



From Prison to Palace: the Muslim Brotherhood's challenges and responses in post-revolution Egypt

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»» Egypt's ongoing revolution is transforming the country's Islamist landscape. The first wave of protests, which lasted for eighteen days and successfully ousted the country's dictator, Hosni Mubarak, triggered deep changes within the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). These have led to numerous splits and internal conflicts within the group, as well as to the establishment of a legal political party, independent (at least formally) from the mother organisation. The Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) soon took a front seat in Egyptian politics, swiftly moving the Brotherhood from the periphery to the centre, first through parliamentary plurality. A few months later, its candidate won the country's first post-revolution presidential elections. This rapid political ascent was accompanied by equally fast changes in the MB's political positions. Whereas prior to the revolution the MB denounced some agreements such as the Camp David Accords and the Peace Treaty with Israel, Egypt's President Mohammed Morsi has repeatedly asserted that his country will uphold its international accords, and his government has expanded the scope of economic treaties involving Israel.

With the MB's ascent also came serious, unprecedented challenges. For decades, the group focused on identity politics, by stressing the need to uphold Muslim identity, defend it against seculars and the West, and only enact legislation viewed as compatible with the *Shariah*. It used this rhetoric to maintain organisational unity, but spent less time on developing alternative policies to those of the regime (defamed as anti-Islamic). Its coming to power, however, creates new realities for the organisation. There are at least four main sets of post-revolution challenges that will define the group's future path, namely the relation between religion and state; the shift from identity politics to policy questions; the 'political relevance' versus 'religious authenticity' dichotomy; and the balance of power between the organisation and its members. So far, the *Ikhwan's* (Brotherhood) organisational strategy has capitalised on the group's successful instrumentalisation of the *Shariah*, and its reliance on high levels of discipline and trust, to achieve the intertwined objective of seeking both political power and organisational unity. While successful in the short term, in the medium and long terms this strategy could lead to the marginalisation of the Brotherhood and its replacement by other more sophisticated forms of religiously-motivated political and social activism.

Pre-revolutionary Muslim Brotherhood

» The MB is the world's oldest existing Islamist movement and was for long Egypt's largest opposition group. Over time, at least four different schools of thought, or ideological leanings, have come to co-exist within the MB. First, in the early twentieth century it was dominated by a relatively modernist school that existed on the margins of al-Azhar, championed by 'reformists' like Muhamad Abduh. It rejects the *turath* (the accumulated heritage of Islamic knowledge) as the defining authority and calls for a return to the Quran and Sunna as the original sources, and to practicing *ijtihad* (independent judgment) with guidance from, rather than complete adherence to, the ideas in *turath*. Second, the traditionalist school, championed by al-Azhar's long history of scholarship, is characterised by a heavy reliance on *turath* and the acceptance of the full authenticity of the four main Sunni schools of jurisprudence. This school also promotes the notion of 'balanced identity,' arguing that each individual belongs to different circles of affiliation, including schools of jurisprudence and theology, Sufi order, hometown, profession, guild, family, and so on. These schools, especially the latter, have been on decline since the 1960s and have been partially replaced by Qutbism and Salafism.

Qutbism – the third school of thought, named after Sayyid Qutb – is characterised by its highly politicised and revolutionary interpretation of the Quran, which divides people into those who belong to/support Islam/Islamism and those who oppose it, with (almost) no grey areas. This school emphasises the need to develop a detached vanguard that focuses on recruitment and ways to empower the organisation, postponing all intellectual questions. While hard-line Qutbism opens doors for political violence, MB Qutbis follow a demilitarised approach, clearly distancing themselves from notions of *takfir* (denunciation as apostates) and violence. There is still a heavy tendency to focus on organisational empowerment and unity by postponing intellectual questions, and to viewing the world through an organisational lens, dividing people between those that are 'with us' and those that are 'against us'.

Forth, the Salafi/Wahabi school made its way into the MB (and broader Egyptian society) in the 1970s. It is a modernist Islamist ideology that has minimal respect for *turath* and relies instead on 'a direct interface with the texts of revelation', leading to 'a relatively shallow and limited hierarchy of scholarly authorities'.¹ Salafism is characterised by a conservative reading of the *Shariah*, as it relies on 'a textual approach, which uses text more than wisdom and reason, and adage more than opinion',² leaving little room

1. Bernard Haykel, 'On the Nature of Salafi Thought and Action', in Roel Meijer, *Global Salafism: Islam's new religious movement* (London: Hurst and Company, 2009), p. 36.
2. Mohammad Emara, *Tayyarat al-fikr al-islamy* (Cairo: Shorouk, 2008), p. 130.

for diversity. Salafists tend to be more concerned with social than political issues, and their conservative reading of the *Shariah* is thus manifested primarily through matters of appearance (including men's beards, women's *hijab/niqab*) and social transactions (inter-gender relations, and those involving non-Muslims). Unlike the other schools, the Salafi and Qutbi schools are more concerned with outlook and action, and are more ambiguous and less harmonised and coherent in their methodological stances.

