Shame on Anyone Who Ever Thought Mohammad Morsi Was a Moderate

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Nov 26, 2012

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Articles & Testimony

Given the Brotherhood's belief that it can mobilize legions of foot soldiers to win any street battle domestically, only international pressure might force it to think twice about its undemocratic approach.

Nobody should have been surprised when Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi issued a "constitutional declaration" on Thursday asserting total political power. This was, after all, the former Muslim Brotherhood leader's second power grab since he took office in June, complementing his earlier seizure of legislative and constitution-writing authorities by now insulating himself from judicial oversight. Yet Washington was caught entirely off-guard: Morsi's power play was at odds with the administration's view that the Muslim Brotherhood is a "democratic party," and his impressive handling of last week's Gaza ceasefire created a modicum of trust between him and President Obama. So the State Department released a predictably confused statement, urging "all Egyptians to resolve their differences...peacefully and through democratic dialogue."

Washington ought to have known by now that "democratic dialogue" is virtually impossible with the Muslim Brotherhood, which is now mobilizing throughout Egypt to defend Morsi's edict. The reason is that it is not a "democratic party" at all. Rather, it is a cultish organization that was never likely to moderate once it had grasped power.

That's because the very process through which one becomes a Muslim Brother is designed to weed out moderates. It begins when specially designated Brotherhood recruiters, who work at mosques and universities across Egypt, identify pious young men and begin engaging them in social activities to assess their suitability for the organization. The Brotherhood's ideological brainwashing begins a few months later, as new recruits are incorporated into Brotherhood cells (known as "families") and introduced to the organization's curriculum, which emphasizes Qur'anic memorization and the writings of founder Hassan al-Banna, among others. Then, over a five-to-eight-year period, a team of three senior Muslim Brothers monitors each recruit as he advances through five different ranks of

Brotherhood membership -- *muhib, muayyad, muntasib, muntazim*, and finally *ach amal*, or "active brother."

Throughout this process, rising Muslim Brothers are continually vetted for their embrace of the Brotherhood's ideology, commitment to its cause, and -- most importantly -- willingness to follow orders from the Brotherhood's senior leadership. As a result, Muslim Brothers come to see themselves as foot soldiers in service of the organization's theocratic credo: "Allah is our objective; the Quran is our law; the Prophet is our leader; Jihad is our way; and death for the sake of Allah is the highest of our aspirations." Meanwhile, those dissenting with the organization's aims or tactics are eliminated at various stages during the five-to-eight-year vetting period.

The Brotherhood, in other words, does not tolerate pluralism -- it methodically works to extinguish it. In this vein, when a number of its most prominent youth activists -- including organizers of the January 2011 anti-Mubarak uprising -- disagreed with the Brotherhood's decision to form a single political party after last year's revolution, they were banished. Similarly, when longtime Brotherhood leader Abdel Monem Abouel Fotouh decided to run for president at a time when the organization had decided against fielding a candidate, he was banished. And when some Brotherhood youths supported Abouel Fotouh's campaign, they were banished as well.

Nor does the Brotherhood tolerate dissent from outside the organization. It has often accused its critics -- Christians in particular -- of launching a "war on Islam." And during last year's parliamentary elections, it frequently accused its non-Islamist opponents of apostasy.

Moreover, despite its participation in elections, the Brotherhood views formally democratic institutions as means to an end, rather than as sacred in and of themselves. The Brotherhood was perhaps most candid in 2005, when it declared on its official website, "If democracy means that people decide who leads them, then [we] accept it; if it means that people can change the laws of Allah and follow what they wish to follow, then it is not acceptable." But the Brotherhood's undemocratic outlook was more openly on display this past June when, in the run-up to the announcement of the presidential elections results, Muslim Brothers occupied Tahrir Square and -- at the orders of their leaders -- declared themselves ready to fight if Morsi was not named the winner.

Despite the brazenness of the Brotherhood's undemocratic practices and outlook, however, many within the American policy community gave the Brotherhood the benefit of the doubt. This was particularly the case following Mubarak's ouster, when Arab Spring optimism dissuaded too many analysts from taking a discerning look at Egypt's newly emerging leaders. Rather than going through a laundry list of those who called it wrong, I offer the following e-mail I received from an editor shortly after the revolution, responding to my proposed article critiquing the Brotherhood:

"Be forewarned that people may be hostile to your conclusion -- there is an understandable sentimental attachment to the Egyptian Revolution and an equally understandable fear in US discourse of letting Islamophobia color our impression of the MB. Of course I know your writing on the MB to be objective and fair, but just keep in mind that there will be an especially high burden of proof here."

There was, in other words, the prevalent view that the Muslim Brotherhood was a contributor to Egypt's democratic awakening, and that those who attacked it were cranks of either the anti-Muslim or pro-autocratic variety. The notion that one might oppose the Brotherhood precisely because of his hope for Egyptian democratization was entirely lost in these kinds of exchanges.

Morsi's second power-grab in five months, however, has laid bare the mutual exclusivity between the Muslim Brotherhood and democracy. Indeed, as the first protests mounted against his edict, Morsi responded by encouraging confrontation rather than compromise, declaring his opponents "weevils eating away at the nation of Egypt." Brotherhood youths echoed Morsi, calling for "cleansing" the country of Morsi's top critics, including Nobel Laureate Mohamed ElBaradei and former presidential candidates Amr Moussa and Hamdeen Sabahi. Meanwhile,

prominent Muslim Brothers have advocated violence to defend their president. In this vein, senior Brotherhood adviser Gehad El-Haddad tweeted on Saturday that, "When future of Egypt is in balance...we are more than wiling to pay for it with our lives not votes." Even more ominously, following the death of a Brotherhood youth in clashes on Sunday, Saad El-Shater -- the son of a top Brotherhood leader -- accused Morsi's opponents of starting a "civil war," and warned that "the Brotherhood has a surplus of manhood."

Given the surprising strength of the anti-Morsi protests, it is too soon to know how this episode will end. But within the American policy community, Morsi's edict has catalyzed a new consensus regarding the Brotherhood's undemocratic nature. Indeed, even the Brotherhood's most consistent American defenders are suddenly reversing course, openly calling for using economic aid as leverage for compelling Morsi to change his behavior. This is an important development: given the Brotherhood's belief that it can mobilize its legions of foot soldiers to win any street battle domestically, only international pressure might force it to think twice. And thanks to Morsi's recklessly autocratic constitutional declaration, calls for applying international pressure are growing rapidly.

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