

Youth Activists Chip Away at Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood

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Brief Analysis

Rather than an ideological split, the formation of a new, small party by Muslim Brotherhood youth activists stems from discontent at their inability to advance quickly.

The recent decision by leading Muslim Brotherhood (MB) youth activists to break away from their parent organization and form the Egyptian Trend Party (al-Tayyar al-Masry) demonstrates the fluidity of Egyptian politics during the ongoing transitional period. In the short term, however, it does not represent a significant change in the country's overall political environment -- the split was about administrative, not ideological, differences, and the MB remains Egypt's strongest and most cohesive political organization.

Administrative Disagreements

The new party represents the culmination of an increasingly intense standoff between the MB's Guidance Council and leading MB youth activists regarding the nature of the group's internal decisionmaking processes. The disagreement began months ago, when the council rejected the activists' demands for the Brotherhood to support the January 25 anti-Mubarak demonstrations. It continued after Mubarak resigned, as the activists pushed for continued protests while the MB leadership assumed a more strategically conservative pro-stability outlook.

The MB's establishment of the Freedom and Justice Party as its sole political entity was another source of disagreement: the Guidance Council viewed the party as a mechanism for unifying the organization's members under one political banner, while the youths saw it as the council's way of dictating their votes. Meanwhile, given their leading role in the demonstrations, the youths began to view the age and experience requirements for serving in both the council and the MB's Shura Committee as overly restrictive, demanding greater inclusion in these decisionmaking bodies. These disagreements reached a crescendo on May 28, when the council released a statement declaring that the MB youths who had participated in unauthorized demonstrations no longer represented the organization. The youths began establishing their own party immediately thereafter.

Thus far, the Egyptian Trend founders have not outlined an ideological vision distinct from that of the MB. In fact, their stated goal of creating an Islamist faction resembling Turkey's Justice and Development Party precisely echoes the description of the Freedom and Justice Party issued by various Guidance Council members. In its founding documents, the new party studiously avoids ideological statements while emphasizing inclusiveness, envisioning itself as a "youth party presenting a new way and understanding of Egyptian political life, relying on youths and their creativity and their high potential for achievement" and "involving citizens as individuals...in the public affairs of the state."

These platitudes reinforce the extent to which the Egyptian Trend represents a critique of the MB's closed internal structures and not an ideological alternative. The fact that three of the party's four founders -- Islam Lotfi, Muhammad al-Qasas, and Moaz Abdel Karim -- served in the MB for approximately fifteen years, leaving only when their demands for greater influence were rebuffed, further suggests the absence of a meaningful philosophical divide.

Still, the departure of the Brotherhood's most prominent youth activists -- all of whom are deeply connected to the organization's university networks -- raises an important question: how will this affect the MB's performance in September's parliamentary elections?

A Slight Chip, Not a Deep Split

The Egyptian Trend's emergence is the latest in a series of high-profile departures from the MB in recent months.

In February, former Guidance Council member Abdel Monem Abouel Fetouh bucked the Shura Committee's opposition to fielding a presidential candidate and announced that he was running for office. In March, former Shura Committee member Ibrahim al-Zaafarani broke from the organization to form the Renaissance (Nahda) Party. And in June, another group of high-ranking Muslim Brothers departed to form the Pioneers (al-Riyada) Party.

Although the continued emergence of breakaway candidates and parties could undermine the MB's long-term viability, the current batch of offshoots is not likely to catalyze deep splits that would weaken the group in the short run. The MB has quickly expelled all participants in these new efforts, including the 4,000 members who reportedly signed on to Fetouh's presidential campaign and the prominent activists who founded the Egyptian Trend. This decisive action should deter other Brothers from even flirting with these offshoots. After all, members typically work within the organization for five to eight years before achieving full-fledged "working Brother" (*akh amal*) status, and they are unlikely to risk losing something for which they have worked so hard. They are also tied to the organization through their tight-knit, five-person "families" -- that is, small groups of Brothers who meet weekly to study Islamic texts and share events from their personal lives. The risk of banishment would be too high a social price for most of them to pay.

Moreover, the offshoot parties are too new to seriously compromise the MB's vast support base. They are, for the most part, ideologically indistinguishable from one another, and also must compete with other Islamist parties that have projected themselves as alternatives to the MB, such as the Center (Wasat) Party. In addition, they are still in the process of obtaining licenses from the government's Committee on Party Affairs and have therefore been unable to focus on developing grassroots support for the September elections.

By contrast, the MB's Freedom and Justice Party -- which received its license in April -- has spent much of the previous two months using the Brotherhood's nationwide network to build its infrastructure beyond its Cairo headquarters. In the past two weeks, the party has held governorate-level elections in at least nineteen of Egypt's twenty-seven provinces and in every section of Cairo, and more local votes are planned in the coming month. This well-developed hierarchy will enable the party to enter the September elections as the strongest Islamist faction, with minimal local competition from its offshoots.

The founders of the Egyptian Trend know this, which is why they have set their sights on winning a mere two to four seats in September, compared to more than 100 for Freedom and Justice. The breakaway party is playing for the long term, hoping that it can gain a small parliamentary foothold through which it can influence the drafting of Egypt's new constitution. But until it outlines a distinctive ideological vision, its participation in the constitutional process is unlikely to have a meaningful impact.

U.S. Policy Options

The Muslim Brotherhood's avowedly anti-Western outlook makes it tempting to view the Egyptian Trend as an opportunity to weaken the organization. However, given the vicissitudes of Egypt's current political atmosphere, U.S. policymakers are advised to take a wait-and-see approach. The Obama administration's recent announcement that it would engage the MB can be part of this cautious approach -- but only if such efforts are part of a broader strategy for engaging Egypt's many political players in order to better understand their interests and aims. Washington could also engage the Egyptian Trend within this context, so long as policymakers maintain realistic expectations about the party's ability to challenge the Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party -- ideologically or politically -- in the short run.

As the September parliamentary elections approach, Washington should focus on ways to counter the Freedom and Justice Party's organizational strength. Specifically, the U.S. government should continue aiding organizations that train Egyptian liberals to run effective local campaigns, and should dissuade such parties from aligning with Islamists. American public diplomacy can also help raise the liberals' profile by reminding Egyptians that the Tahrir Square protestors fought for a country in which religious equality reigns -- and that parties calling for an Islamic state are at odds with this vision.

Finally, to widen the political space available to liberals, Washington should endorse a recent proposal to ban members of the previous parliament from running in the September elections. This would be an important step toward preventing the combined organizational strength of the MB and members of the former ruling party from squeezing liberals out.

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