The Unbreakable Muslim Brotherhood: Grim Prospects for a Liberal Egypt

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Aug 23, 2011

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Articles & Testimony

The iconic youths of Egypt's Tahrir Square revolution are now deeply divided among nearly a dozen, often indistinguishable political parties, while the Muslim Brotherhood is seizing the momentum.

The protesters who led Egypt's revolt last January were young, liberal, and linked-in. They were the bloggers who first proposed the demonstrations against Hosni Mubarak on Twitter; the Facebook-based activists who invited their "friends" to protest; and Wael Ghonim, the 30-year-old Google executive who, after Egypt's state security agency detained him for 12 days, rallied the crowds to hold Tahrir Square. Far from emulating Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, they channeled Thomas Paine, calling for civil liberties, religious equality, and an end to Mubarak's dictatorship. Their determination, punctuated by the speed of their triumph, fueled optimism that the long-awaited Arab Spring had finally sprung -- that the Middle East would no longer be an autocratic exception in an increasingly democratic world.

The political transition following their revolt, however, has dulled this optimism. The iconic youths of Tahrir Square are now deeply divided among nearly a dozen, often indistinguishable political parties, almost all of which are either too new to be known or too discredited by their cooperation with the previous regime. Concentrated within the small percentage of Internet-using, politically literate Egyptians, their numbers are surprisingly small.

Meanwhile, the Muslim Brotherhood, which largely avoided the limelight during the revolt, is seizing the political momentum. The Brotherhood is Egypt's most cohesive political movement, with an unparalleled ability to mobilize its followers, who will serve it extremely well in a country still unaccustomed to voting. To understand the sources of the Brotherhood's political strength, and the reasons why it is unlikely to temper its ideology, it helps to take a close look at its organizational structure and the nature of its membership. From January through March of this year, I interviewed nearly 30 current and former Muslim Brothers in an attempt to do just that. Whereas Egypt's liberal and leftist political parties are nearly as easy to join as parties in the West, becoming a full-fledged Muslim Brother is a

five- to eight-year process, during which aspiring members are closely watched for their loyalty to the cause and are indoctrinated in the Brotherhood's curriculum. This intricate system for recruitment and internal promotion produces members who are strongly committed to the organization's purpose, enabling its leaders it to mobilize its followers as they see fit.

The Muslim Brotherhood is relying on this system to build a single political party, the Freedom and Justice Party, to which it will direct its millions of members and admirers. And when it emerges from Egypt's parliamentary elections this fall with significantly increased electoral power, if not an outright plurality of the vote, it will use its enhanced position to move Egypt in a decidedly theocratic, anti-Western direction.

Starting Young

The Muslim Brotherhood's internal cohesiveness and ideological rigidity derives from its highly selective membership process. Local members scout for recruits at virtually every Egyptian university. These recruiters begin by approaching students who show strong signs of piety. "Certain members of the Muslim Brotherhood are supposed to meet and befriend new students and engage them in very normal, nonpolitical activities -- football, tutoring -- stuff that appeals to everyone," Amr Magdi, a former Brother, told me. Magdi was recruited during his freshman year at Cairo University's medical school but ultimately left the group due to ideological reservations. At first, recruiters do not identify themselves as Muslim Brothers and simply try to build relationships with their targets in order to scrutinize their religiosity. "This is what makes us different from political parties," said Khaled Hamza, who edits the Muslim Brotherhood's English-language Web site. "We are an ideological grass-roots group, and we use our faith to pick members." According to Hamza, the process of recruitment can last a full year. Brothers frequently cite these early interactions as the reason they ultimately joined the group.

The Brotherhood also targets children for recruitment, starting around age nine. "It focuses on Muslim Brothers' kids in particular," said Mosab Ragab, 23, a leading Muslim Brotherhood youth activist whose father and uncles belong to the group. "The focus of my house was for me to follow my father, and sometimes he advised me to sit with certain people." Like other Muslim Brothers, Ragab was won over by this early exposure to the organization, and he officially enrolled when he turned 16.

In some circumstances, aspirants seek out the organization on their own. Typically, these Brothers-to-be were raised in religious families and came across the organization in the course of their study. Even in these cases, however, prospective members are carefully vetted before being admitted. "I was in [religious] Azhari schools since kindergarten. I demanded to join the Muslim Brotherhood," said the youth activist Anas al-Qasas, 28. "I went to my uncle [a Muslim Brother], and . . . he took me to another man, a teacher, who was a sheik. . . . When someone wants to join the [Muslim Brotherhood], a man comes to guide him."