In addition to these ideological differences, at least two other sets of contradictions have characterised the Brotherhood. First, its different members' socio-economic interests. While the professional middle-class had traditionally constituted the group's backbone, the last decade witnessed an unprecedented ascent of businessmen to senior positions in the Guidance Bureau and Shura Council. Several members of these organisational bodies (as well as their business partners) have had strong influence on the Brotherhood's decision-making processes, through their formal and informal roles. Some of them operated as liaisons between the MB and Mubarak's cronies. After the revolution, the newly-established Egyptian Business Development Association (EBDA), led by key MB businessmen, acts as a link between the president and the business community, including Mubarak's cronies who have fled the country. In parallel, there was a growth in the number of peasants and workers joining the organisation, as part of the group's 'ruralisation', particularly from the late 1990s.³ Far from reflecting coherent socio-economic demands, the MB – with members coming from 'universities, free professions, private sector, and even many state institutions',⁴ alongside unorganised workers and peasants – was left with rather contradicting class and institutional socio-economic interests.

Another contradiction regards the different roles assumed by the organisation. On the one hand, the MB was a *de facto* political party that opposed the Mubarak regime, while on the other hand, it was a social movement, operating in the civil realm trying to capitalise on apolitical spaces provided by the regime to shape/ restore society's values-system. In any context, but especially under authoritarian regimes, assuming both roles entails an inherent contradiction. On the one hand, allying with the opposition threatens its existence. On the other hand, maintaining apolitical activities requires government approval. This led to recurrent tensions, especially after the MB's heavy politicisation in the late 1980s when it decided to run in parliamentary and professional unions' elections. Tensions re-surfaced in the few years preceding the revolution, and the MB was criticised by some of its members for the 'excessive politicisation' of some of its activities and by others for its 'political quietism' and/or too much compromise.

Despite a few resignations, the MB managed to maintain organisational unity. This was particularly due to ambiguous uniting principles: a belief that Islam is an all-encompassing system; rejecting violence as a means of political change in domestic politics; accepting democracy as a political system; consequently accepting political pluralism; supporting resistance movements operating against foreign occupation; and the shrewd application of identity politics. These 'general principles' are shared by an

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3. Hossam Tammam, *Al-ikhwan Al-Muslimoon: Sanawat ma Qabl Al-Thawra* (Cairo: Shorouk, 2012).

4. Nathan Brown, 'When Victory Becomes an Option: Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood confronts success', *The Carnegie Papers*, 2012, p. 12.

overwhelming majority of Egyptians, not only Brotherhood members. According to a 2008 Gallup world poll, 98 per cent of Egyptians think that religion is an important part of their daily lives, while for 87 per cent traditions and customs associated with Islam play a central role therein.⁵ Thus, religion is not merely a set of rituals, but rather a *weltanschauung* with its values-system and legislative guidelines. The vast majority of Egyptians wants the *Shariah* to be not a source of legislation only, but the only source. Post-revolution polls illustrate similar results. Only 9 per cent of Egyptians want an absolute separation between religious and political institutions (whereby religious scholars would have no authority over political affairs); 14 per cent seem to support theocratic rule (where religious scholars have full authority over political affairs); and 70 per cent stand somewhere in between (demanding that religious scholars play an advisory role). Similarly, 88 per cent of Egyptians believe in democracy as the path to prosperity, 97 per cent say that targeting civilians is never justified, and 79 per cent opine that only peaceful means can bring desired changes. Consequently, the MB's unifying principles, while ensuring a common denominator for the group, do not distinguish it from the broader Egyptian society – a necessary condition for organisational strength.

Identity politics provided the necessary glue for organisational unity in the pre-revolution context. The recurrent waves of mass arrests forced the Brotherhood to adopt a defensive stand, and 'survival' became a top priority. It responded to years of threats and actual persecution by institutionalising a 'state of emergency', which gave the group's leadership leeway to postpone intellectual and policy questions and compromise on methodology, capitalising on the growth of the Salafi and Qutbi tendencies and leading to their further empowerment. Focusing on 'organisation' facilitated the leadership's otherwise impossible task of negating the ideological differences caused by the influence of different schools of thought. Instead of developing a clear definition of the *Shariah* (in terms of methodology, approach and verdicts) that would act as a benchmark, it was instrumentalised through the reconstruction of the Islamic notion of necessity (*dharoura*). Originally defined as reaching a state where abstaining from doing the forbidden is fatal, legitimising acts that are otherwise religiously illegitimate, *dharoura* was redefined to justify a wider range of actions. Avoiding anything harmful to the organisation was part of *dharoura*, and hence 'organisation' became an absolute, while the *Shariah* continued to serve as a powerful instrument that utilises members' loyalty and trust to monopolise the definition of necessity.

