

The Muslim Brotherhood and The Egyptian Revolution

Written by Barry Rubin

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BARRY RUBIN, JUL 16 2011

In early August 2010, the new leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, Muhammad al-Badie, gave a speech that set forward a new Muslim Brotherhood policy. Badie departed from the historic Brotherhood position that the group was still in the base-building stage and he openly called for jihad and revolution. Was this new policy related to the outbreak of Egypt's revolution a few months later?

Only in the future will it be possible to say for sure. Another way of looking at the situation is that the Brotherhood leadership simply analyzed the weakness of both the United States under the Obama Administration and the Egyptian government, under the aging President Husni Mubarak and his incapable heir and son, Gamal.

The Brotherhood has been for several years in an alliance with the April 6 Youth Movement, a left-oriented secular movement that used social media as an organizing tool. The Movement was close to the opposition forces led by Muhammad El Baradei who, despite being promoted by the Obama Administration, was also allied to the Brotherhood.

When the Movement decided to begin demonstrations in January 2011, the Brotherhood was well-informed of these plans but decided not to participate directly. It had three good reasons for following this policy: so that the protests weren't discredited internationally as Islamist-directed; to limit the inevitable government crackdown on the Brotherhood; and to see if the anti-Mubarak campaign did take off.

While the regime quickly rounded up the "usual suspects" among Brotherhood leaders, the demonstrations not only gained momentum in Egypt—or, more accurately, in Cairo—but also won a huge amount of media sympathy and international support. Literally within hours of the onset of the movement, the Obama government in the United States was calling for the overthrow of President Husni Mubarak, an ally since he had taken power thirty years earlier.

Within days of the start of protests, the Brotherhood sent its youth cadre into Tahrir Square with orders to keep quiet their affiliation and ideology. It played an important role in furnishing tough young men who could stand up to the Mubarak regime's police and covert attacks. Credulous Western journalists helped them keep their cover. The revolution was branded as moderate and democratic. Yet it succeeded so quickly and easily in large part because the Egyptian military was also fed up with the Mubarak family and open to a regime change.

Once the revolution had succeeded—with power in the hands of senior officers who were in no way hostile to the Brotherhood—the group's situation was quite good. Its supporters were among those chosen by the generals to make limited constitutional amendments in order to prepare for elections. Later, it won the referendum to accept those amendments and early elections, despite the opposition of the relatively moderate reformers and El Baradei himself.

Having broken with its former allies among the relatively liberal, the Brotherhood upgraded its publicly expressed ambitions. Having said it would only contest thirty percent of the parliamentary seats, it raised that quota to fifty percent. It formed its own political party. Though it insisted on not planning to run a presidential candidate, a top Brotherhood leader did declare his candidacy. While nominally expelled by the Brotherhood, there are reasons to believe he remained their stealth candidate.

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The election rules drawn up for the junta also favor the Brotherhood, with candidates elected both on party lists and as independents. Thus, the Brotherhood can camouflage its cadre as independents and do well in both election segments.

In understanding the Brotherhood's post-revolutionary power, it is important to note that its primacy is based not only on its own organization but the lack of organization of all other political forces and also the unwillingness of these alternative groups to oppose the Brotherhood.

There are six potential political forces in Egypt:

–**The old, pre-revolutionary establishment** as represented by Mubarak's National Democratic. These forces, which do enjoy a considerable support base, have disintegrated.

–**The radical left** comprised of several small semi-Marxist parties. These groups have a small support base and are not going to be significant factors. Contrary to a purely ideological analysis, they are not hostile to the Brotherhood and can find common ground in a radical anti-America, anti-Israel policy.

–**The Brotherhood**, the only truly organized force in Egypt with lots of support not only among clerics but also from such professionals as doctors and lawyers.

–**The Salafists**, even more extreme Islamist groups which Western observers see as in conflict with the Brotherhood but actually work with it quite well.

–**The Arab nationalists**. While this might be expected to be a powerful force, the lack of charismatic leadership and the refusal of their strongest representative—presidential candidate Amr Moussa—has marginalized them. Without the opposition of a strong nationalist bloc, the Islamists represent the only viable ideologically organized force.

–**The “moderates,” “liberals,” “pro-democrats” or “reformers.”** This group is far less powerful than Western observers think, exists mostly in Cairo, and is badly divided. No less than four leading “moderates” are running against each other for president. While these people may think secular thoughts, they are not going to stand up to the Brotherhood. Some see it as an ally; others think they can restrain it. Another factor is that many of the “moderates” are not really all that “moderate” on many issues.

Finally, there are many myths about the Brotherhood itself, purveyed first and foremost by that group for propaganda purposes and especially to lull the West into passivity and even cooperation with the Islamists. The Brotherhood is still radical, still Islamist, and still very anti-American and anti-Western as well as fanatically anti-Jewish (not merely “anti-Zionist.”) To discover these facts it is only necessary to read its leaders' speeches and documents.

Equally, the Brotherhood has never “renounced” violence but only agreed to stop using it within Egypt as a condition for the regime let it reemerge into public life in the 1970s. As for seeking to make Egypt an Islamist state, that ambition has not changed in the least either. The only question is the pace, tactics, and strategy to be employed. The Brotherhood has learned from its Turkish counterparts that patience and deception are very useful tools in that process.

Will the Brotherhood succeed in its goal? Obviously, that isn't clear but it has become more powerful and closer to that objective than ever before. That issue will be at the center of Egyptian politics from now on.

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