This careful recruitment procedure helps the organization ensure that it invests only in young men who are already inclined toward its Islamist ideology. But recruitment is just the beginning of a much longer, multistage process that turns a hopeful new member into a Muslim Brother.

Becoming a Brother

When an aspirant is first admitted into the Muslim Brotherhood, he becomes a *muhib,* "lover" or "follower." During this period, which typically lasts six months but can last as long as four years, the *muhib* enters a local *usra,* or "family," a regular meeting group where his piety and ideology are closely monitored. "At the *muhib* level, they try to educate you and improve your morals," Islam Lotfy, 33, another leading Muslim Brotherhood youth activist, told me. "If there is no improvement, they won't take you."

The *usra,* which consists of four to five people and is headed by a *naqib,* or "captain," is the most basic, but arguably

most essential, unit of the Muslim Brotherhood's hierarchy. *Usra*s meet at least once a week and spend much of their time discussing members' personal lives and activities. This allows the Muslim Brothers to monitor their young colleagues' adherence to the organization's rigorous religious standards and to build group unity. "The main concept for [the organization] is the brotherhood of Islam," said Mohamed Abbas, 26, a Muslim Brotherhood youth leader active during the revolt. "The *usra* is about solidarity."

After the leader of an *usra* confirms, through observations or written exams, that a *muhib* prays regularly and possesses basic knowledge of the major Islamic texts, the *muhib* becomes a *muayyad,* or "supporter." This stage can last for one to three years. The *muayyad* is a nonvoting member of the organization and must fulfill certain duties set by his superiors, such as preaching, recruiting, or teaching in mosques. He also completes a more rigorous curriculum of study, memorizing major sections of the Koran and studying the writings of the group's founder, Hasan al-Banna.

In the next phase, an aspirant becomes *muntasib,* or "affiliated." The process lasts a year and is considered the first step toward full membership. A *muntasib* "is a member, but his name is written in pencil," says Lotfy. *Muntasib*s can work in one of the official Muslim Brotherhood divisions, such as those that run programs for professionals, laborers, university students, or children. *Muntasib*s also study the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad and Koranic commentary and start giving a portion of their earnings, typically five to eight percent, to the organization.

Once a *muntasib* satisfies his monitors, he is promoted to *muntazim,* or "organizer." This stage typically lasts for another two years, during which time the *muntazim* must memorize the Koran and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad and can assume a lower-level leadership role, such as forming an *usra* or heading a chapter of multiple *usra*s. Before he can advance to the final level -- *ach 'amal,* or "working brother" -- the loyalty of the *muntazim* is closely probed. "They might test you by acting like state security and giving you wrong information, to see whether you talk," said Ragab, who is not yet a *muntazim* but has had the process described to him by more senior colleagues. Advancement to the final level also requires superiors' confidence that the *muntazim* will follow the directives of the Muslim Brotherhood's leadership. "It is about your knowledge, thinking, commitment to do duties, and how much ability you have to execute the orders given to you, like participating in demonstrations or conferences," said Mohammed Habib, the Brotherhood's former second-in-command.

After he becomes an *ach 'amal,* a Muslim Brother can vote in all internal elections, participate in all of the Brotherhood's working bodies, and compete for higher office within the group's hierarchy. He continues to meet weekly in his *usra* and is tasked with fulfilling *dawa,* the "call" to a more Islamic way of life, which is often done through the provision of social services, especially to communities in need.

The rudiments of this recruitment system date back to the Muslim Brotherhood's founding in 1928. But my conversations with members suggested that the process started to be formalized only in the late 1970s, when it became an important tool for ensuring that the state security services could not infiltrate the organization, which is precisely what happened to most other opposition groups and parties under President Anwar al-Sadat and Mubarak. (Under President Gamal Abdel Nasser, who ruled from 1956 to 1970, domestic opposition groups were decimated and Brotherhood leaders were incarcerated for decades.) "It's possible for a [state security] agent to become a muhib, but he won't move up," Ali Abdelfattah, a leader of the group in Alexandria, told me. "You have to be patient to become a *muayyad.* And if you're an agent, you won't be patient enough."

Even if Mubarak's fall yields a more democratic political environment, the Muslim Brotherhood is not likely to scrap this vetting system, which the organization's leaders view as essential to ensuring its members' purity of purpose. "The Muslim Brotherhood recruits people by convincing them and [incorporating them into] the structure," said Mohamed Saad el-Katatny, the former head of the organization's parliamentary bloc, who recently left his position in the group's leadership to lead the Brotherhood's new party, the Freedom and Justice Party. "They do not have any

business interests. They just want to serve the religion. Our structure is so strong. When you start, you are active -- you do not run after authority. You just work for the religion and work until Judgment Day."