The organisational structure reflected this mode of thinking. The group responded to persistent security threats by developing a 'pyramid-shaped hierarchy [which] ensures that members dutifully execute the aims of its national leadership at the local level'.⁶ Through centralising decision-making and decentralising implementation, the MB has sought to sustain internal unity and efficiency. Unity was maintained by narrowing the decision-making circles (until former Chairman Mahdi Akef stepped down, these circles were comprised primarily of the group's 'historical' leadership),

5. John L. Esposito and Dalia Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam? What a billion Muslims really think* (New York: Gallup Press, 2007), p. 7.

6. Eric Trager, 'The Unbreakable Muslim Brotherhood: grim prospects for a liberal Egypt', *Foreign Affairs* 90(5), September/October 2011, 114-126, p. 119.

thus reducing the room for disputes and disagreement. The MB was able to do this by substituting members' need for empowerment with a strong sense of duty – caused by the institutionalisation of crisis – and given the high levels of loyalty and trust, based on a history of sacrifice and resilience, and strong fraternity bonds among its members. Implementation was ensured through decentralisation, as a means to overcome inefficiencies caused by the recurrent arrests of members at different hierarchy levels. Loyalty was also reflected in the group's recruitment and promotion criteria, based on religious standards and organisational discipline. Observers noted that 'becoming a full-fledged Muslim Brother is a five-to-eight year process, during which aspiring members are closely watched for their loyalty'.⁷

Highly centralised decision-making was a double-edge sword. On the one hand, it enabled successive regimes to control the MB's decisions by pressuring a small group of leaders. On the other hand, it led to the emergence of a heavyweight, albeit less intellectually-sophisticated and ideologically-coherent organisation. This matched the group's pre-revolution requirements: the MB needed more muscle than brains to exhibit power in elections and, occasionally, in demonstrations.

The MB had to undergo serious transformations throughout the decade preceding the revolution. It was part of the opposition that united around a common foreign policy agenda following the Palestinian Intifada in 2000 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003.⁸ Its domestic agenda has also increasingly prioritised democracy since 2005.⁹ The short 'Spring' of 2005 opened more doors for opposition groups' joint activities, as Islamists and non-Islamists began to cooperate on a wider range of issues, most importantly the battles for judicial independence in 2006, the rejection of the 2007 constitutional amendments, the protests against the 2008-2009 Israeli war on Gaza and the role of Egypt therein, and the support for the growing social protests triggered by neoliberal reforms that were intensified by the government from 2002 onwards. These developments led to the emergence of a new generation of MB youth activists (mainly from big cities), who were better connected to the broader opposition movement and less tied to identity politics. They were more willing to take initiative and were less dependent on centralised decisions to join protests, as evidenced by their participation in the pre-revolution demonstrations against the torture and killing of the Alexandrian Khaled Said by security forces.

Another wave of change came from within, when Mahdi Akef announced his decision to step down in the fall of 2009. He was the last MB leader with historical legitimacy. His successor, Muhammad Badie, belongs to another generation that lacks the gravitas that had helped Akef and his predecessors to resolve internal disputes and force compromises. Thus, it became increasingly difficult for the MB to postpone intellectual and political debates while maintaining unity, at least at the decision-making level. The executive council elections that took place between December 2009 and January 2010 took the competition between different MB factions to another level. The most

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7. Ibid., p. 115.

8. Dina Shehata, 'Islamists and Non-Islamists in the Egyptian Opposition' in Daniel Brumberg and Dina Shehata (eds.) *Conflict, Identity and Reform in the Muslim World: challenges for U.S. engagement* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 2009), p. 315.

9. Ibid., p. 325.

powerful Salafi–Qutbi faction, fearing that diversity in decision-making would lead to rifts, adopted an exclusionary position, leaving out key ‘reformist’ figures from the executive council, including Abdelmonem Aboufotouh and Mohamed Habib. It was now in full control of the MB’s leadership, and led the group during the revolution and months that followed.

The Muslim Brothers, and Islamists at large, were generally excluded from pre-revolution politics. Not a single Islamist political group was legally-recognised, and tolerance for the MB’s extra-legal existence was dictated by the regime’s need for legitimacy. Militants’ threat to such legitimacy during the 1990s caused the regime to change its stance and violently crush militant radicals, allowing relative space for ‘moderates’ to overshadow them. The following decade witnessed the descent of the radical threat, and the regime consequently adopted a new strategy to keep the opposition boxed in.¹⁰ It included ‘divide-and-rule tactics to break the opposition’s ranks and prevent sustainable alliance-building between Islamists and non-Islamists’, and policies that ‘significantly raised the costs of cooperation with Islamists’.¹¹ This was coupled with crackdowns on MB strongholds, including student unions, professional unions, private mosques, the banking sector, and private enterprises. The exclusion of inclusion-seeking Islamists created room for others to flourish, most importantly the Qutbis and Salafis. Their ascent with the (almost complete) exclusion of Islamists from the public domain led to the development of a parallel religious sphere, in which less sophisticated and more extremist ideas remained uncontested.

