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Who Really Holds the Reins in Egypt?

Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood

By Matthias Gebauer, Daniel Steinvorth and Volkhard Windfuhr

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Mohammed Morsi may be the president of Egypt, but it's the Muslim Brotherhood that appears to be calling the shots. The Islamist group waited decades for a shot at power in the country and it isn't about to yield without a fight.

He calls himself Sharif. He is a young man without a beard who wears a hoodie and athletic shoes. He doesn't look anything like a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, but rather like one of those young revolutionaries his men are assaulting with stones, sticks and steel rods.

Sharif says that he hates these liberals and leftists, who began protesting against the Muslim Brotherhood and its president, Mohammed Morsi, after he acquired sweeping new powers through a decree issued in late November. Over the weekend, Morsi moved to rescind that decree, replacing it with a weaker one. But opposition protests have hardly abated as a referendum on the country's controversial draft constitution approaches in a few days. Sharif's strong feelings, meanwhile, led him to take command of a group of Islamist thugs last week.

Sharif's Muslim Brotherhood men are well organized and disciplined, carrying plastic bags for the rocks they pull out of the track bed for street cars, and they are buoyed by their combative spirit. "We are prepared for a long struggle," says Sharif. "We will defend our president, even if things get tough."

For them, defending their president means chasing their enemies from the presidential palace into side streets, where they brutally attack and beat them. Even ordinary onlookers are attacked. With burned out cars still smoking by the side of the road, they proudly present their prisoners: 63 men, their faces swollen and bloody, herded together in front of the entrance to the presidential palace. Sharif's opponents, armed with sticks and firebombs, strike back with almost equal brutality. Last week, the violence had led to at least five deaths, several hundred injuries and the shocking realization that the new president feels less committed to the Egyptian people than to the Brotherhood. The deployment of the Egyptian military on the streets of Cairo has calmed the chaos since then, but protests continue daily.

Gangs of Thugs

Through Facebook and Twitter, the Muslim Brotherhood had called for a pro-Morsi demonstration in front of the presidential palace, and using chain text messages, they ordered their supporters to the Cairo district of Heliopolis to teach the "enemies of democracy" a lesson. The thousands of men like Sharif who heeded the call are cogs in the wheel of the Muslim Brotherhood, which is currently summoning up as many of its supporters as possible to ensure that it doesn't lose its newly acquired power.

It wouldn't be the first time that the Muslim Brotherhood had sent its gangs of thugs into the streets. In its early years, it controlled a militia that committed political assassinations and attacked leftists. "The Muslim Brotherhood feels that it has reached its goal of finally being able to implement the ideals of its founder, Hassan al-Banna. They've been preparing for this for 84 years," says Cairo political scientist Siad Akl. "That's why they won't give up power that quickly."

For many Egyptians, the rioting of the last few weeks is proof that it isn't the president but the Brotherhood that is pulling the strings -- and that it has no scruples about pushing the country to the brink of civil war, if necessary.

In late November, the US newsmagazine *Time* named President Morsi the most important politician in the Middle East. But very few people believe that the ponderous engineer is actually the most powerful man in the country. There are likely two other men who make the decisions: Mohammed Badie, the head of the Muslim Brotherhood, and Khairat El-Shater, its first candidate, who was excluded from the election for formal reasons and is in charge of organization and financial affairs for the Brotherhood.

At the moment, state-owned television is probably the best place to see who is in charge in Egypt. Almost every week, it broadcasts encounters between the president and important dignitaries. Morsi often meets with Badie, greeting him by kissing his hand. It's a gesture meant to express obedience, and it shows that the oath of allegiance Morsi, like all members of the Brotherhood, once swore to the movement and its leader still applies.

More of a Pragmatist than a Democrat

What, though, does Badie want? The 69-year-old professor of veterinary medicine is the "murshid al-'am," or supreme leader of the Islamist organization. Since January 2010, he has been the chairman of the "guidance office" of the Muslim Brotherhood, a sort of politburo, currently consisting of 21 predominately older and deeply conservative men. Almost all members were shaped by many years of imprisonment. But when Badie came into office, he surprised many with his passionate support for then President Hosni Mubarak. Soon afterwards, the regime released several imprisoned members of the Muslim Brotherhood.

