

Mohamed Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Why the Revolution Continues

Written by Ami J. Abou-bakr

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AMI J. ABOU-BAKR, AUG 23 2012

Egyptian politics are currently as unpredictable as they are complicated. As outside observers seek to understand the rapidly changing political landscape, it is important to remember that for many the revolution continues. Change is ongoing and despite the recent success of Mohamed Morsi in the presidential elections, the long-term political direction of Egypt is far from decided. It would be a mistake for scholars and the international community to use the election results to assume either that the future of Egypt is assured, or that the country is destined for Islamist leadership. This article argues that although the Muslim Brotherhood has been successful in the early stages of Egypt's new democracy, this success was more the result of circumstance, political maturity and election tactics than a reflection of the will of the people.

As Morsi settles into the role of president, questions about the future of Egypt continue to loom large. Who is in control? To what degree does the Muslim Brotherhood dominate and what does this mean for Egypt's foreign and domestic policy? What happened to the non-Islamists behind the uprising in 2011, and will they reemerge?

To begin to address some of these issues, and understand the degree to which the longevity of the Muslim Brotherhood's leadership in Egypt remains uncertain, this article leverages insights and recurrent themes resulting from a series of interviews conducted by the author with prominent Egyptian activists and leaders of the liberal, socialist and revolutionary political parties in July 2012. The intent of this article is to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of contemporary Egyptian politics. Because many of the issues discussed in this piece have not been widely discussed outside of Egypt and the Middle East, this piece seeks to initiate a more comprehensive debate about the drivers of political change in the nation and the implications these issues may have on the foreign policy of states such as the United States, Iran and Israel.

In short, while this article does not offer foreign policy advice or predictions to the international community, it seeks to provide unique insights that may offer a more thorough and accurate understanding of the currents driving Egyptian politics today to inform foreign policy experts. Insights gained through interviews with key political actors are used to identify and briefly explore five key points that outside observers should bear in mind as they consider the broader implications of the Muslim Brotherhood ascension to the presidency: 1) the need to contextualize Morsi's victory in the elections; 2) the questionable motives of the Muslim Brotherhood's charitable donations and the subsequent distrust this has generated toward the party; 3) the advantage political maturity and financing provide the Muslim Brotherhood; 4) the Muslim Brotherhood as both Islamist *and* capitalist; and 5) the uncertainty of Morsi's long-term power and aims.

1. The need to contextualize Morsi's victory in the presidential elections

Morsi's ultimate victory in the second round of the presidential race must be taken into context and be understood not as a sign of widespread support, but as a rejection of former Mubarak Prime Minister Ahmed Shafiq and also an indication of the failure of the liberal candidates to consolidate forces and run under a single ticket.

By the June 2012 presidential elections, the Muslim Brotherhood was increasingly viewed with skepticism by voters.

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Election promises made during the parliamentary elections of November 2011-January 2012, were tossed aside and critics claimed that the party had hijacked the revolution to consolidate their own power base and Islamist agenda. As suspicions grew and the Brotherhood reneged on an earlier promise not to run for the presidency, many voters drew away from the Muslim Brotherhood and toward centrist pro-revolutionary candidates such as moderate Islamist Abdel Moneim Aboul Fatooh and center-leftist Hamdeen Sabahi. Had these men joined forces prior to the presidential elections, they would have won.[i]

2. The questionable motives of the Muslim Brotherhood's charitable donations and the subsequent distrust this has generated toward the party.

During the parliamentary and presidential elections the Brotherhood has been accused of using both its religious foundation and strong finances to unfairly bias voters. In both elections, the Muslim Brotherhood provided voters in poor and rural districts with meat, rice, and oil in exchange for votes and often drove buses of voters directly to the polling stations.[ii] Critics argue that this is bribery masked as charity. They contend that this form of giving creates long-term dependency and argue that while the distribution of these goods may provide immediate relief, it provides no long-term mechanism for the poor to develop skills or provide services to make this segment of the population self-sufficient and less dependent on charitable donations.

Tactics such as these have caused many Egyptians to question the integrity and motives of the party and further supports the argument that the actions of the Muslim Brotherhood have been carefully focused on a single aim—assuming power.

3. The advantage political maturity and financing provide Muslim Brotherhood

In the parliamentary and presidential elections, the parties created by the revolutionaries of Tahrir Square were new, highly disorganized, decentralized and had little financing. In the 11 months between Mubarak's resignation and the first parliamentary elections, these groups sought to organize themselves as political parties and simultaneously run for office.

In sharp contrast, the Muslim Brotherhood was an experienced and mature political force. With over 82 years of political experience in Egypt, the organization benefited from a vast network of established supporters in each of Egypt's governorates, a well organized and tightly managed network of leaders, and the ability to generate funds. These factors gave the Brotherhood a substantial advantage as they profited from the political immaturity and upheaval facing their opponents.