The Brotherhood during the revolution

»» Following the ousting of Tunisian President Ben Ali, Egyptian activists called for demonstrations on 25 January to protest against police brutality and call for the dismissal of the interior minister. The Brotherhood’s reaction was rather sophisticated. The group’s leadership had two choices: provoking the regime (in line with its political, but in contradiction with its social path), or detaching itself from the broader protest movement (more in line with its social path). Between 15-23 January, the group issued three statements in escalating tones. The first congratulated the Tunisian people for the ousting of Ben Ali and called upon Arab regimes to ‘listen to the voice of wisdom’ from their people. The second presented a ten-point roadmap for reform to be enacted immediately. Finally, the third condemned the interrogation of and threats to its leaders in an attempt to pressure them to boycott

10. Hesham al-Awadi, *In Pursuit of Legitimacy. The Muslim Brothers and Mubarak* (New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 2004).

11. Shehata, op. cit., p. 321.

the protests, and called for dialogue.¹² While the official statements remained ambiguous about the MB's own participation, a group of youth members were quick to endorse the protests and began rallying for the cause. Between 25-28 January, the MB modified its position around the clock. In a statement issued on 26 January, it asserted that its members were participating in their personal capacity and that the regime should 'comply with people's will'.¹³ On the eve of 28 January, the group announced its endorsement of the calls for nationwide demonstrations. The regime responded by pre-emptively arresting several key MB leaders and activists, including a handful of executive council members.

Despite its traditionally-conservative outlook, the MB's grassroots character kept it connected to the people and facilitated a swift change of rhetoric following the unprecedented clashes of 28 January and their shocking death toll. Four increasingly strident statements were issued between 29 January and 1 February, the last one openly calling for Mubarak's resignation.¹⁴ However, the positions adopted in the following week reflected internal divisions. While on-the-ground activists played an instrumental role in defending revolutionaries during the 2 February crackdown on Tahrir Square, the MB leadership was shaken by Vice President Omar Suleiman's carrot-and-stick TV interview in which he offered them a seat in negotiations while accusing them of political opportunism. On 3 February, the MB issued a statement retreating to their earlier conservative position: while clearly rejecting the regime's threats and endorsing revolutionary demands, it opened the door to a 'constructive, productive and sincere dialogue' with the regime.¹⁵

Overall, the eighteen days prior to Mubarak's fall had a deep impact on the MB. Most significantly, it pushed the group beyond the borders of identity politics. Repolarisation was revived by debates surrounding the March constitutional referendum, but the short era of inclusion had already triggered some major changes within the Brotherhood. The group declared its intention to establish a political party. While the nomination of leaders (all of whom were members of the MB executive council) raised serious questions about the party's autonomy, the establishment of a political party reflected a major shift in the group's political thinking.

The FJP's structure and leadership was met with dismay by different reformist figures within the group. Three prominent 'reformists' from Alexandria decided to split and form their own political party, which soon also split into three. Younger members who had operated for a far shorter time under oppression found it much easier to move into the policy realm and resisted the MB's retreat to identity issues. A first wave of protests came from a group of Cairene youth, who called for a nationwide MB youth conference on two main themes: transforming the MB from an organisation to an institution, and discussing different scenarios for the relationship between socio-religious and political activities. This was followed by the dismissal of key figures, young and old, who refused to join the FJP and formed their own parties, or who joined Abolfotouh's presidential

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12. Amr Hamid Rabie, 'Watha'iq 100 yawm 'ala thawret 25 yanayer' (Cairo: Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, 2011), p 174-8.

13. Ibid., p. 178.

14. Ibid., p. 179-82.

15. Ibid., p. 183.

campaign. Abolfotouh himself was dismissed for breaching the MB's decision not to present a candidate to the presidential elections; a decision later reversed by the group.

The split in the public sphere was again visible in the referendum on constitutional amendments held in March 2011. With the MB supporting the amendments and most 'secular' political forces rejecting them, the Salafis, realising their political naivety, decided to side with the more experienced MB. Over 77 per cent of voters were in favour of the constitutional amendments. Instead of seeing the results as the broader public's choice of a less risky path to change, mainstream media insisted that the outcome reflected the Islamists' overwhelming electoral power. This led to the re-emergence of an identity-based polarisation, with political actors characterised as Islamists on the one side, and as secular on the other. Such polarisation has, in turn, marginalised serious reform and policy questions that Islamists now have to face in post-revolutionary Egypt. These include three related challenges concerning the development of a coherent political programme, the relationship between state and religion, and authenticity and modernity/relevance, as well as the organisational challenge of striking a balance between individual empowerment and organisational unity and harmony.