Deploying the Soldiers

The Brotherhood's recruitment system virtually guarantees that only those who are deeply committed to its cause become full members. Meanwhile, its pyramid-shaped hierarchy ensures that these members dutifully execute the aims of its national leadership at the local level.

At the top of the hierarchy is the Guidance Office (Maktab al-Irshad), which is comprised of approximately 15 longtime Muslim Brothers and headed by the supreme guide (*murshid*). Each member of the Guidance Office oversees a different portfolio, such as university recruitment, education, or politics. Guidance Office members are elected by the Shura Council, which is comprised of roughly 100 Muslim Brothers. Important decisions, such as whether to participate in elections, are debated and voted on within the Shura Council and then executed by the Guidance Office. Orders are passed down through a chain of command: the Guidance Office calls its deputies in each regional sector, who call their deputies in each subsidiary area, who call their deputies in each subsidiary populace, who call the heads of each local *usra,* who then transmit the order to their members. The chain also works in reverse: *usra*s can pass requests and concerns up to the Shura Council and the Guidance Office.

This type of transmission system enabled the Muslim Brotherhood to communicate reliably and discreetly despite intense police scrutiny under the previous regime. And in the post-Mubarak political environment, the Brotherhood's unique organizational capacity is allowing its leaders to communicate with its members nationwide -- with reasonable certainty that orders will be obeyed, given the immense commitment that becoming a Muslim Brother entails. No other Egyptian opposition group can count on the type of breadth or depth of the Muslim Brotherhood's networks.

The efficiency of this system proved pivotal during the anti-Mubarak revolt. The Muslim Brotherhood initially avoided direct involvement in the demonstrations, which began on January 25, because the state security agency had threatened to arrest Mohammed Badie, the Brotherhood's supreme guide, if its members participated. But the following day, the Guidance Office yielded to the demands of its younger members and decided to make it "obligatory" for Brothers to join the protests on January 28 -- dubbed "Friday of Rage" by organizers -- and sent the message through the hierarchy. "My *usra* leader called me and told me pretty early," said the Muslim Brotherhood youth activist Amr el-Beltagi. "Most of the people found out through the telephone. All emergencies go by phone because it is faster."

Although the overwhelming majority of the Egyptian demonstrators were not affiliated with any political movement, this order from the Muslim Brotherhood seems to have helped catalyze the revolt's early triumph over the Central Security Forces, which Mubarak reportedly removed from the streets after the successful protests of January 28. As noontime prayers ended at mosques across the country that day, a handful of activists gathered at each entrance, and their numbers gave ordinary worshipers the confidence to confront Mubarak's police forces. Many of those activists were reportedly Muslim Brothers.

The Brotherhood Bloc

In the months since Mubarak's resignation, the Muslim Brotherhood has continued to demonstrate its unique capacity to mobilize supporters. Protests continue to be held in Tahrir Square on most Fridays, and those protests that are endorsed by the Muslim Brotherhood draw substantially larger crowds than those that are not. The Muslim Brotherhood displayed its influence during the March 19 referendum on Egypt's proposed constitutional amendments, which set up earlier elections: it broke with most other opposition groups in supporting the amendments, which passed with a whopping 77 percent of the vote. The outcome all but ensured that parliamentary

elections would be held this fall, thereby benefiting the Brotherhood over still-forming liberal and leftist parties.

As the parliamentary elections approach this fall, leaders of the Brotherhood are therefore highly confident about their chances. Although the group initially promised to run in only 30 to 40 percent of Egypt's electoral districts, in May it announced that it would run candidates in just under half of all constituencies. Three prominent former Guidance Office members -- Mohamed Morsy, Essam el-Erian, and Katatny -- are running the Freedom and Justice Party and will serve as important links between the nominally independent party and the Brotherhood proper. And the Brotherhood will use its hierarchic network to choose candidates on a district-by-district basis, as it has done in the past.

Unless the Mubarak regime's National Democratic Party is resurrected under a different name (it was officially outlawed in April, and there have been proposals to ban its former parliamentarians from running), no other party will have anything close to the network of committed supporters that the Muslim Brotherhood has. The Brotherhood thus stands to win the vast majority of the seats that it contests, making a parliamentary plurality highly likely. But the organization is not stopping there: in recent months, it has encouraged certain independents to run for parliament as well, promising them the Muslim Brotherhood's support. "They say, 'We want to offer our services without any agenda,'" said one activist approached by the Muslim Brotherhood. It is not known how many independents have been encouraged to run this way, but the phenomenon demonstrates the Brotherhood's determination to win decisively.

