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## The Political Future of the Muslim Brotherhood

### Excluding the Exclusionary?

by MICHAEL GASPER and MOHAMED YOUSRY

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In the immediate aftermath of the coup that deposed president Muhammad Morsi on July 3, 2013, it looked as though the Muslim Brothers had decided to embrace all options including violence. In the heat of the moment, some members of the Muslim Brothers and a number of their supporters waved flags associated with militant Islamist groups, such as al-Qaeda, and issued rampant threats against the deposed president's opponents. After a quick recalibration however, the Muslim Brothers wrapped themselves in Egyptian flags and brought women and children with them to demonstrations proclaiming that their resistance to the military backed government would be non-violent.

To many, this seemed to be a welcome departure for the Muslim Brothers who had not shied away from espousing violence to achieve their ends through much of their history. However, a closer look at the Brothers' strategy offers insight into the extent that the group's past continues to weigh heavily on its decision making in the present. The group's history is a burden that severely handicaps their ability to reach a political settlement that would secure a legal place for the movement in Egypt's political future.

Indeed, the parallels between the past and the present are striking. For example, just as they have always done, the Brothers fundamentally overestimated their support among the general population while underestimating the strength of their opponents. In 1953, Muslim Brothers'

luminaries Sayyed Qutb and Hassan al-Hudaybi confidently declared that the Brothers would destroy their opponents (the Free Officers, the military régime that had ousted the monarchy in 1952). There are echoes of that now as many leaders of today's Brothers confidently declared their ability to defeat the opposition and to reinstate Morsi within a few short days. In both instances the Brothers seem oblivious to the range of forces allayed in support of the new régime.

This inability to grasp the political significance of the moment might be traced to a second factor that has marked the Brothers self-perception since they became a significant player in Egyptian Politics in 1930s. The group continues to represent its discourse as synonymous with Islam and as such distances themselves from any other political movement or trend. Indeed, the Brothers continue to portray their political struggle not as competition for political power but as martyrdom in the path of God. This is not new, in 1965, Qutb and those in his immediate circle (these include the current leader of the Brothers, Muhammad Badie') declared themselves al-'Usba al-Mu'minah (Faithful Core). That was enough to justify their view of the 1960s as a battle against the "infidel" régime of president Nasser whom they saw as a lackey of the West conspiring with the Jews and the Soviet Union to destroy Islam. Similarly, we now hear echoes of this dusty rhetoric from many Brothers who stridently assert that their group represents the only vision of Islam and that their struggle is not so much about the future of Egypt, but the future of Islam writ large. To them, their enemies are criminals determined to extinguish God's light on earth.

Third, as in the past, the Brothers continue to depict themselves as victims protected by angels facing off against non-believers. Long time Brotherhood activist, Zayneb al-Ghazali claimed that while imprisoned in the 1960s, God's angels appeared in her cell to feed, clothe and protect her. Then over the past weeks, a number of Brotherhood speakers claimed to have seen the angel Gabriel at their on-going encampment in Rab'a al-'Adawiyya that was so brutally attacked on the morning of August 14, 2013. Among them are some that have gone so far as to claim that they have received divine visions claiming that the Prophet of Islam requested that president Morsi lead *him* in prayers. In fact, even during Morsi's presidency, Fahmy Howeidy, the Islamist writer, characterized Morsi's opponents as Pharaohs and non-believers and the Brothers and president Morsi as Moses and his Godly people.

And finally, the Muslim Brothers continue to do what it does best, muddy the facts. For example, 'Umar al-Tilmissani (a former head of the Brothers) declared that the movement's founder, Hassan al-Banna, was the true initiator and the real architect of the 1952 coup that toppled Egypt's monarchy and brought Nasser to power. This complete rewriting of reality is parallel in the way the current leadership claims that not only did Morsi challenge American/Israeli hegemony in the region (a powerful populist position that is not supported by facts) but also that he had agreed to hold early presidential elections after the military's ultimatum of June 30, 2013. Again this is not supported by facts. Moreover, the Brothers also continue to argue that the deposed president included the opposition in all his decision-making processes. Regardless of one's view of the military intervention on July 3, 2013, no serious observer could reasonably assert that Morsi's government was inclusive.

If history is any indication, the current strategies like those the Brothers adopted during previous moments of political upheaval will fail to achieve the movement's goals. One need look no further than their 1954 misreading of the political situation that caused their defeat as Nasser detained thousands of Brotherhood members. Eventually, more than 1500 hundred were sentenced to long prison terms and six were hanged. This inability to fully grasp the ramifications of their actions greatly weakened the movement at a time when it was facing increasing repression from the Egyptian state. Was the historical analog to this lesson the frightful violence perpetrated by the security forces against the two encampments of Morsi supporters this week?

With all of this in their history it is perplexing that the current leadership has not learned from the past. Even more inextricable is that despite the caution from a prominent and ardent supporter, Hazem Salah Abu Ismael, a Salafi preacher, many weeks ago on June 27, 2013, that the Brothers had lost much of their ability to mobilize the masses, they still don't have a realistic view of the present. Indeed it is quite clear that their support, even among Islamists, is dwindling and their popularity among ordinary citizens is very low. This explains at least in part the so far muted response among Egyptians about the violence of August 14.