Post-revolution challenges

»» There have been various attempts to define the term 'secular' and assess how it relates to religious values. Perhaps the most important attempt in the Egyptian context is that of Abdel-Wahhab Elmessiri, who distinguishes between two layers of secularism: the procedural and the absolute.¹⁶ While procedural secularism amends procedures without challenging the governing values-system, absolute secularism aims at constructing its own frame of reference, challenging the transcendental religious values that governed societies in pre-secular times. For Elmessiri, these forms exist on a continuum, with theocracies at one end, procedural secularism somewhere in the middle, and absolute secularism at the other end. This clustering has a much greater illustrative capacity than traditional Islamist–secular polarisation. The notion of 'absolute secularism' has only marginal (if any) presence in Egypt's public debate. As opinion polls indicate, a vast majority of Egyptians oppose the reduction of Islam to personal status issues and the private domain. The question is therefore not *whether* religion should have a role in the political system, but rather *how* this role should be managed and which domains should it cover.

The MB's answer to this question remains ambiguous. Exhibiting more sophistication than other Islamist groups, the organisation argues for a 'civil state with an Islamic frame of

16. Abdel-Wahab Elmessiri, *Al-'elmaneyya al-juz'eyya wal-'elmaneyya al-shamila* (Cairo: Shorouk, 2002).

reference'. While this articulation is still considerably vague, it distinguishes the MB from Salafis and other Islamists who call for an Islamic/Islamist state, and helps it present itself as a more moderate, mainstream movement capable of acting as a bridge between both sides of the political spectrum – the 'civil' and 'Islamist' forces. However, this position fails to answer the more serious questions. It continues to 'overlook the significant differences between the modern nation-state and the pre-modern Islamic community',¹⁷ and does not critically engage in discussions about the role of the state in managing society and its engagement in the preservation of public morality'. This lack of intellectual debate on the role of the state is a persistent deficit in the Brotherhood's political thought. The lack of a coherent position *vis-à-vis* the state-religion relationship is not unique to the Brotherhood, or even to Islamists at large. The term 'civil' – Egypt's substitute for the term secular – is not any less vague, for its advocates accept the second article of Egypt's constitution (stipulating the principles of the *Shariah* as the primary source of legislation) without illustrating the difference between their position and that (equally vague) of Islamists.

Developing coherent political strategies is a key challenge for the MB in the aftermath of the revolution. Pervasive Islamist-secular polarisation postpones the transcendence of identity politics, but the MB's ascent to power creates a more urgent need to focus on services and policy issues. Despite desperate attempts to remain in the realm of identity politics, public debate will eventually reshape alliances in a way that shifts the focus from identity to policy. The economy, the distribution of resources, the political system and foreign policy, among other questions, will prove to be more important to Egypt's public debate. Nonetheless, the MB, while venturing beyond identity domains, remains cautious. Aware of its deficits, it recurrently resorts to creating contained crises, where identity politics can be re-usherred to maintain organisational unity and cover policy deficits.

Another major challenge is the authenticity–modernity/relevance dialectic. Long decades of exclusion from policy-making have led to the detachment, and consequently stagnation, of Islamist scholarship in socio-political domains.¹⁸ However, since authenticity is such an integral component of Islamism, Islamists cannot simply discard it and unconditionally accept modern notions. If more politically-experienced groups such as the MB do so, they are automatically subjected to criticism by other marginal groups, and their 'Islamist legitimacy' is jeopardised. Striking a balance between authenticity and social, political and economic relevance and practicalities is even more problematic after the MB's coming to power in the absence of a workable project of 'Islamisation'. Attitudes towards issues like 'democracy', 'nation-state', modern economy, Israel and US relations reveal serious tensions between authenticity and practicality. The MB adopts a rather pragmatic stance, capitalising on its high levels of organisational cohesion and the instrumentalisation of the *Shariah*, clearly leaning toward relevance and practicality at the cost of authenticity. However, this risks causing a legitimacy crisis, as it creates the paradox between the promise of change (embedded in the slogan 'Islam is the solution', the 'Renaissance project' and the 'revolutionary candidate') on the one hand, and the acceptance of the status quo, on the other hand. As one MB reformer suggested, the most dangerous phenomenon now is not the

17. Moataz El Fegier, 'A Tyranny of the Majority? Islamists' ambivalence about human rights', *FRIDE Working Paper*, 2012, p. 3.

18. Tariq al-Bishri, *Al-malamih al-'amma li-l-fikr al-siyasi al-islami fil-tareekh al-mu'asser* (Cairo: Shorouk, 2005).

‘*ikhwanisation* of the state’ but rather the ‘statification of the Brotherhood’. While the instrumentalisation of the *Shariah* and the institutionalisation of the concept of ‘necessity’ resolve the problem in the short run, the rapid pace of change pre- and post-revolution and the emergence of the Salafi movement – which is eager to compete with the MB on identity and authenticity – pose serious challenges.

