

Is the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood Nominating a Presidential Candidate?

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

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Shortly after mass protests toppled Hosni Mubarak last February, Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood sought to assuage fears of an "Islamist takeover" by making two promises to both the international community and to Egyptian secularist parties: that it would run candidates in fewer than 50 percent of the parliamentary races, and that it would not run a presidential candidate. Yet one month before the parliamentary elections, the Brotherhood backtracked on its first promise. Fearing that upstart Salafist parties would steal its thunder, the Brotherhood's electoral alliance ran a full slate of candidates. The reversal paid off: The Brotherhood won a 47-percent parliamentary plurality, nearly doubling the second-place Salafists' 24-percent take.

Now the Brotherhood is considering a second flip-flop: Its leaders are deliberating over whether to run a presidential candidate. They fear that, without a Muslim Brotherhood presidential candidate, the organization's younger members will vote for Abdel Monem Abouel Fotouh -- a popular former Brotherhood leader whom the organization banished last year after he declared his presidential candidacy despite the Brotherhood's policy against running a presidential candidate at that time. If a critical mass of Muslim Brotherhood members vote for the outcast Abouel Fotouh, it would represent a major affront to the organization's leadership.

So how is the Muslim Brotherhood leadership conducting this intra-party deliberation of obvious national importance? The answer is revealing, if not reassuring, about the Brotherhood's political practices.

Zakariya Helmy, an activist in the Brotherhood-affiliated Freedom and Justice Party, told me that Brotherhood leaders were claiming that they had sought the counsel of the organization's rank-and-file members. "The argument [that the Brotherhood leaders are making] is that, before we take any decision, we start taking the opinion of the grassroots of the local areas and members of every local area," he says.

Helmy described a process in which the lowest levels of Brotherhood leadership discuss potential presidential candidates, and then pass their recommendation up through the Brotherhood's five-tiered, nationwide chain of command. The aim is to reach consensus (ijma) through broad consultations (shura), so that even those Muslim Brotherhood members who disagree with the organization's decision are bound by it (wajib) because of the way in which it was achieved. It is a process rooted in certain schools of Islamic jurisprudence, whereby law is derived from

interpretations of the sharia that are approved by scholarly consensus. "So [the Brotherhood leadership] argues that we've already consulted the grassroots, so it should be binding," said Helmy.

But is this deliberative process really taking place, I asked, or is it just a ruse?

"This is what they say," Helmy responded, sounding quite skeptical. Since Helmy is only affiliated with the Brotherhood's party, and not a member of the Brotherhood itself, he had no way of knowing for sure.

If the Muslim Brotherhood is, indeed, discussing the question of running a presidential candidate throughout its chain of command, those deliberations would begin at the organization's lowest level, the "family." All Muslim Brotherhood members meet weekly with their five-person "families," where they study texts, discuss politics, and share concerns from their private lives. The "family" thus creates a strong social bond between regular Muslim Brothers and the larger organization, and it is the first place that key issues confronting the Muslim Brotherhood would be debated.

So I called a 29-year-old Muslim Brotherhood member and asked him: Did you discuss the issue of running a presidential candidate in your "family" meeting this week?

Suddenly, my normally forthcoming contact clammed up. "Why are you asking me this, Eric?"

"Well, I'm just trying to figure out..."

"Please don't ask me this, Eric. I can't talk about this. Don't ask me this again."

The Muslim Brother hung up, which is very unlike him.

It is too early to know whether the Muslim Brotherhood will actually run a presidential candidate. But the way in which its deliberations on this sensitive issue are playing out tells us two important things about the organization. First, its leaders' primary concern is maintaining internal discipline. Indeed, they are considering a presidential run only because they fear that a banished Brotherhood leader will challenge their support among the Brotherhood's rank-and-file members -- which threatens the viability of the organization's historic top-down, dictatorial structure.

Second, even as the Brotherhood increasingly participates in politics, it remains a secret society. Non-Brotherhood members, including those who are affiliated with its Freedom and Justice Party, have little idea of what is actually happening within the organization, and actual Brotherhood members won't talk about it. Those in Washington who are optimistic that dialogue with the Brotherhood will moderate its theocratic ideology should thus think twice. An organization so dedicated to being closed rarely opens.

Eric Trager, The Washington Institute's Ira Weiner fellow, is a doctoral candidate in political science at the University of Pennsylvania, where he is writing his dissertation on Egyptian opposition parties. ❖

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