Brother President

The Islamist Agenda for Governing Egypt

By Shadi Hamid

It was looking bleak for Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood. The region's oldest and most influential Islamist movement had underperformed and overreached in parliament, alienating leftists and liberals in the process. When, in April, the Muslim Brotherhood announced that Mohammed Morsi would be its presidential candidate, after its first choice had been disqualified, the sense of policy drift was unmistakable. The Brotherhood was losing ground. Predictions of its demise, however, were premature. Despite numerous missteps, the movement has proved its resilience. It has not, to be sure, become what many Egyptians hoped it might be—the leader of a unified, national movement that would push Egypt, however haltingly, toward democracy. But by its own particular standards, the Brotherhood has succeeded.

The organization (including its political arm, the Freedom and Justice Party) does not operate as a traditional party might be expected to. It cares, of course, about winning elections. But it cares even more about the unity and integrity of the organization, in Arabic, *tanzim*. In the early days of Egypt's transition, the Brotherhood showed its more ruthless side—not necessarily out of discomfort with internal democracy but out of its longstanding concern, some would say obsession, with self-preservation. To the extent that dissent within the Brotherhood undermined the *tanzim,* it had to be quashed.

First, the Brotherhood leadership forbade its members from joining any other party but its own. Those who joined other parties, or started their own, were expelled. One of the group's most prominent figures, Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh, was forced out after he insisted on running for president against the Brotherhood's wishes. Thousands of young activists who joined his insurgent campaign had their memberships frozen.

▷ Mohammed Morsi being sworn in as Egyptian president, Supreme Constitutional Court, Cairo, June 30, 2012. *Egyptian Presidency/ Ahmed Fouad/Associated Press*

Indeed, Egypt's revolution was a threat as much as it was an opportunity for a group that had grown accustomed to the unifying power of repression. Without a clear enemy—the Mubarak regime—maintaining organizational cohesion was becoming difficult. So it had to be enforced. Brotherhood officials did not apologize for their increasingly aggressive tactics. For them, it was a simple matter of respecting the institution of which they were a part and to which they had pledged their lives. It was, after all, the group's policymaking body, the *shura* council that voted to ban members from joining other parties. "All decisions are taken as an organization, with *shura* (consultation), with democracy," Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) deputy leader Essam El-Erian told me at the time. "[The youth] are appreciated but they are appreciated in the context of the organization and not outside of it." Dissent was permitted before a final decision was made, but not after.

From the standpoint of organizational unity, the Brotherhood's controversial decision to run a presidential candidate, after pledging not to, was not so surprising. In the early months of 2012, the group tried to find a sympathetic consensus candidate whom they could support. They couldn't. In the resulting vacuum, Aboul Fotouh's campaign surged. Soon enough, he was an unlikely frontrunner, commanding support from an unlikely and diverse group of liberals, leftists, Muslim Brotherhood youth, and Salafists. Despite his origins in the Brotherhood—or rather because of them—Aboul Fotouh emerged as a grave challenge to the *tanzim* and perhaps an existential threat to the Brotherhood itself. Charismatic and with his own distinct sources of legitimacy, Aboul Fotouh, as president, would have undermined the Brotherhood's once firm grip over mainstream political Islam.

To understand the group's at times overwrought paranoia, we can think of its leaders as, to varying degrees, institutionalists. Individuals within the Brotherhood derive their influence not primarily from their own political talents but from the fact they are part of a *gama'a*, or group, one that is presumably greater than the sum of its parts. In the past, whenever prominent figures broke off from the organization to start new parties or movements, they failed. Without the Brotherhood's grassroots support and infrastructure, they found themselves relegated to the political margins (see, for example, Al-Wasat, founded in 1996, and the Egyptian Current Party, founded in 2011). This was why Aboul Fotouh represented such peril: he was shattering, for the first time, the idea that success can only come through the *tanzim*.