Egypt’s revolution has brought about major shifts in Islamist organisations’ way of thinking. The pre-revolutionary context had led to the emergence of autocratic organisations, in which leaders wielded tremendous power. Organisational success was primarily (and almost solely) determined not by intellectual capability and the sophistication and well-articulation of its political programme, but rather by organisational power and the number of supporters. Persistent political occlusion prevented political parties and groups from playing a role in government, and hence detailed, prioritised and effective policy alternatives were unnecessary. High calibre cadres were therefore viewed as more of a burden than an asset, and organisations focused on ‘quantity’ and ‘mass-production/indoctrination’ to the detriment of quality.

The post-revolution context, however, is different. Various groups’ leaderships saw their power challenged by the decision of individual members to join the mass protests. In the case of the MB’s youth, this altered the group’s chain-of-command legitimacy, enshrining more legitimacy on individual initiative. Further, the post-revolution erosion of barriers to political inclusion meant that the articulation of political programmes was now a necessity, especially with the Brotherhood moving from the periphery to the core of Egyptian politics. While its organisational and electoral machine was always successful, the Brotherhood’s political deficits were exposed in the aftermath of every election since the revolution. The MB government’s weak legislative agenda (which hardly corresponds to revolutionary demands); the almost complete failure to restructure the state and dismantle the networks of crony capitalism tied thereto; the president’s unmet promises of his 100-day programme; and the FJP’s failure to present a real alternative to the policies it criticised attest to the urgent need for higher calibre cadres within the group. The real paradox, however, is that in order to achieve this, it is first necessary to open more windows for creative thinking and critical attitude, which in turn will negatively impact on organisational unity and electoral power. Striking a balance between ‘quantity’ and ‘quality’ is therefore a serious challenge for the Brotherhood in the months to come.

MB responses

» So far, the Brotherhood’s response to these challenges has reflected an inadequate understanding of the magnitude of change brought about by the revolution. Instead of devising strategies to deal with such unprecedented challenges, the group’s leadership seems more inclined to continue with ‘business as usual’. The current leadership (elected before the revolution and thus a product of years of political stagnation and occlusion under Mubarak and his predecessors) has therefore,

consciously or not, decided to re-focus on identity politics as the only means for maintaining unity. Recent events reflect the Brotherhood's insistence on presenting themselves as victims.

Instead of basing policy and alliances on socio-economic issues, the MB focuses on 'identity' and integrates the Salafi ascent in their political calculations. In the 2011 parliamentary race, it presented itself as the 'moderate' Islamist group, willing to forge a broad 'democratic' alliance with both Islamist and civil actors, as opposed to the 'extremist' Salafis, who rejected any form of cooperation. With the Salafi bogymen and the group's own organisational power, however, the MB ended up marginalising civil parties, forcing the vast majority of them to break out and form their own electoral lists. Those who remained were rewarded by having their leaders and senior figures elected to parliament. During the presidential elections, however, MB prospects were threatened by the key Salafi parties' decision to support Abolfotouh. In response, the *Ikhwan* attempted to detach these parties' leaderships from their grassroots movements, by accusing Abolfotouh of 'compromising too much' on Islamic identity and presenting their own candidate as the 'only Islamist candidate'. Even in the aftermath of Morsi's election, the MB continued successfully to play the identity card to defend Morsi's decisions, even if they were irrelevant to religious concerns. The president is referred to as an 'Islamist' whenever his policies are targeted, a strategy that has proven successful in avoiding Islamists self-critique and guaranteeing overwhelming Islamist support for otherwise controversial policies.

Identity issues (including the *Shariah*) are therefore instrumentalised by the group's leadership whenever deemed necessary. For example, during the first round of presidential elections, in order to support the somewhat controversial constitutional declaration of 22 November, Mohammed Morsi was portrayed as the 'only Islamist candidate' who would 'Islamise everything, including the sewage system' and who would establish 'the United Islamic Nation, with Jerusalem being its capital'.

