

The Rise and Fall of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood

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How did the group rise to power so quickly after Mubarak's ouster in 2011 -- and then just as quickly lose public support and fall from power itself? Read or watch a conversation between leading experts on Egyptian politics.

On October 18, Eric Trager, Nancy Youssef, and Michele Dunne addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Trager is the Institute's Esther K. Wagner Fellow and author of the new book [Arab Fall: How the Muslim MB Won and Lost Egypt in 891 Days](#). Youssef is a senior national security correspondent for the Daily Beast. Dunne directs the Middle East Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

ERIC TRAGER

Nearly six years after Egypt's January 2011 "Arab Spring" uprising and Hosni Mubarak's overthrow a month later, many of the same factors that contributed to the uprising are even worse: the country is more repressive, its politics are more autocratic, and its economy is in critical condition. Yet the past three years since the June 2013 ouster of Egypt's first elected president, Muslim MB (MB) leader Mohamed Morsi, have been relatively quiet. To understand this quiet, one must examine the legacy of the MB's quick rise and failed experiment in power.

After Mubarak was toppled, the MB was the only organization capable of mobilizing nationally to win elections for two reasons. First, the process of becoming a Muslim Brother takes five to eight years, during which every prospective candidate is vetted for his commitment to the organization's cause and his willingness to follow orders as he ascends through successive organizational ranks. At the end of this process, Brothers take an oath to "listen to and obey" the organization's leaders.

Second, until very recently, the MB possessed a rigid, nationwide chain of command in which a centralized leadership based in Cairo (known as the Guidance Office) directed cells of five to ten Brothers (known as *usar*, or families) that were scattered throughout the country. No other political organization coupled this kind of deeply committed membership with a tight mobilizing structure for promoting its vision, distributing social services, organizing protests, and managing effective get-out-the-vote efforts. The MB was therefore able to win because it was far and away the best organized movement -- not because it was immensely popular or "mainstream," as many in Washington believed.

The purpose of the MB's particular organizational structure is promoting its vision of Islam as an "all-encompassing concept" that should dictate every aspect of life. The group therefore sought to indoctrinate individuals in this message, using its cells to spread the message and then anticipating that it would achieve power once its ideology had sufficient public support. Its ultimate goal was to then spread its influence worldwide in order to establish a "global Islamic state."

Yet the MB's brief period in power indicated that this vision was nothing more than a power-seeking program, and that it had little idea what it meant to "implement the sharia" in policy. Its aimlessness was one factor in its quick fall. Another factor was Morsi's successive power grabs, which catalyzed a mass movement against him that culminated with his ouster barely a year after he won the election.

The story of the MB's rise and fall is very much an internal Egyptian one. But the Obama administration's decision to engage the group unconditionally contributed to the MB's decision to pursue power, and also made it feel secure even as it governed more autocratically and consolidated its authority. Due to its anti-Western ideology, the MB expected the West to be a primary barrier to its political rise; it was therefore pleasantly surprised when Washington engaged it in a friendly manner.

Washington pursued this strategy because it believed the MB would remain in power for a while, and that the United States could best influence the group through carrots rather than the typical mix of carrots and sticks. The failure of this policy, and Washington's utter inability to read an organization that had been promoting the same radical message throughout its eighty-plus-year history, raises doubts that Washington can ever get the domestic politics of Middle Eastern countries right.

NANCY YOUSSEF

During the 2011 Tahrir Square uprising, Western media painted Egyptians monolithically, characterizing them as universally supporting the revolution and Mubarak's overthrow. The press therefore failed to prepare Americans (including policymakers) for the instability that ensued, because Egyptians did not agree on the way ahead -- they were somewhat divided on Mubarak's overthrow and deeply divided over the way forward thereafter. Only the MB had a coherent ideological agenda and a strategy for promoting it.

The circumstances surrounding Morsi's rise were similarly complex. Leading up to the June 2012 presidential election, many Egyptians who did not support the MB nevertheless viewed the alternative -- former prime minister Ahmed Shafiq -- as a vote for the very regime they had just toppled. So for many Egyptians, voting for Morsi was not a vote for the MB's particular agenda, and of course he won narrowly with less than 52 percent of the vote.

But once in office, Morsi treated the election as a mandate. When he eventually launched his power grab -- placing his presidential edicts above judicial scrutiny -- a swift downturn in popular support soon followed. The street still believed that it could change things, and there was a growing sense that this new administration would not last long. By spring 2013, a new movement was calling for mass protests on the election's anniversary, and it rapidly gained traction.

The June 30, 2013, protests were very large, and the military ousted Morsi on July 3. At the time, people celebrated his overthrow in Tahrir Square, while the MB protested at Rabaa al-Adawiyya Square in northern Cairo. For many in Washington, Morsi's toppling reflected the termination of the democratic political process, but for many Egyptians it represented just another removal of a leader, and was thus comparable to Mubarak's overthrow. Once again, the lens through which Washington chose to view Egypt did not reflect the complexity on the ground.

MICHELE DUNNE

There are three common myths about Egypt during the post-Mubarak period. The first is that the MB is radically different from other political parties in Egypt. In fact, the MB was not unique in its use of constitutional declarations, power grabs, and thugs for attacking its opponents -- the current authorities have done the same, as have other actors.

The second myth is that the MB's behavior was uniquely incompetent. In fact, parties that emerge during political transitions are often unprepared to govern and lack meaningful policy agendas. They also frequently exhibit majoritarian attitudes and intense paranoia.

Third is the mistaken belief that the unconditional U.S. relationship with the MB was unique. In fact, Washington had engaged the Mubarak regime in a similar manner and has done so with Abdul Fattah al-Sisi's government as well. Moreover, the perception within Egypt that the United States supported the MB during the June 2013 protests and their aftermath is wrong: rather, Washington supported a political resolution.

The Egyptian military was the key player following Mubarak's overthrow. The generals saw the uprising as a way to undermine the power of Mubarak-era crony capitalists, though they were also wary of political change. Then, in 2013, the generals sensed that the people wanted to disempower the MB, and they likewise saw this as beneficial to their interests. Since Morsi's overthrow, Egyptians have refrained from rising up because repression is extraordinarily high, and because there is a widespread desire for stability so the economy can improve.

Regarding U.S. policy, democracy promotion is interpreted in various ways. It does not necessarily mean that Washington creates wide open democracy, but that it tries to persuade those in power to be a little more open about civil liberties and human rights. Even during the MB era, the United States never demanded anything of Morsi or his government because it did not want to interfere in the transition. The only notable exception was when the U.S. embassy was under attack and the Obama administration demanded immediate protection, shocking Morsi to action.

The MB's future is largely unpredictable. The group might yet return to power and govern again after being in a state of dormancy like the Islamist Ennahda faction in Tunisia. The United States and others are unsure how the 2013 collapse will affect the group's ideology -- nobody knows if it will turn violent, remain relatively nonviolent, or wait to rise again in a future revolutionary setting.

This summary was prepared by Yousif Kalian.