The Brotherhood's establishment of a legalized party (under Mubarak, the Brotherhood's members ran for, and served in, parliament as independents) has not occurred without major bumps. Some of its most prominent members view the organization's insistence on supporting only the Freedom and Justice Party, rather than allowing Muslim Brothers to choose any Islamic party, as too limiting. "Any Muslim Brother who wants to compete in politics is fine," Abdel Moneim Abou el-Fatouh, a former Guidance Office member who may be forming his own Islamic party and is running for president, told me in March. "Back in al-Banna's time, this is what was allowed: people could be in the Saadist Party, the Wafd Party, or others. . . . [The Muslim Brotherhood] should be a civil Islamic organization, as it was since al-Banna in 1928."

Others see the formation of a political party as a distraction from the organization's greater priority: the long-term Islamization of Egyptian society through the provision of social services. This view seems particularly pronounced among Muslim Brotherhood youth activists, who held a conference without the Guidance Office's approval to publicize this position in late March. "We want the Muslim Brotherhood to be a religious group, and not to be in policy," said Ahmed Hassan, a physician who attended the conference.

These internal tensions have led a number of analysts to argue that in due time, the Muslim Brotherhood will split into several political factions. These pundits predict that prominent older leaders, such as Abou el-Fatouh, will draw away significant numbers of supporters, while disaffected youth activists will reject the Guidance Office's orders on how to vote. These tensions, they argue, could undercut the Muslim Brotherhood's ability to mobilize support.

My discussions with a dozen attendees of the March youth conference suggested that such a split is unlikely. Although some prominent Muslim Brotherhood youth activists, particularly the leaders of the revolt, vowed not to support the organization's official party, most conceded that they would ultimately obey the Guidance Office. "I'm going to support Freedom and Justice, because it's the official party of the group," Mohamed el-Gabaly, 31, told me. In fact, disagreements over the Muslim Brotherhood's political future appear to be isolated, affecting only a relatively small group of individuals. The youth conference, although noteworthy for the fact that it was held without the Guidance Office's permission, attracted only a few hundred attendees. "This is just a small group," said Mohamed Abdul Quddus, a prominent Muslim Brotherhood journalist. "Thousands of youth support the Guidance Office and the Muslim Brotherhood."

The Muslim Brotherhood youth activists who split from the organization to form Hizb al-Tayyar al-Masry (the Egyptian Current Party) in late June should be viewed in this light. According to its leaders, the new party is "not a Brotherhood party or a party of the Brotherhood youth," and most Muslim Brothers are therefore unlikely to see it as a realistic alternative to the Freedom and Justice Party. The ability of Hizb al-Tayyar al-Masry to have a long-term impact will depend on its members' ability to draw from, or replicate, the Brotherhood's nationwide networks. But that cannot happen immediately.

Winning the 81 Million

Washington should view the recent rise of the Muslim Brotherhood with concern. Despite the Brothers' insistence that their goals are "moderate," they seem to define this word differently from how one would in the West. To Muslim Brothers, the word, as Hamza, the editor of the group's English-language Web site, put it, simply means "not using violence, denouncing terrorism, and not working with jihadists."

Yet the Muslim Brothers that I interviewed invariably carved out important exceptions to this vow of nonviolence. "We believe that Zionism, the United States, and England are gangs that kill children and women and men and destroy houses and fields," former Supreme Guide Mohammed Mahdi Akef told me. "Zionism is a gang, not a country. So we will resist them until they don't have a country." Muslim Brothers added the conflicts in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya, and Iraq to the list of those in which violence is permissible. And true to this principle, when U.S. Navy SEALs killed Osama bin Laden, the Muslim Brotherhood called the action unjust and referred to the al Qaeda leader with the honorific "sheik."

Meanwhile, the Brotherhood's recent alignment with several anti-Western political parties suggests that Egyptian policy will become more hostile to the United States. In June, the Brotherhood formed the National Democratic Alliance for Egypt with over a dozen other political parties, including the Salafist Nour Party, the Nasserist Karama Party, and the liberal Wafd Party. The extreme diversity of the coalition makes its survival doubtful. Yet its parties have managed to agree on one thing: that Egypt should assume a foreign policy that is often inimical to U.S. interests. Following the alliance's June 21 meeting, for example, it released a statement announcing that it wanted to "open a strategic dialogue with Iran and Turkey . . . and review the settlement process with Israel, on the basis that it is not a real peace in light of the unjust aggression and violation of the Palestinian right to self-determination." Sentiments like this indicate that in post-Mubarak Egypt, the Brotherhood hopes to improve relations with the United States' greatest regional nemesis, Iran, and denigrate the Camp David accords with Israel, one of the United States' greatest diplomatic achievements.

