Arab Power after the Spring

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Articles & Testimony

An inside look at Egypt's new president suggests that Washington will have to adjust to a troublesome new status quo.

"I do not think these questions are proper," the man sitting across from me said. "I will not go through this conversation if it goes like this."

It was August 2010 and, five weeks into my dissertation fieldwork in Cairo, I had already interviewed over 70 Egyptian opposition leaders about their personal backgrounds -- where they were from, what their fathers did for a living, whether they were the first members of their family to engage politically, and the like. But this was my first research interview with a Muslim Brotherhood leader, and it was not going well.

"Such statistical information can never ever be a part of a research [interview]," he continued. "Such a methodology is not accepted to me."

So went my only in-person meeting with Mohamed Morsi, who was elected Egypt's first civilian president this June. The prickly engineering professor, who at the time headed the Brotherhood's political division, mostly refused to answer questions about himself, and was especially unwilling to discuss his reasons for joining the Muslim Brotherhood in the first place.

For Morsi, talking about his personal life entirely missed the point. Understanding the Brotherhood, he intimated, required appreciating its work in Islamicizing society to build an Islamic state in Egypt -- the most populous Arab country -- from the ground up. Rather than focusing on the personal, he wanted me to focus on the organizational.

"What we do is religious education," he told me. "We try hard to show and explain and implement the meanings of Islam...what's the meaning of a comprehensive Islamic regime -- for everything, in politics, in economics."

According to Morsi, the Brotherhood had scattered local cells -- known as "families" -- all over Egypt, which were engaged in various social activities that encouraged people to live proper Islamic lifestyles.

"More important than [joining the Muslim Brotherhood] is to really be a good Muslim," he said. "To understand Islam, apply Islam, practice Islam, convey the message of Islam -- the realistic one, the comprehensive one -- to others."

At one point in the conversation, I started asking about the Brotherhood's plans for the future. Hosni Mubarak was reportedly ill, so I asked Morsi: If Mubarak dies tomorrow, will the Muslim Brotherhood run a presidential candidate?

"No, because society is not ready," he replied. "Our society is not ready yet to really defend its worth."

In other words, until it had succeeded in Islamicizing Egyptian society, the Brotherhood would not seek total power.

Two years and a popular uprising later, the Muslim Brotherhood's strategic vision has changed considerably. While the Brotherhood continues to operate its Islamist-oriented social services, it is primarily focused on achieving political dominance through the ballot box. And it has been astoundingly successful. It won the winter 2011 parliamentary elections, controls the presidency, and recently appointed Egypt's next governing cabinet.

To be sure, the Brotherhood does not yet have complete political control. In lieu of a constitution, President Morsi's authority remains ill-defined, and the military junta that has ruled Egypt since Mubarak's ouster remains Egypt's most powerful institution. But Morsi's electoral victory, and the Brotherhood's quick emergence into Egypt's halls of power, still gives it tremendous leverage for shaping Egypt's future. So how will it act?

Perhaps my August 2010 interview with Morsi provides some insight. For starters, the Brotherhood remains committed to Islamicizing Egyptian society as a first step towards building an Islamic state. Its newfound political power, its leaders say, merely gives it new tools for expediting this process. Thus, on the campaign trail, Morsi frequently promised to "implement the sharia" if elected, and the Brotherhood has used its dominance of Egypt's constitution-writing committee to ensure that the "principles of the sharia" remain the primary source of Egyptian legislation. And though Morsi's new cabinet is mostly comprised of holdovers from the former cabinet and technocrats, Morsi has chosen fellow Muslim Brothers to run ministries that provide social services -- such as the ministries of education, housing, manpower, youth, and information. The Brotherhood's theocratic ideas will thus penetrate society more deeply.

Moreover, Morsi will likely remain beholden to the Brotherhood, rather than attempting to chart his own path. After all, Morsi's presidential platform -- the "Renaissance Project" -- was drafted by high-ranking Muslim Brotherhood officials, and members of the "Renaissance Project" team advised Morsi on picking the cabinet ministers best suited to implement it. Meanwhile, the Brotherhood has mobilized its local "families" nationwide to support Morsi's first 100 days by picking up trash, directing traffic, and providing public safety. The Brotherhood has further signaled its willingness to call its members to mass protests in Tahrir Square if the military junta attempts to curtail Morsi's authority.

For these reasons, Morsi cannot be viewed as a typical head of state. He remains a cog within a much larger -- and quite secretive -- organization, and his presidency will likely be a vehicle for advancing the Brotherhood's organizational goals, rather than a platform through which Morsi comes into his own. This would accord with the man I encountered two years ago: a Muslim Brother first, Mohamed Morsi second.

This will create a host of challenges for Washington. For starters, the speed with which a cohesive, theocratic organization has won power will significantly dampen prospects for democratization in Egypt -- especially since there is still no party that can challenge the Brotherhood's mobilizing prowess. The Brotherhood has also sent worrying signals on civil liberties. In conversations, Muslim Brotherhood parliamentary leaders have told me that they will not tolerate criticism of the sharia, and the Brotherhood is using its control of the Shura Council (Egypt's upper parliamentary house) to install its own members in the country's influential state media. It should be noted that, within the Brotherhood during the last five years of Mubarak's rule, Morsi served as the enforcer, ousting less ideologically rigid members. As president, Morsi is likely to amplify the Brotherhood's most undemocratic instincts.

Moreover, Morsi's tight attachment to the Brotherhood makes it highly unlikely that he will act cooperatively with the United States on key American interests. In this vein, Morsi used his post-election Tahrir Square address to call for the US to release Omar Abdel Rahman, the "Blind Sheikh" convicted for his involvement in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. Morsi has also sent worrying signals about his commitment to Egypt's peace treaty with Israel: he has previously called Israelis "killers" and "vampires," and, when Egypt's Ministry of Foreign Affairs responded on Morsi's behalf to a congratulatory message from Israeli President Shimon Peres, Morsi denied having sent it. Finally, Morsi intends to upgrade Egyptian-Iranian relations, which have been nearly non-existent since Iran's 1979 revolution, and has signaled his desire to visit Iran (though, to be sure, the military junta might pressure him against doing so).

In response to these developments, the Obama administration has opted to engage the Brotherhood, apparently hoping to embed Morsi and his organization in a pattern of relations that will prevent the Brotherhood from behaving too irresponsibly. Given the strategic importance of Egypt, that is perhaps the only option for the time being. Yet Washington must also prepare for the strong possibility that the Brotherhood will not act cooperatively. The Brotherhood, after all, has spent the past 84 years trying to enact its theocratic, domineering agenda for Egypt, and Morsi's election provides an opportunity that the Brotherhood is unlikely to forgo.

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

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