

The Muslim Brotherhood's Long Game: Egypt's Ruling Party Plots Its Path to Power

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In the 18 months since the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak, the Muslim Brotherhood has risen swiftly from the cave to the castle. It founded the now-dominant Freedom and Justice Party last April, won a massive plurality in the winter parliamentary elections, and, last week, celebrated as its candidate, Mohamed Morsi, won Egypt's presidential elections. After 84 years of using its nationwide social services networks to build an Islamic state in Egypt from the ground up, the Brotherhood is, for the first time, poised to shape Egyptian society from the top down.

There is, however, a catch: most of the Brotherhood's gains exist in name only. In early June, a court order invalidated the parliamentary elections and dissolved the Brotherhood-dominated parliament. Then, just prior to the second round of the presidential elections, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) issued a constitutional declaration that seized executive authority from the presidency, ultimately rendering Morsi a mostly powerless figure.

But after weeks of mounting tension with the SCAF, including mass demonstrations against the junta's power grab, the Brotherhood is dialing things down. It fears that agitating for more authority now could foment unrest and alienate a deeply divided public. It is also wary of what happened in Algeria in 1991, when the country's military-backed government responded to the electoral victory of an Islamist party with a harsh crackdown that culminated in civil war. To avoid further violence and cement its place in Egyptian politics, the Brotherhood now hopes to create a period of calm in the short run so that it can act more assertively in the future.

To begin with, the Brotherhood is attempting to forge a unified front with Egypt's other political parties. It began these efforts a week before the announcement of Morsi's victory to dissuade the SCAF from rigging the elections for Mubarak-era candidate Ahmed Shafik. During two days of intense negotiations, Morsi met with a wide spectrum of political groups and activists, promising to name a woman and a Christian as vice presidents and to appoint a cabinet that would not be dominated by the Brotherhood. Brotherhood leaders have used this agreement to prove that they intend to build a representative government. "We are standing with all political powers for the same demands," Brotherhood parliamentarian Khaled Deeb told me.

Yet this is not the first time that the Brotherhood has attempted to insulate itself by aligning with other factions, and

history suggests that these agreements are typically short-lived. In June 2011, the Brotherhood joined the nationalist Wafd party in creating the Democratic Alliance for Egypt, an electoral coalition that at one point included approximately forty political parties ranging from socialist to Salafist. But by September, the Democratic Alliance broke down over the Brotherhood's insistence on reserving 40 percent of the coalition's candidacies for its own members, thereby leaving too few seats to satisfy its other partners, most of whom bolted. It hardly mattered: three months of unity enabled the Brotherhood to build its profile as a leading political entity, and it ultimately won a 47-percent plurality in the winter parliamentary elections.

The Brotherhood's current unity project appears destined for the same fate. Despite initial reports that Brotherhood figures would fill only 30 percent of the new cabinet, Brotherhood parliamentary leader Farid Ismail recently said in *Al-Ahram* that the organization may take up to half. The Brotherhood also seems intent on controlling the cabinet selection process to ensure that many non-Brotherhood ministers are non-ideological experts who are balanced out by Brotherhood-affiliated deputy ministers. "We have more than one [Brotherhood] candidate for each cabinet position, and some of those might be deputies," Brotherhood parliamentary leader Saad al-Husseini told me. "And we might nominate someone from a technocratic [background] or ask the other parties for nominations."

The Brotherhood's promise to nominate a Christian and female vice president is also more about symbolism than genuine power sharing. Brotherhood sources have suggested that Morsi may appoint up to five vice presidents, thereby watering down the influence of the Christian and female deputies. Moreover, to prevent Morsi from being succeeded by either a woman or a Copt in the event of his death, the Brotherhood will seek to maintain the current constitutional clause mandating that the speaker of the parliament -- currently Brotherhood leader Saad al-Katatny -- assume the presidency. "A state with a Muslim majority can't be ruled by a non-Muslim," Brotherhood Guidance Office leader Mahmoud Hussein told me, citing a sharia principle.