The rise of the Muslim Brotherhood will also likely mean that the next Egyptian government will be less ready to cooperate with the United States. It will also likely draw closer to the Iranian-led bloc that resists U.S. influence and will reduce cooperation on security matters with Israel. Indeed, these shifts are already materializing, as the ruling Supreme Military Council, apparently unnerved by the rising power of the Brotherhood and popular discontent with Mubarak's foreign policy, has renewed relations with Tehran, a regime that once named a street after Sadat's assassin. It is also why the government has reopened the border with Gaza, which had been closed since Israel's August 2005 disengagement. Although even a Muslim Brotherhood-ruled Egypt would not likely declare war on Israel, the Brotherhood's leaders have made clear that the organization intends to support the "resistance" in Gaza. This support will likely translate into greater funding for Hamas, leading to a likely uptick in Israeli-Palestinian hostilities.

Precisely because the Muslim Brotherhood's success in the elections this fall is likely to push Egyptian foreign policy further away from U.S. interests, the Obama administration needs to combat the Brotherhood's influence on two fronts. Prior to the elections, it must communicate clear "redlines" to Egypt's current military leaders and relevant political parties about the kinds of behavior that it is unwilling to accept. Specifically, it should promise to recognize

the outcome of any Egyptian election, but only if those elected commit to not participating in conflicts beyond Egypt's borders. Such a statement would blunt the Brotherhood's accusations that the United States is interfering in Egyptian affairs, as Washington would be exchanging noninterference in Egyptian affairs for the Brotherhood's noninterference in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Meanwhile, even after the elections, Washington should continue to aid liberal groups through various nongovernmental organizations, focusing in particular on training leaders outside Cairo. A great deal of the Muslim Brotherhood's strength lies in its near monopoly of influence in many countryside areas. The United States and progressive Egyptian groups can only combat this influence by introducing liberal ideas and teaching people how to organize politically. Moreover, at every opportunity, the United States should declare its hope that Egypt will become the religiously open country for which the protesters in Tahrir Square fought. It must speak up whenever Egypt's Christians are attacked, as they have been several times in recent months. Such attacks are a harbinger of more intolerance and violence.

Washington will have no choice but to work with whoever comes to power in Cairo. The United States must therefore ensure that the Muslim Brotherhood's rise is a temporary setback and that clear limits are set on the amount of damage the organization can do to U.S. interests. And it must simultaneously seek to make Egypt's domestic political scene more competitive. To do all this, the United States will need to be clear about the nature of the Brotherhood as an organization. The estimated 600,000 people who fill the Brotherhood's ranks are deeply committed to the organization and not likely to moderate their views. U.S. policy must therefore focus on the other 81 million Egyptians, who are largely unmobilized and uneducated. They are political free agents, and given the religiosity of Egyptian society, the Brotherhood can easily win their allegiance if the United States fails to act quickly to support the alternative -- the liberal vision for which the youths of Tahrir Square fought so valiantly.

Read this article on the Foreign Affairs website. (http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/68211/eric-trager/the-unbreakable-muslim-brotherhood?gp=68074:b1d4c9534e7a0d23)

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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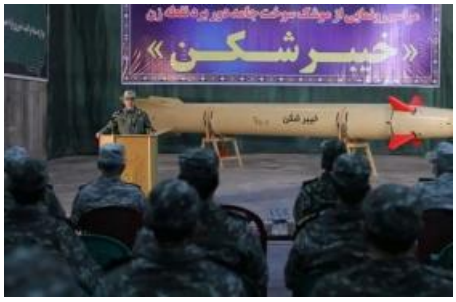

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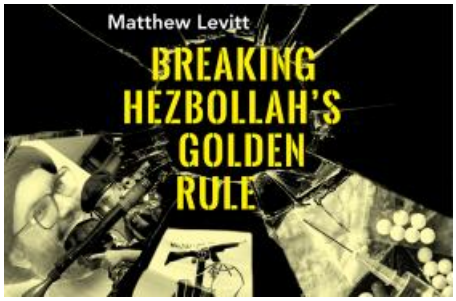

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