4. The Muslim Brotherhood as both Islamist *and* capitalist

The Muslim Brotherhood are not simply Islamists, they are also capitalists. Led by successful and dynamic businessmen such as Khairat al-Shater (the Brotherhood's original presidential candidate and a longtime leader and financier of the organization) the Brotherhood understands the importance of simultaneously growing Egypt's economy to secure its own position of power through the accumulation of wealth while also being seen to satisfy the demands of the revolution.[iii] These demands include higher wages, greater employment opportunities and more equal distribution of wealth. The Muslim Brotherhood aims to achieve these objectives largely through free trade, economic development and attracting foreign direct investment.[iv] To make this possible, a greater degree of economic and political stability must be achieved to lure investors back to Egypt. Morsi's actions thus far indicate that he remains closely aligned with the Brotherhood in the pursuit of these goals.

While Morsi and the Brotherhood may differ from Mubarak by first looking east to the Gulf rather than west to Europe and the United States in the first instance as a source of investment, few potential investors are likely to be dismissed and these astute political actors will continue to be incentivized to cooperate with the international community and maintain strong relationships with the US and Europe to achieve their goals. Free and open trade relations will be a priority. Aggressive foreign policy aimed at Israel or any other state is unlikely as it would generate instability and run counter to these aims.

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5. The uncertainty of Morsi's long-term power and aims

Upon assuming office, Morsi's power and authority was limited by two primary sources. First, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) prevented Morsi from serving as commander-in-chief and maintained legislative, military, and budgetary control of Egypt. Second, the power of the president was further limited by perceptions that Morsi was little more than a puppet of the Brotherhood and selected as their candidate based on his demonstrated willingness to follow instructions from key party leaders (including al-Shater).

While it appeared that the SCAF would significantly limit Morsi's power and authority as president, his actions in recent weeks indicate a focused attempt to centralize control and authority in Egypt. On August 12, the president issued a constitutional declaration to transfer legislative authority from the SCAF to the president, forced the resignation (retirement) of the two most senior members of the SCAF among others, and appointed a new vice-president.[v] While weakened, the SCAF maintains control of the military and Morsi and the Brotherhood have said they will continue to accept the authority of the SCAF on matters of foreign policy and domestic security.[vi] The economic implications of this are significant given that Egypt is the recipient of \$1.3 billion a year from the United States in military aid and additionally owns as much as one-third of the nation's economy through a vast network of government-owned service and manufacturing companies.[vii] It is important to recognize that, while weakened, the military continues to hold a great deal of power. Morsi's actions, however, bring in to question both the degree of power the military has over the president and the degree to which the SCAF can—or would—challenge his authority to block the assumption of additional powers.

The relationship between Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood also creates uncertainty about Morsi's real power. Although the president officially resigned from the Muslim Brotherhood when he took office, Morsi is widely seen as little more than a figurehead president who continues to closely consult Brotherhood leaders and follow their policies, aims and objectives. One recent indicator of their continued closeness was seen when Morsi announced the retirement of the generals. The Muslim Brotherhood financed the transportation of thousands of Muslim Brotherhood supporters to Tahrir Square from various governorates to publically celebrate his announcement.[viii] This level of support indicates the Brotherhood's ongoing support for Morsi and their continued alignment.

Although the SCAF's influence and grip on power has apparently lessened in recent weeks, the personal motives and ambitions of the president remain unclear. Close links with the Muslim Brotherhood are both predictable and evident, but the degree to which Morsi will continue to operate "under orders" from the Brotherhood is not yet certain.

Conclusion

While the five factors above are not exhaustive, they illustrate that Muslim Brotherhood (or Islamist) leadership in Egypt is not a forgone conclusion. The Egyptian people remain uncertain about the political party best poised to represent their interests. The people will demand that their wishes be upheld and having recently deposed President Hosni Mubarak, they will not tolerate the pursuit of individual- or party-interests over national interests. The centralization of power by the president in recent weeks has created worries among secularists that the reforms, in combination with recent restrictions on the media, may indicate a transition toward a more authoritarian form of government reminiscent of the Mubarak era.[ix] The degree to which Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood will be able to satisfy the populace remains uncertain and questions have already arisen about the motives driving the president. At best, Morsi is a clever pragmatist who will try to use his Islamist foundation as a reassurance for conservatives, while seeking to maintain stability and accommodate the disparate agendas of the military, the Muslim Brotherhood and the secularists. At worst, Morsi is the mouthpiece of the Brotherhood and will use his position to blindly enforce their Islamist agenda.

As observers outside of Egypt consider these issues and try to understand the nation's rapidly changing political landscape—which invariably includes Mohamed Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the broader implications Islamist leadership may have in Egypt—it is important to remember that while the Muslim Brotherhood may have been successful in the early stages, their ability to maintain their current grip on power will depend upon their ability to prove themselves to voters and make significant strides that reflect not only the aims of the party, but also the

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demands of the revolution and the will of the people. For many in Egypt, until these things occur, regardless of who is in power, the revolution will continue.

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Ami J. Abou-bakr is a Lecturer in Politics at King's College London. Her research focuses on state resilience in times of serious national crisis. Her PhD research explored the viability of US public-private partnerships to enhance resilience to catastrophic disasters. She also sustains an ongoing and active interest in the response to political crises in the Middle East and North Africa, particularly in regard to Egypt and the Arab Uprisings. She has recently published two articles in *World Defense Systems*, and her upcoming book, *Managing Disasters Through Public-Private Partnerships*, is scheduled for publication by Georgetown University Press in the spring of 2013.