To this day, many Egyptians see this as evidence of secret cooperation between the former regime and the Brotherhood, their public disdain for one another notwithstanding. When it comes to power, Badie, it would seem, is more of a pragmatist than a democrat.

El-Shater, meanwhile, is the chief strategist of the Muslim Brotherhood, meaning he is nominally responsible for all political maneuvers the Brotherhood has employed to control the revolution since Mubarak's overthrow. They include the deal with the former military leadership that enabled both sides to save face, depriving the top military officials of some of their power while simultaneously preserving all of their privileges.

And his relationship with Morsi? El-Shater was once Morsi's direct superior. "Internally, the current president was seen as nothing but his errand boy," says a former member of the Brotherhood. "Morsi can't make any decisions on his own," confirms Amr al-Laithi, one of nine presidential advisors who resigned in recent weeks in protest against Morsi's dictatorial behavior. According to al-Laithi, everything -- every word, every proposal -- has to be approved by the Brotherhood's second-in-command. It isn't El-Shater who calls the president, says al-Laithi, but the president who calls El-Shater. The experts who are supposed to advise the president on key issues are all members of the Brotherhood, says al-Laithi, adding that he resigned when he realized that he had no say whatsoever.

Directly from the Politburo

There are more examples that prove that Morsi isn't the only one in charge. When the president was supposed to appoint new governors a few months ago, Egyptian journalists discovered after the fact that the list of candidates had come directly from the Brotherhood's politburo. Neither

cabinet members nor the president's advisors were consulted in advance. When top officials in the government media were replaced, the incoming management was likewise chosen by the Brotherhood.

And last week, when liberals, Copts and secular Egyptians battled with members of the Muslim Brotherhood in front of the presidential palace, the president, protected by tanks and the presidential guard behind the palace walls, took more than 24 hours to comment on the rioting. Was it because he had to coordinate his response with Badie and El-Shater first?

When Morsi finally gave a televised address, he was as rigid as ever, incapable of sending a message of reconciliation to the opposition. No, he said, he was sticking to his plan of putting the constitution to popular vote, a document shaped in large part by Islamists, on Dec. 15. His power is limited, he said. And he insisted that the blame for the bloodshed rested solely with thugs paid by opponents of the Islamists, and accused them of being controlled by henchmen of the former regime. Then he spoke half-heartedly about a "national dialogue." It was a speech reminiscent of Mubarak's final efforts as the autocrat struggled to cling to power.

Little is known about the inner workings of the Muslim Brotherhood, though that is now changing. More and more members are leaving the organization, and they are taking their criticism public. They include young members who reject the Brotherhood's hierarchical structures as well as older supporters like Tharwat al-Gharbawi, a well-known attorney, who says that the Brotherhood's authoritarian ideology always becomes more prevalent when the organization comes under pressure. According to al-Gharbawi, there are even training camps where the organization trains members in hand-to-hand combat, an allegation the Muslim Brotherhood denies.

Crumbling Support

"As long as the guidance office of the Brotherhood is dominated by hardliners, a compromise isn't to be expected," says Gharbawi.

The strength of the Muslim Brotherhood was always partly the consequence of a weak opposition. Only a quarter of all voters chose Morsi in the first round of the presidential election, but he won the runoff election because the opposition couldn't agree on a candidate. Indeed, non-Islamist candidates received more than half of all votes in the presidential election, making it difficult to argue that the Brotherhood has much of a mandate for significant changes.

Since then, the group's support seems to have crumbled even further. More than 30 buildings owned by the Muslim Brotherhood were set on fire in the last two weeks, and the protesters are now chanting the same words they chanted before Mubarak was overthrown: Down with the regime.

Most importantly, opposition leaders finally joined forces in the week before last, and are now calling themselves the "National Salvation Front." The liberal Nobel laureate Mohamed ElBaradei is part of the group, as are the former secretary-general of the Arab League, Amr Moussa, and Nasserist politician Hamdin Sabahi. Many Social Democrats and Communists have also joined forces. Traditionally, these are groups that have been deeply opposed to each other. But now, they are suddenly united in their opposition to Morsi and the Brotherhood.