And so the Brotherhood opted to enter the presidential race at the last moment. Despite an unprecedented smear campaign, which included a widely circulated but obviously implausible rumor that Islamist parliamentarians were trying to legalize necrophilia, and an underwhelming candidate in Mohammed Morsi, the Brotherhood managed to secure a first-place finish in the first round. Perhaps just as important, Aboul Fotouh

finished a disappointing fourth place. Still, the results suggested major vulnerabilities. The Brotherhood was hemorrhaging support in its former strongholds in the Nile Delta.

It was the fight for the presidency in the runoff election that rejuvenated the Brotherhood and unified Islamist ranks. The movement found a convincing enemy in Ahmed Shafik, who was Hosni Mubarak's last prime minister and a seemingly unapologetic autocrat. For decades, Egypt-watchers predicted internal splits in the Islamist movement, which never came to pass. And after the revolution, the Brotherhood, for all its mistakes, survived more or less intact.

The Temptations of Power

Before the Arab revolts began, there were six countries where the Islamist opposition actively contested elections on a regular basis—Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Bahrain, Morocco, and Yemen. Focusing on the last two election cycles, the average portion of seats contested was a mere 35.9 percent.[1] Islamist parties were losing on purpose.[2]

This was, in part, a legacy of Algeria, and the sense that Arab regimes and their international backers would never allow Islamists to win. Islamist groups even coined their own term for this, the "American veto." In January 1992, Algeria's largest opposition party—the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS)—found itself on the brink of an historic victory. In the first round of elections, FIS won 47.5 percent of the vote and 188 of 231 seats while the ruling party won a dismal fifteen seats. In the end, FIS was expected to secure over 70 percent of the total 430 seats, more than enough to form a government with members of its own party. But there were mounting fears that the military was preparing to move against the Islamists. It was in this context that FIS leader Abdelkader Hachani addressed a crowd of supporters. "Victory is more dangerous than defeat," he warned, urging them to exercise restraint and avoid giving the army a pretext for intervention. Nonetheless, a few days later, the military aborted the elections and instigated a massive crackdown that plunged Algeria into a bloody civil war.

Islamists across the region came to realize that winning before the time was right could threaten to undo decades of painstaking grassroots work and organization building. Hachani's warning would soon evolve into a sort of unofficial Islamist motto: "Participation not domination" (*musharika wa laisa al-mughaliba).* If there was any doubt about such an emphatic embrace of gradualism—to the point even of timidity—the Algerian narrative was reinforced, this time in vastly different circumstances, by the intense international opposition that Hamas encountered after its unexpected electoral victory in 2006.

Nearly five years later and after Mubarak's fall, the Muslim Brotherhood seemed to have learned the lesson. The group's leaders had a mantra in those early days of uncertainty—repeated over and over to anyone who would listen. They would not run a

presidential candidate. They would contest only one-third of the seats in parliament. Soon enough, it increased to half of the seats, and finally almost all of them. In the short span of a year, Egypt's Islamists had, with striking speed, adjusted their ambitions. The same sense of destiny that led them toward caution before the revolution was now leading them in the opposite direction. After eighty-four years of waiting, this was their moment. They had been close before only for their gains to be snatched away. They wouldn't let it happen again.

What becomes increasingly apparent is that an Islamist movement in opposition and an Islamist party in power are two very different things. When Brotherhood officials were promising not to run for president in March 2011, they were still stuck in old patterns of behavior. In authoritarian settings, Islamists either cannot win or do not want to win elections, as winning threatens their organizational infrastructure (again, the matter of self-preservation). Most political parties do not double as states-within-states, with parallel networks of mosques, clinics, banks, businesses, day care centers, and Boy Scout troops. Islamist parties do. They must therefore tread carefully to avoid provoking the regime, as the costs of a crackdown on its social, educational, and preaching activities—effectively the Islamist lifeline—are severe. Decades of imprisonment, torture, and exile had produced a steely resolve and a sense of confidence: one day their time would come and they would be ready. Until then, they could wait, patiently. In interviewing Islamist leaders before the Arab Spring, this was a consistent feature: a stoic sense of calm in the face of considerable odds. Analysts sometimes mistook this to mean that Islamists would always display such traits, even after circumstances changed considerably. The point they seem to have missed is that the caution and calm were a result of, and a reaction to, repression. Once the repression ceased, Islamists could just as easily display a knack for political power, one that sometimes borders on the cutthroat.