This persistent focus on identity politics, however, remains short of resolving the more serious social, economic and political post-revolution challenges. The MB has blamed external factors for its failure to solve these issues (caused primarily by its failure to abandon identity politics and devise workable policies). The failure to push forward a relevant legislative agenda to deal with the pressing questions of economic development and distribution, judicial reform and security sector reform was attributed to the previous government's 'irresponsiveness'. FJP leaders repeatedly insisted that parliament was partly to blame. However, as FJP parliamentarians failed to utilise political pressure and legislative tools meaningfully to influence government policy, they blamed the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) for misusing its *de facto* presidential legitimacy to the detriment of democracy, and used this argument to justify their decision to file a presidential candidate. Parliament was dissolved via a Constitutional Court decision a few days before the election runoffs, and a Constitutional Declaration was issued enabling the SCAF to seize legislative power. When MB candidate Mohammed Morsi assumed power, he dismissed senior SCAF leaders and abolished the Declaration. He continued, however, to blame the judiciary for his failures, even though he retained both executive and legislative powers until the new constitution was ratified in December 2012. Even now – with the presidency, a parliamentary majority and the ratification of the new MB-approved constitution

– the MB blames the opposition and the media for its lack of achievement. However, as the economy deteriorates and the hopes of the revolution evaporate, MB members, sympathisers and supporters will be less and less likely to accept these excuses. In the medium term, and maybe even sooner, this will be reflected in both voter turnout (as voters will feel increasingly betrayed by politicians, jeopardising the political system's legitimacy) and the MB's electoral performance (if its political opponents succeed in presenting a convincing alternative capable of attracting voters).

The lack of a clear political project creates a growing paradox between the promise for 'change' and maintaining the status quo. With no clear strategy on how to manoeuvre the political system, dismantle corruption and maintain the people's sovereignty, the MB seems to have decided to pursue status quo policies whilst adopting a populist rhetoric promising change. The former is intended to maintain power by avoiding provoking the more powerful players, both domestic and foreign. Locally, the MB seems keen on not provoking senior bureaucrats and business tycoons. Internationally, it does not wish to challenge the regional configuration of power, founded on Egypt's strategic alignment with 'moderate' forces, such as the Gulf, Israel and the United States. On the other hand, populist rhetoric aims to avoid members' dismay, or rather frustration, caused by the lack of Islamisation, or lack of change in general.

This strategy explains contradictory policies such as dismissing senior SCAF leaders and not including civilian control over the military in the new constitution; verbal attacks on businessmen and remnants of the Mubarak regime, while appointing some of the old guard to ministerial posts and allowing business representatives to accompany the president on his foreign trips; and the verbal boycott of Israel (with the president making no mention of Israel in any of his speeches) and the rapid destruction of tunnels to Gaza. While ensuring short-term stability, this only empowers the status quo forces that will remain sceptical of the MB. It erodes hopes for structural reforms or deep changes in political orientation, allowing for no more than a (partial) change of face, accompanied by limited populist policies focusing on public morality.

The lack of a well-articulated political vision suggests that the MB will continue to follow this strategy for some time. This does not entail, however, an absolute lack of change, but rather the absence of deep structural changes. In the realm of foreign policy, for instance, changes can only be partial. Promises do not include decreasing Egypt's reliance on assistance and aid from the United States and the Gulf. The MB is likely, however, to opt for stronger ties with Turkey and Qatar, aiming at forming a strategic alliance and securing financial aid from the former and financial assistance from the latter. But these new potential partners are also US allies, and the Brotherhood will remain bound by the Camp David structure and will maintain Egypt's pivotal role in the 'axis of moderation'. Egypt's Islamists are not expected to openly support resistance groups in the region, or introduce radical changes to the economy that may significantly threaten the interests of key state and non-state economic actors. At best, post-revolution Egypt will express increased support for the Palestinians while maintaining a 'cold peace' with Israel; and seek a more active role in regional affairs while avoiding to challenge the peace treaty, display hostility towards the growing Gulf/Wahhabi influence in the region, or to openly support the Palestinian resistance. Arguably, therefore, they will, at best, revive Egypt's foreign policy of the 1990s.

Conclusion

»» The post-revolution Muslim Brotherhood has been wrongfully accused of focusing on the Islamisation of the state and society. In fact, its primary focus has been maintaining organisational unity whilst seeking political power. The question of '*Shariah* application', rather than being an end has been instrumentalised via the reconstruction of the notion of 'necessity' to serve that end. So far, the group's leadership has been successful in keeping it in the realm of identity politics, which helps to maintain organisation unity, ensures electoral success, allows controversial neoliberal policies (inherited from Mubarak's last years, and encouraged by the empowered MB businessmen) to pass unnoticed, and postpones serious questions about competence, socio-economic biases, legislative priorities and overall political performance.

The rapid shift of the MB's position from prisons and the periphery of Egypt's polity to the presidential palace and the heart of post-revolution politics in no more than two years generates mixed outcomes. On the one hand, it allows the MB to continue relying on identity politics. On the other hand, however, it forces the group to abandon some of its earlier stances and ideological positions and seek other more 'relevant' ones. While justifiable in the short term, these 'compromises' increasingly hurt the MB's credibility, and will eventually lead to an internal legitimacy crisis in the medium and long terms.

The Brotherhood is now trapped between two threats. Holding on to identity politics implies discarding more serious policy questions that are gaining in importance in light of economic hardships and security sector reform challenges. This, in turn, would lead to the gradual 'statisation' of the group and the evident loss of its *raison d'être*. The organisation's historical legacy and its high levels of loyalty might help to prevent major rifts and breakouts caused by political failures, but its ability to secure votes and to attract new recruits and supporters will be seriously harmed.