At the same time, no one can question the fact that the Brothers enjoy enthusiastic support from among their followers and that they are a disciplined and organized force. But, facts on the ground indicate that the movement's current strategy, its attempt to mobilize the "street" against the military-backed government, has not worked. The Brothers have failed to attract support from outside their ranks. In fact the movement had been reduced to what might be called a "Hail Mary" strategy. Every three or so days, the Brothers organized small marches in an effort to attract others to join them. The strategy produced the opposite effect. Ordinary citizens seemed to grow impatient towards what they saw as disruptive tactics. Indeed, so far, despite a large number of fatalities of Brothers' supporters, there seems to be scant evidence of sympathy for the Brotherhood. One could see this in especially sharp relief among the residents of the Rab'a vicinity who made no secret of their desire for the Brothers to end their encampment and depart their neighborhood. It is possible the events of Wednesday August 14<sup>th</sup> may change that, but it seems unlikely.

One incident sums up much of the sentiment on the street. On July 9, 2013, under the leadership of long time Brotherhood activist Mohammed Abdel Qudus, a handful of Brothers attempted to organize a protest against the death of the Brother's photographer (who was killed during the first massacre perpetrated by the Egyptian army in the wake of the July 3<sup>rd</sup> Coup). Almost instantaneously, dozens of ordinary Egyptians harangued them, calling them traitors and in turn blaming the Brothers for the events at the Republican Guards Club that resulted in the death of 51 people. One wonders if the same will now happen on an even larger scale after the violence of August 14, 2013.

This decline in the movement's popularity is due to several factors. While some of this may be inherited from the era of the deposed president Hosni Mubarak, much of the anti-Brotherhood sentiment can be traced to their use of divisive and doctrinaire tactics during the movement's unsuccessful one-year in power. Upon taking the reins of government after the elections of 2012, instead of offering immediate plans to ease the sufferings of Egypt's poor or its struggling middle class, the Brothers engaged in what many believed to be avoidable battles with Egypt's

entrenched institutions (such as the judiciary or the media) and with secular forces and minorities. While the Brothers claimed these battles were aimed at fighting corruption, many ordinary Egyptians perceived them as an effort of “Brotherization,” a process to assure the Brothers’ control over every aspect of state and society.

The massive anti-Brotherhood demonstrations of June 30 and July 26 give some indication that many Egyptians pin the Brotherhood’s failure on its archaic ideology, outdated policies and its seeming lack of interest in social and economic justice. To further complicate this, after a particularly virulent anti-Brothers media campaign many Egyptians are now questioning the group’s loyalty to Egypt. According to this view, the Brothers only consider control of Egypt as a stepping-stone towards the establishment of a new Muslim Caliphate.

That brings us back to the present moment. Now, the leaders of the Muslim Brothers have a choice, either to continue on the same path as they have throughout their history or to initiate painful but necessary reforms in order to begin a new future within Egypt’s diverse political landscape. Unfortunately, early indications are that powerful voices of the Brothers’ past (like that of shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the influential Qatar-based Egyptian cleric, who recently called on Muslims from every part of the Arab and Muslim World to join the struggle of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt in order to obtain martyrdom) will prevail.

What might reforms look like? There may already be some indications. Many young Brothers’ recently formed three separate trends within the movement, *Ikhwan Bila ‘Unf* (Brothers Without Violence), *Shabab al-Ikhwan* (Youth of The Brotherhood) and *Ahrar al-Ikhwan* (The Free Brothers) and are calling for a comprehensive review of the movement’s ideas and practices. These young activists appear to have realized that the Brothers old strategies are outmoded and belong to a different era. This is happening at the same time that some leftist and liberal activists are also calling upon the Brothers leadership to join with their younger members and to abandon the discordant ways of their violent past in order to secure a place in Egypt’s future.

What is clear is that the Brothers must recognize that their old ideas are not suitable for today’s diverse political landscape. They must acknowledge and put into practice the idea that for any Islamist (or indeed any political) project to succeed it must be inclusive, Christians, Jews, Shi’a and other minorities must be treated equally under the law. The movement must abandon the notion that it represents God’s faithful core; abandon secrecy, deception and violence. It must also entertain the possibility that the Muslim Brothers were banned and imprisoned precisely because of their intolerance and their tendency to express this intolerance with acts of violence against those who oppose their maximalist vision of an Islamist Egypt.

Sadly however, even if the movement adapts all of these changes it still might not be enough to include the Brothers as a legal political force in Egypt’s future. Many liberal and leftist activists are demanding the dismantling of the Brothers’ Freedom and Justice party (and all other religious party for that matter). Their argument is simple. They argue that those whose foundational beliefs and practices are built on excluding the others cannot be included in a reconciliatory political process. It is hard to tell, but it seems as if this argument is gaining popular momentum.

To avoid further marginalization, the Brothers' leaders must stop looking backward. They must make a courageous decision and agree to join the current political process or risk returning to the margins as an underground group. Most importantly, if the Brothers think that this crisis is similar to others in their troubled history, they are badly mistaken. This time is different. The movement is not only facing the wrath of a military régime; it is also facing the anger and distrust of a large segment of the population. For the Brothers to have any voice in Egypt's political future, the movement must abandon their past and look for a new path forward before its too late.