deeply divided: To the Brotherhood's theocratic right, the Salafists are split among a handful of competing organizations and, to its left, the field is even more fragmented among communists, socialists, Nasserists, old ruling party members, and a smattering of liberals. Perhaps most dangerously, the Brotherhood's quick ascent has empowered it to shape Egypt's new political institutions, and it will likely tailor these institutions to perpetuate its reign.

But the Brotherhood's support isn't strong enough to preclude the emergence of a challenger. For that reason, the United States must ensure that it avoids the impression that it is putting all of its eggs in the Brotherhood's basket. Already, non-Islamists are asking why the United States has been loath to squeeze a new ruling party that is neither democratic nor, in the long run, likely to cooperate in promoting U.S. interests. Whether or not these non-Islamists can effectively challenge the Brotherhood right now -- and I am dubious -- they are right in challenging the Washington conventional wisdom that fails to see the Brotherhood for what it is: a deeply undemocratic movement concerned above all else with enhancing and perpetuating its own power.

Eric Trager is the Next Generation fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

Foreign Policy

RECOMMENDED



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)

TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

Democracy & Reform (/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Egypt (/policy-analysis/egypt)

North Africa (/policy-analysis/north-africa)