Leaving identity politics behind and moving onto real policy debates will not be less costly. Entering the realm of policy would take out the group's common denominator for internal unity. Contradictions between different classes, ideological and other biases will come to the fore, leading to a multitude of political manifestations. If the MB continues to have the FJP as its sole political representative, splits and cracks will be unavoidable, eventually leading to the group's complete breakdown. If pressure is too strong and the MB is forced to accept multiple political representatives, their individual electoral power will not be strong enough and they will need to seek alliances based on political rather than religious agendas, while competing to capitalise on the MB's historical legacy.

Foreign policy is likely to be another area where the group will follow pragmatic tendencies and instrumentalise identity politics. As part of the broader Islamist movement, since its early establishment the MB has adopted a critical stance *vis-à-vis* the West, blaming Western countries for 'political colonisation', resource exploitation

and cultural invasion.¹⁹ These notions have become central to the Islamist movement, which has based its legitimacy on the claim of defending independence (political and cultural) and working towards ‘Islamic renaissance’. Unlike other Islamists, however, this critical stance has not stopped the MB from seeking cooperation with the West, in an attempt to ‘convince the West to change its alliances and policies in the Middle East’.²⁰ Instead of putting all blame for the country’s underdevelopment on the ‘far enemy’ (i.e. the West), unlike other Islamist groups the MB has also blamed corrupt local regimes and the domestic secular elite. In practical terms, the concept of *dharoura* (necessity) has justified the MB’s pendulous movement between blaming the West and seeking its support and cooperation. At times, the MB batted its eyelashes at Western (and particularly US) officials. After its 2005 parliamentary victory (when the MB won 20 per cent of seats), Deputy Chairman Khairat el-Shater soon asserted that there is ‘no need to be afraid’²¹ of the Brotherhood, for the group does not ‘promote an anti-Western agenda’.²² At other times, it criticised Western involvement in domestic affairs, calling for the end of ‘neocolonialism’.

This pendulous position has continued after the MB’s ascent. While using populist rhetoric to discredit the opposition by accusing them of relying on foreign support, the MB has sought better relations with the West and even tries to capitalise on (sometimes fake) statements of Western officials and thinkers praising President Morsi as a proof of his competence. The MB is likely to continue this dual policy as long as it is not faced with serious criticism from Western governments. As mentioned earlier, under pressure the MB is likely to adopt tougher stances on Israel, yet its conservative nature will ensure its adherence to the rules of the game, ruling out any possibility of an attempt to challenge the current balance of power.

The same can be said about regional politics. Keen on enhancing its relations with the Gulf, the MB will not take any serious steps towards rebuilding relations with Iran. The MB government has placed the sectarian question of ‘Shiaisation’ (alongside, and maybe as part of, the Syrian question) at the top of its foreign policy agenda towards Tehran, a decision that can be best understood in light of the recurrent statements insisting that Egypt will not compromise on security in the Gulf. The MB will not attempt fully to escape US influence, but rather escape ‘direct’ influence to ‘proxy’ influence through deepening ties with US allies Qatar and Turkey. While seeking higher levels of foreign policy ‘independence’, it is unlikely that the MB will introduce any fundamental qualitative changes on that front.

Thus, alike in other areas, it is not ‘Islamism’ that will guide the group’s foreign policy, but ‘pragmatism’ and political conservatism. The authentic notion of *Umma* (nation) has been (almost) fully replaced by the nation-state, opening wide doors for a legitimacy crisis that erupts particularly at moments when the nation and the state are at odds, such as regarding the Israeli-led war on Gaza. In these moments of crisis,

19. Walid Abdelnasser. *Altayyarat Alislameyya fi Misr wa Mawaqifha Tijah and Kharij: min Alnaksa Eila Almanasa* (Cairo: Shorouk, 2001), p.82.

20. Ibid., p. 84.

21. Khairat el-Shater, ‘No Need to be Afraid of us’, *The Guardian*, 23 November 2005, available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2005/nov/23/comment.mainsection>

22. Khairat El-Shater, ‘We do not Promote an Anti Western Agenda’, *MB News*, 14 March 2006, The Muslim Brotherhood, Ikhwan Web.

the MB is forced to yield to public pressure and retreat from its 'moderate' positions, hence putting its regional alliances – on which depends its governing – at stake.

In all cases, the phenomenon of Islamism – in its current simplistic form, focused predominantly on the question of identity and presented foremost by the MB – will end up being replaced by more sophisticated forms of religiously-motivated political activism carrying higher levels of diversity (both religious and political) and better responses to the country's challenges. Ironically, the only force capable of impeding this change is not the MB, but its political rivals.

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