The Making of Mohammed Morsi

Political power is a delicate thing. And Mohammed Morsi did not appear the right man to wield it. He was a Brotherhood loyalist and enforcer. By most accounts, he was a competent manager who got things done. But it was unclear what other qualities qualified him for the presidency.

Born in Sharqiya governorate in 1952, Morsi studied engineering at Cairo University. He went on to earn his doctorate from the University of Southern California in 1982, and served as an assistant professor at California State University, Northridge. Two of his five children are American citizens by birth. Upon his return to Egypt, he quickly rose through the ranks of the Brotherhood, eventually serving as the head of the group's parliamentary bloc from 2000 to 2005. Khairat El-Shater,

the Brotherhood's initial pick for the presidency and its most powerful figure, had plucked Morsi from relative obscurity to join the Guidance Bureau, the organization's top decision-making body. Morsi went on to serve as the founding chairman of the Brotherhood's political arm, the Freedom and Justice Party.

After El-Shater was disqualified due to a prior criminal conviction, Morsi stepped into the fray, almost by default. None of the Brotherhood's other viable candidates had the full trust of El-Shater and the rest of the conservative leadership. Morsi did. He was quickly derided by the Egyptian media as the "spare tire" candidate. He seemed to lack the stuff of presidents, the stature, the charisma, and the respect. But, buoyed by the Brotherhood's unparalleled electoral machine, he soon found himself Egypt's first freely elected head of state and the Arab world's first ever Islamist president.

There are times when ordinary, pedestrian politicians become leaders. The moment can matter more than the person. That became clear when Morsi gave a rousing address to hundreds of thousands in Tahrir Square on June 29. Fifteen minutes in, he began repeating, almost in chant-like fashion, "there is no authority above the people." The bar was low, but it was one of the better speeches—and certainly one of the most impassioned—by an Arab leader in recent memory.

By virtue of being the man who defeated Ahmed Shafik—and by extension the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF)—Morsi became the vehicle for growing anger toward the resurgent old regime. For its part, the Brotherhood had always seemed to perform better with its back to the wall. And here they were facing a clear threat. That threat became all too obvious when the military—it too drawing on Algeria's legacy—staged a soft coup in June by dissolving the country's first democratic parliament, one that happened to be dominated by the Brotherhood.

Morsi and the Brotherhood will need to manage their fraught relationship with the military for the foreseeable future. The group's dual-track approach—threatening mass protests on one hand but negotiating behind closed doors on the other—will continue. Despite occasional bouts of impatience, Brotherhood officials remain gradualists, uncomfortable with the disorienting nature of revolution in particular and sudden change in general.

The broad strokes of what the Brotherhood wants are relatively straightforward. The problem is the absence of a clear path to getting there. The first and most obvious priority is economic recovery and its various constituent parts: boosting employment, reducing income inequality, and combating corruption. The economy is not just an end but a means. If the Brotherhood manages to reverse the economy's downward trend, then Egyptians will be more willing to tolerate controversial interventions in the social and moral sphere (something which Turkish Islamists came to learn over time). In addition, the Brotherhood will use its growing role in the economy to bind

Egyptians to it through interlocking patron-client relationships. In this sense, penetrating the state machinery, including in education and the media through the Ministry of Information, helps the Brotherhood with its long game; further cementing the organization's role in public life.