[i] In the first round of the presidential elections, approximately 24 percent of voters (5.8 million) voted for the Muslim Brotherhood while roughly 23 percent (5.5 million) voted for former Mubarak Prime Minister Ahmed Shafiq. Had the two leading centrist candidates, Hamdeen Sabahi and Abdel Moneim Aboul Fatooh, joined forces they would have easily won the first round—as they secured 37.6% of total votes (8.8 million). This number would likely have increased in the second round, as they were best poised to appeal to voters whose votes were split among nine other candidates in the elections—including the 2.5 million votes that went to former Arab League leader, Amr Moussa. Egypt's Election Commission, *Final Presidential Results* as quoted in "Egypt poll: Islamist Mursi and ex-PM Shafiq in run-off," BBC News Middle East, 28 May 2012, via: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-18240294> (accessed August 6, 2012); and "Morsi, Shafiq Officially in Egypt's Presidential Elections Runoffs." Ahram Online, May 28, 2012, via: <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/36/122/43126/Presidential-elections-/Presidential-elections-news/BREAKING-Mursi,-Shafiq-officially-in-Egypt's-presid.aspx> (accessed August 6, 2012).

[ii] Jihad el-Khazen, "Ayoon Wa Azan (Goodbye Egypt, Mother of the World)," Al-Hayat, March 22, 2012, via: <http://alhayat.com/home/Print/404388?PrintPictures=0>, (accessed August 18, 2012); Siham Boursouti, "Anxiously Awaiting Results, Mubarak-Era Candidates Clash," Almonitor, May 25, 2012, via <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2012/05/the-brotherhood-of-saudi-arabia.html> (accessed August 18, 2012).

[iii] Al-Shatar, is a prominent Egyptian businessmen and the most powerful figure in the Muslim Brotherhood. He was disqualified as a result of past legal convictions against him for crimes including money laundering. Salma Shukrallah, "Is the Brotherhood Candidate El-Shater Eligible to Run for Presidency?" Ahram Online, April 4, 2012, via: <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/36/122/38401/Is-Brotherhood-candidate-ElShater-legally-eligible.aspx> (accessed August 6, 2012); Egypt's Presidential Candidates, Al-Jazeera, April 26, 2012 via: <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2012/04/201242614439402525.html> (accessed August 6, 2012); Amira Howeid, "Meet the Muslim Brotherhood's Enforcer: Khairat al-Shater," Ahram Online, March 29, 2012, via: <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/37993/Egypt/Politics-/Meet-the-Brotherhood%E2%80%99s-enforcer-Khairat-ElShater.aspx> (accessed August 6, 2012); and Yolande Knell, "Egypt Candidate: Muslim Brotherhood's Khairat al-Shater," BBC News Middle East, April 2, 2012, via: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-17583661>

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(accessed August 6, 2012).

[iv] Jason Hickel, "Neoliberal Egypt: the Hijacked Revolution," March 29, 2012, Al-Jazeera, via: <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/03/201232784226830522.html> (accessed August 6, 2012).

[v] Field Marshal Hussein Tantawi (defense minister and commander of the armed forces) and Sami Anan (armed forces chief of staff) were both asked to retire by Morsi. "Morsi Retires Egypt's Top Military Leaders: Amends 2011 Constitutional Declaration; Appoints Vice-President," Ahram Online, August 12, 2012 via: english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/140/50239/Egypt/First—days/Morsi-retires-Egypt-s-top-army-leaders;-amends—con.aspx (accessed August 21, 2012).

[vi] Stephen Roll, "Mursi Reaches Agreement with the Generals," Qantara, via: <http://en.qantara.de/Mursi-Reaches-Agreement-with-the-Generals/19674c20949i0p9/> (accessed August, 21, 2012).

[vii] Cam Simpson and Mariam Fam, "Egypt's Army Marches, Fights, Sells Chickens: The armed forces have a substantial stake in Egypt's civilian economy through a host of government-owned service and manufacturing companies," *Bloomberg Businessweek*, February 17, 2011; Professor Robert Springborg in an interview with National Public Radio. Alex Blumberg, "Why Egypt's Military Cares About Home Appliances," *National Public Radio*, February 4, 2011.

[viii] Heba Afify, "Empowered Brothers Celebrate, Their Way," Al Masry Al Youm, August 18, 2012, via: www.egyptindependent.com/print/1056136 (accessed August 21, 2012).

[ix] Noha El-Hennawy, "A Lost Enemy: Secularists Fear Morsy Move Paves Road For Grip on Power," August, 14, 2012, via: <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/lost-enemy-secularists-fear-morsy-move-paves-road-grip-power> (accessed August 21, 2012); "Newspaper Editor's Trial for Insulting Morsi to Begin Thursday," Ahram Online, August 21, 2012, via: english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/50921/Egypt/Politics-/Newspaper-editors-trial-for-insulting-Morsi-to-beg.aspx (Accessed August 21, 2012).

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