The second prong of the Brotherhood's strategy for temporary calm involves its coordination with the military. "This relationship was established from the first day," Deeb, the Brotherhood parliamentarian, told me. "No clash, no total agreement." In the week leading up to the announcement of Morsi's victory, Brotherhood leaders Katatny and Khairat al-Shater, among others, met frequently with SCAF generals, apparently hashing out a deal to ensure Morsi's election while tabling other areas of disagreement. The existence of these meetings, which now include Morsi, have led to a shift in the Brotherhood's rhetoric. After months of accusing the SCAF of seeking to engineer the presidential elections and stage a coup, Brotherhood leaders are now praising the SCAF's stewardship. At an inaugural event on Saturday, Morsi declared, "The SCAF has fulfilled its promises and the oath it made, to not be an alternative to popular will."

The Brotherhood has also signaled that it will now accept several key SCAF demands that it had previously opposed. In this vein, immediately after his electoral victory was announced, Morsi stated that he would only be sworn in before the parliament, thereby pressuring the SCAF to reverse the parliament's dissolution. Yet he ultimately agreed to be sworn in before the Supreme Constitutional Court, which implicitly recognized the validity of the SCAF's constitutional declaration.

Brotherhood leaders have also intimated that they can live with the power that the SCAF appropriated to itself via the constitutional declaration, at least for now. "The constitutional declaration doesn't give the SCAF full power -- just the right for legislation," al-Husseini, the Brotherhood parliamentary leader, told me. "The president has veto power." The Brotherhood even seems willing to accept SCAF's autonomy over military budgets, a key SCAF demand, so long as a small civilian committee is briefed on the details. "I can't bring the military budget in front of the parliament and discuss it publicly," Brotherhood parliamentarian Azza al-Garf told me. "It should be discussed among a few people in parliament secretly." As a result, the military's vast business holdings, which are said to encompass between 15 and 40 percent of the Egyptian economy, appear safe for the time being.

The Brotherhood's arrangement with the SCAF is not surprising. It is consistent with the organization's long-held strategy of avoiding confrontation with more powerful authorities by negotiating the extent of its political activities. In fact, Morsi was the Brotherhood's point man in these negotiations during the last five years of Mubarak's rule, using the dealings to coordinate the Brotherhood's participation in parliamentary elections and limited interaction with various protest movements. As a cohesive, 84 year-old society, the Brotherhood typically places organizational goals, such as achieving power incrementally, over broader societal goals, such as ending autocratic rule more immediately. "Our program is a long-term one, not a short-term one," Morsi told me in August 2010. "If we are rushing things, then I don't think that this leads to a real stable position."

This hardly means, however, that the Brotherhood intends to accommodate the military indefinitely. Last November, for example, the SCAF and the Brotherhood struck a deal in which the Brotherhood agreed to avoid violent Tahrir Square protests in exchange for the SCAF's agreement to hold parliamentary elections on time. But the pact broke down in March, when the SCAF first threatened to dissolve the parliament and the Brotherhood suddenly dropped its promise that it would not run a presidential candidate. Moreover, the Brotherhood appears unlikely to accept long-term limits on the authority that it has won in the elections. "The army is owned by the people," said Brotherhood parliamentarian Osama Suleiman told me. "[Civilian oversight of the military] is the popular will -- and nobody can stop popular will."

In short, the long-anticipated confrontation between the SCAF and Brotherhood has been delayed -- and, for that, many Egyptians are thankful. After all, Cairo seemed on the brink of disaster a few weeks ago, when tens of thousands of mostly Islamist protesters packed Tahrir Square, some declaring themselves ready to die if Shafik was named president. But the current calm, and the Brotherhood's attempt to appear inclusive while also accommodating the SCAF, will not last. The Brotherhood will use this period to build its legitimacy as Egypt's next ruling party, and resume its push for more authority once the temperature cools down.

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

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