The second priority is rolling back SCAF's powers and moving to a more balanced civil-military relationship. In the early days of the transition, some mistook the Brotherhood's indulgence of SCAF as something more than it actually was. The Brotherhood and the Freedom and Justice Party—driven again by self-preservation—wanted to establish their legitimacy as political actors before picking a fight. Securing a dominant position in the country's first freely elected parliament was the way to do that. After winning nearly half the seats, they could plausibly claim both democratic legitimacy and a popular mandate. Parliament, more than anything else, was a platform to challenge SCAF, just as the presidency would come to serve a similar purpose six months later.

Challenging the military's grip on power is exactly what Mohammed Morsi did when, in July, he unexpectedly issued an executive decree calling parliament back into session, just weeks after SCAF had dissolved it. While the move had limited success – the parliamentary session lasted only a day and triggered a heavy rebuke from the judiciary – it sent a strong message: Morsi was going to be a tougher, more assertive president than many may have expected. If there was any doubt, on August 12, Morsi surprised Egyptians by sending the top-tier of SCAF, including Field Marshall Hussein Tantawi, into early retirement. He also canceled the controversial constitutional addendum which had stripped the presidency of many of its powers.

Clearly, the Brotherhood has bargaining power; and following Morsi's dramatic moves, it – or at least the presidency – has extensive executive powers as well. This is not to say that Egypt's generals, while weakened, have been defeated. Morsi's civilian "counter-coup" represents a significant episode in Egypt's troubled transition but it is far from a conclusive victory. In the short run, both sides will need to learn to live with each other and seek temporary accommodation, with each side compromising. Neither side is strong enough to hand the other a decisive blow.

As for Islamization, it is still—and will always be—a central part of the Brotherhood's message as well as its appeal. The Brotherhood's strain of Islamism is not particularly well developed (theology almost always takes a back seat to politics). To a great extent, the Brotherhood simply reflects something that is already there. They are, after all, products of their own society. By Egyptian standards at least, even the movement's most controversial positions fall firmly within the mainstream. According to numerous polls, the Brotherhood's illiberalism, including on women, Christians, and personal freedoms, are widely shared by the broader population. For example, in an April 2011 YouGov poll, only 18 percent of Egyptian respondents said

they "would support a woman president." If Islamists banned alcohol or inserted a stronger dose of religion in the educational curriculum, it might enrage liberal elites but few others. In fact, since the revolution, there is little to suggest that the Brotherhood lost significant support because of its perceived religious conservatism. Rather, the criticisms of the group have largely revolved around its underwhelming legislative record in parliament, its incessant flip-flopping, back-room deal making, and a tendency to put organizational self-interest above almost everything else.

If the Brotherhood begins to perform, however one wishes to measure that, then many of those criticisms will subside. For any governing party, the stakes are considerable. For Islamist parties, the stakes are even greater. Graham Fuller, in his book *The Future of Political Islam*, wrote that Islamists run a "haunting risk: the association of failure with Islam, or what has been called 'the Islamization of failure.'" The reverse is also true: the Islamization of success.

Islamists and the West

For better or worse, success will depend on the help of others. Due to budgetary constraints and a burgeoning deficit, there is only so much Egypt can do on its own. It urgently needs billions of dollars in direct assistance, loans, trade benefits, and investment. Despite their longstanding opposition to Western cultural and political influence, Mohammed Morsi and the Brotherhood need the United States and Europe more than they might like to admit.

The economy is one area where there is likely to be less friction between the U.S. and Egyptian Islamists. The Brotherhood, under El-Shater's influence, has become an unabashed proponent of the powers of the free market. Its economic program can be best described as "Islamic Calvinism" combined with vague nods to safety nets and social justice. The Freedom and Justice Party program states its support for an "Egyptian economy built on the principle of economic freedom." Elsewhere in the program, it affirms that "the private sector has a fundamental role to play in Egyptian economic life," and that "values and morals should not be separated from economic development, as they are two sides of the same coin."

