

# Reports of the Muslim Brotherhood's Demise Were Greatly Exaggerated

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In the run-up to the first round of Egypt's presidential elections, which concluded on Thursday, the Muslim Brotherhood's downfall was widely anticipated. Only four months after winning a 47-percent plurality in the parliamentary elections, the *Washington Post* reported that the Brotherhood's stock was "plunging," while the *Wall Street Journal* insisted that the Brotherhood's fortunes had "faded" due to "mounting public criticism" and "internal defections." Pre-elections polls bolstered this storyline, pegging support for notoriously uncharismatic Brotherhood nominee Mohamed Morsi at a paltry three to nine percent, and it was widely expected that many Muslim Brothers would buck their parent organization and support ex-Brotherhood leader Abdel Monem Abouel Fotouh.

Yet reports of the Muslim Brotherhood's demise, it seems, were greatly exaggerated: Morsi won a first-round plurality with roughly 26 percent of the vote, and will face former Mubarak regime figure Ahmed Shafik in the second round, which begins on June 16. Morsi's strong performance, which comes despite his many deficiencies as a candidate, is a testament to the Muslim Brotherhood's unmatched mobilizing capabilities, which have made the organization's political dominance practically inevitable since the moment that Hosni Mubarak resigned.

It is not merely that the Muslim Brotherhood is Egypt's "best organized" group, as many commentators frequently note. It is the only organized group, with a nationwide hierarchy that can quickly transmit commands from its Cairo-based Guidance Office (*maktab al-irshad*) to its 600,000 members scattered throughout Egypt. The hierarchy works as follows: The twenty-member Guidance Office sends its marching orders to deputies in each governorate (*muhafaza*), who communicate with their deputies in each "sector" (*quita*), who communicate with their deputies in each "area" (*muhafaza*), who communicate with their deputies in each "populace" (*shoaba*), who finally communicate with the leaders of each Brotherhood "family" (*usra*), which is comprised of five Muslim Brothers and represents the organization's most basic unit. This chain of command is used for executing all Guidance Office decisions, including commanding Muslim Brothers to participate in protests, organize social services, and -- during the most recent elections -- campaign and vote for Mohamed Morsi.

There are two additional elements of the Muslim Brotherhood's internal structure that ensure that the Brotherhood leadership's commands are followed. First, the social lives of members are deeply embedded within the organization. Muslim Brothers meet with their five-person Brotherhood "families" at least weekly, where they study

religious texts, discuss politics, organize local Brotherhood activities, and share their private lives with one another. Muslim Brothers' deepest personal relationships thus emerge within the organization, and there is a great disincentive to buck the Brotherhood leadership's commands, since doing so risks alienation from their closest friends and mentors.

Second, the very process of becoming a Muslim Brother ensures that only those who are deeply committed to the organization and its principles become full-fledged members. Indeed, becoming a Muslim Brother is an intricate five-to-eight-year process, during which each member is gradually promoted through four tiers of memberships before finally becoming a "working Brother" (*ach ama*). (In order to attain the third level, a rising Muslim Brother's supervisors must affirm that he has studied the works of Brotherhood founder Hassan al-Banna; memorized specific chapters of the Qur'an; and shown himself to be "a good follower of the Muslim Brotherhood organization's decisions," as one young Muslim Brother engaged in this process told me last March.) Those who become Muslim Brothers are highly unlikely to turn their backs on an organization in which they have invested so much time and energy in joining.

Morsi's victory in the first round of the presidential elections demonstrates the importance of these structures in determining Egypt's political future. While other constituencies -- including Egyptian Christians and Salafists -- are significantly larger than the Brotherhood, none can mobilize similarly committed supporters as consistently or cohesively. In this vein, while some of the major Salafist organizations endorsed ex-Brotherhood candidate Abouel Fotouh for president, many prominent Salafists backed Morsi -- including leaders from Salafist organizations that had officially supported Abouel Fotouh. By contrast, the Brotherhood could count on its membership to vote en masse for Morsi -- even despite pre-elections reports that many Brothers might support Abouel Fotouh.

The Brotherhood's unmatched mobilizing capabilities suggest that, in a certain sense, it hardly matters whom they nominate for office. The gruff, uncharismatic Morsi was, after all, the Brotherhood's "spare tire" -- a reluctant understudy forced to perform after the group's initial nominee, Khairat al-Shater, was disqualified from the elections due to a technicality. Moreover, Morsi made little attempt at reaching out to the non-Islamist public, whereas the eloquent Abouel Fotouh drew support from a broad coalition that included Salafists on the far right and socialists on the far left. But in a presidential contest featuring five major candidates, Abouel Fotouh's broad coalition was no match for the Brotherhood's reliable legions of foot-soldiers, who could mobilize superior get-out-the-vote efforts in every Egyptian governorate.

The Brotherhood's disciplined infrastructure has thus put Mohamed Morsi one election away from Egypt's presidency, and -- barring massive fraud -- he stands an excellent chance against former prime minister Shafik. While Shafik can count on support from Egyptian Christians and many of the rural clans that previously backed Mubarak's ruling party, Morsi is already drawing support from many non-Islamists who fear a return to the old regime more than a Brotherhood-dominated Egypt. Moreover, early reports indicate that, faced with the choice between the autocratic Shafik and theocratic Morsi, many voters will stay home -- a decision that will bolster Morsi, since low turnouts benefit well organized parties.

Of course, the importance of strong organizations in securing political victories is hardly unique to Egypt. But when only one group can organize effectively in a newly competitive political environment, single-party domination becomes practically inevitable -- with potentially devastating consequences. After all, the dominant party can nominate just about anyone, and win. And if it uses its power to prevent potential competitors from emerging, it can also get away with just about anything.

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