

The Muslim Brotherhood's Radical Plan for Egypt

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Brief Analysis

Given the Muslim Brotherhood's anti-Western outlook, Washington must prepare for the strong possibility that it will hold only limited influence with Egypt's next government.

When the third and final round of Egypt's parliamentary elections concludes tomorrow, the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) is widely expected to cement its dominance of the next legislature. Although the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces still holds executive power, the FJP's political victory promises radical changes for Egypt, including a theocratic domestic program and a confrontational foreign policy. The United States should have no illusions about the party's aims or ability to moderate. As long as the FJP is in power, Washington should condition future bilateral relations on its behavior regarding key U.S. interests, including the treatment of religious minorities, Egypt's peace treaty with Israel, and counterterrorism.

Background

The FJP was licensed on April 30, 2011, making it the second new party to be recognized by the Egyptian government following Hosni Mubarak's February 11 ouster. Initially, it sought to assuage fears of a post-Mubarak Islamist takeover by promising to run for fewer than 50 percent of the seats. But after its electoral alliance with the Wafd Party broke down in late October, the FJP announced that it would contest 77 percent of the seats.

In the first round of the elections, which began on November 28, the FJP's coalition won an estimated 73 of 150 seats (48.7 percent), and in the second round, which began on December 14, an estimated 79 of 172 seats (45.9 percent). Its margin of victory is expected to increase in the third round, which is taking place in traditional Brotherhood strongholds such as the Gharbiyah and Daqahliyah governorates.

A Theocratic Domestic Policy

The FJP's overriding aim is to establish an Islamic state in which sharia would be the primary source of legislation. Although FJP leaders correctly note that "sharia principles were a main source of legislation" under Article II of

the 1971 constitution, which was suspended following Mubarak's ouster, the party intends to implement sharia-based laws far more comprehensively than was previously done. The FJP platform states that "sharia, in its essence...organizes the various aspects of life for Muslims and those non-Muslims who participate in the state with them." The party's theocratic aims are therefore likely to change many aspects of Egypt's domestic policy.

Three such issues should be of special concern to Washington. First, FJP leaders have repeatedly said that they would ban alcohol and beach bathing -- both of which are essential to a tourism industry that accounts for roughly 10 percent of the economy. Second, Egypt faces a severe cash crisis, and its ability to attract international investment may be hampered by the Brotherhood's intention to implement the Quranic prohibition on interest-based banking. Third, newly elected FJP parliamentarians have said that they will not tolerate criticisms of Islam or sharia, including those made by Christians and secularists. In recent months, Brotherhood-affiliated lawyers have filed suits against organizations and individuals accused of insulting Islam. These attempts to limit free speech are likely to intensify once the FJP assumes control of parliament.

A Confrontational Foreign Policy

The Brotherhood is similarly signaling its preference for radicalism over realism in foreign affairs. For example, Supreme Guide Muhammad Badie recently declared that, after forming the new government, the organization would pursue its final goal of establishing a "rightly guided caliphate for the education of the world." This goal may be unrealistic in the short term, but the Brotherhood is already working through the FJP to tilt Egypt away from its Western allies and toward an Islamist foreign policy.

The peace treaty with Israel will likely be the first casualty of an FJP-led government. Although the party has said that it will honor Egypt's international agreements, it has carved out an exception for the Camp David Accords, which it intends to put to a national referendum, thereby shielding itself from direct responsibility for the treaty's demise. Meanwhile, the Brotherhood has amplified its confrontational posture toward Israel in recent weeks by vowing never to recognize the state and warmly greeting Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Cairo.

Not Likely to Moderate

It is tempting to believe that the FJP will moderate once in power, but four factors make this highly unlikely. First, although the Brotherhood has frequently portrayed the FJP as a separate entity, the distinction between the "organization" and its "political wing" is superficial. The Brotherhood's fifteen-member Guidance Office elected the FJP's leaders, all of whom are former members of that office. Moreover, the choice of hardliner Muhammad Morsi as the FJP's first chairman suggested that the Brotherhood was committed to ensuring the party would not veer from its parent organization's principles.

Second, the Brotherhood ensures the FJP's ideological rigidity by retaining direct control over its parliamentary nomination process. The new FJP parliamentarians are all longtime Muslim Brothers whose candidacies were thoroughly vetted by multiple layers of the organization's leadership.

Third, the emergence of the Salafist Nour Party as Egypt's second-strongest faction makes moderation a strategically dangerous choice for the FJP. Much of the Nour Party's appeal is based on its claim to represent the "true" Islam, making it a respected arbiter of Islamic principles within Egyptian politics. The FJP thus risks losing support among an overwhelmingly religious electorate if it is perceived to be veering from its Islamist doctrine. It is particularly unlikely to disagree with the Nour Party on basic Quranic principles such as the bans on usury and alcohol.

Finally, the FJP has invited al-Gamaa al-Islamiyah, a U.S.-designated terrorist organization, to join its future governing coalition. The inclusion of this radical, historically violent faction further reduces the likelihood of the Brotherhood pursuing a moderate agenda, and will severely complicate U.S. efforts to cooperate with the next

Egyptian cabinet.

U.S. Policy Options

The fact that the FJP has won parliamentary power via elections should not fool policymakers into believing that the organization is committed to democratic principles or moderation. For this reason, Washington should use its current engagement with Brotherhood leaders to communicate that the future of U.S.-Egyptian relations depends on the organization's behavior regarding three key U.S. interests.

First, the Obama administration should communicate its concerns about the status of religious minorities under Islamist rule more directly. Specifically, it should demand that the Brotherhood end its illiberal litigation against Christians and secularists accused of insulting Islam, and warn against criminalizing public dissent with sharia.

Second, Washington should insist that Egypt maintain its peace treaty with Israel, telling the Brotherhood that any referendum on the Camp David Accords will be interpreted as an attempt to destroy that agreement. In recent conversations, Brotherhood leaders have expressed their belief that they would not be blamed if the treaty were revoked by a nationwide vote, as seems likely. They need to be told otherwise.

Third, Washington should make clear that it expects the Egyptian government to fight terrorism domestically. In this vein, U.S. officials should use their meetings with Brotherhood leaders to insist that terrorist groups such as al-Gamaa al-Islamiyah be excluded from future governments. Washington should further press the Brotherhood to produce a plan for stabilizing the Sinai. In recent conversations, the organization's leaders acknowledged that growing terrorist activity in the peninsula is both a domestic security problem and a potential spark for crises with Israel. Since the United States and the Brotherhood share an interest in stabilizing, and perhaps developing, the Sinai, this issue could provide an opening for cooperation.

Given the Brotherhood's anti-Western outlook, however, Washington must prepare for the strong possibility that it will hold only limited influence with Egypt's next government. Accordingly, the Obama administration should explore the possibility of a multilateral framework for encouraging a Brotherhood-led Egypt to maintain peace with Israel, respect minority rights, and fight terrorism.

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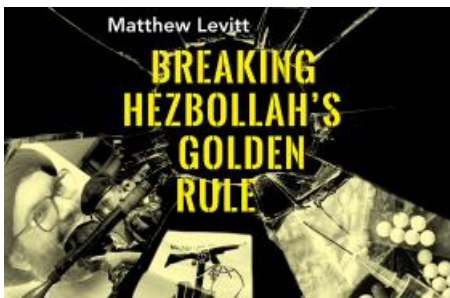
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