On foreign policy, Morsi and the United States will inevitably disagree, to put it mildly. But this has much less to do with the Brotherhood's Islamism than it does with the realities of a post-revolution Egypt. Democratization means the conduct of foreign policy can no longer be insulated from public opinion, as it had been for three decades. If Egyptians dislike Israel, then elected politicians will have to dislike Israel too (at least rhetorically). In a televised debate between Aboul Fotouh and another presidential candidate, Amr Moussa, the two men got into a heated exchange over whether to call Israel an "enemy" or merely an "adversary." The most anti-Israel

of the presidential candidates was arguably not either of the Islamists but the leftist Hamdeen Sabahi, who drew considerable support from the Cairene liberal elite and was indeed the top vote-getter in the capital during the first round of balloting.

Like most other political actors, Morsi and the Brotherhood have affirmed their commitment to the peace treaty, while reserving the right to review aspects of the accord. Morsi, to the extent that the military and security establishment allows him, will draw Egypt closer to Hamas. Morsi, who has a long record of provocative foreign policy statements, is unlikely to stop now. His June 29 speech, for instance, included a call for the release of Omar Abdel Rahman, who is serving a life sentence in the U.S. for his involvement in planning terrorist attacks in the 1990s.

But it is precisely the Brotherhood's well-established anti-American *bona fides* that allow it a degree of latitude to reach out to the West. Liberals, on the other hand, tend to overcompensate with overwrought displays of nationalism. Increasingly, they also fear that the United States in its halfhearted attempts to pressure the military and promote a 'full transition' will continue empowering the Brotherhood. This has, oddly, led to a situation where the most "Westernized" liberals now routinely attack Islamists for being, of all things, American lackeys. Before the presidential election results were announced, a coalition of leading liberal parties held a press conference condemning the Obama administration for supposedly backing Morsi's candidacy. "We refuse that the reason someone wins is because he is backed by the Americans," said Osama El-Ghazali Harb of the Democratic Front Party. (No evidence was provided to substantiate the allegations.) After the August reshuffling of SCAF, speculation was rampant that Morsi's move may have been coordinated with the Obama administration.

After the short-lived unity of Egypt's eighteen-day uprising, the Muslim Brotherhood's relationship with the leading liberal parties has steadily deteriorated. Prominent liberals, perhaps reflecting their minority status, see the aggressive majoritarianism of the Islamists as a frightening harbinger of things to come. "If SCAF goes back to its barracks," said Emad Gad of the Social Democratic Party, "the Brotherhood will control everything."

Much of the speculation surrounding the Muslim Brotherhood's "true intentions" remains just that—speculation. For now at least, we are unlikely to find out exactly what the Brotherhood would do if it had full freedom to act. Egypt is not yet a democracy and will not become one overnight. Despite SCAF's seeming fall from grace, there is still a military, an unreformed bureaucracy and security sector, and a judiciary that appears generally hostile to Brotherhood designs. The presidency was the opening salvo in what will be a long and uneven struggle for political supremacy. The longer that the struggle persists, the more the Brotherhood will find itself under pressure,

struggling to define the proper balance between compromise and confrontation, and between moving to the center and satisfying its Islamist base.

Under repression and under threat, the Brotherhood tends to soften its rougher, more conservative edges in order to reach out to liberal and leftist allies, as it did during the second round of the presidential campaign and, afterwards, when it formed a government of largely non-Islamist technocrats. Morsi and the Brotherhood feared that going too far too soon would provoke more opposition than they could handle, including from a then still dominant SCAF. So they moderated their ambitions. But those ambitions remained.

(Editor's Note: This article updates an earlier version in the Summer 2012 print edition of the Cairo Review of Global Affairs*.)*

1 This figure does not include Morocco since, due to the particularities of its electoral system, it is only possible to measure districts contested, and not seats contested. Once a party decides to contest a district, it is required by law to contest each seat in the district (through a party list). For example, in a three member district, each party would need to put forward a list of three candidates.

2 For more on this phenomenon, see Shadi Hamid, "Arab Islamist Parties: Losing on Purpose?" *Journal of Democracy* 22 (January 2011): 68–80.