The Muslim Brotherhood's Year of Living Dangerously

https://www.e-ir.info/2014/04/20/the-muslim-brotherhoods-year-of-living-dangerously/

MALIK MUFTI, APR 20 2014

It has been a difficult year for democratic Islamists across the Middle East. In Egypt, the military coup that overthrew the elected president Muhammad Morsi on 3 July 2013 led to a series of further blows against the Muslim Brotherhood: widespread repression of its members across the country, including the killing of several hundred supporters in Cairo on 14 August; the outlawing of the Brotherhood in September; its designation as a terrorist organization in December; and the sentencing of 529 members to death by a court in March 2014. In Tunisia, after months of demonstrations by opposition forces, the elected government led by the Nahda (Ennahda) Party was forced to hand power to a caretaker government in October 2013.

On 7 March 2014, Saudi Arabia also designated the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization, followed by the United Arab Emirates two days later. In Syria, meanwhile, the accelerating violence of the civil war has caused the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood to be eclipsed by more militant groups with a much more formidable presence on the battlefield. Even in Turkey, a series of crises – from the Gezi Park protests that broke out in May 2013, to a hotly contested municipal election later that winter marked by corrupt allegations, leaked audio recordings, and a bitter power struggle between the government and Fethullah Gülen's movement – posed the most serious challenge to the ruling AK Party in many years.

The AK Party survived this challenge, once again posting an impressive electoral victory, and its Arab counterparts continue to insist on the soundness of their strategy of non-violent electoral politics. As Atif al-Jolani, editor of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood's newspaper *Al-Sabeel*, recently put it, the past year's events constitute a "test of the Brotherhood's commitment to democracy… I'm happy, not about the [Egyptian] coup, but because the Brotherhood has passed this test." [1] Jolani's observation that the Brotherhood has "adhered to the rules of the political game" in places such as Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt is in line with a consistent non-violent discourse that extends back to the 1970s. Already in 1977, for example, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's General Guide Omar al-Tilmisani advocated "acceptance of the parameters of the political regime and readiness to work within them; and rejection of violence and terrorism as methods for change." [2] In 1994, the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood's General Guide Abd al-Majid Dhunaybat said,

we condemn violence as a way of change. The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria tried it [in the early 1980s] and ended up crushed by the regime. Violence was tried in other countries, and we learned a great lesson from these cases. [3]

In 2004, a Syrian Muslim Brotherhood statement reiterated its line "rejecting violence as a mechanism for change… and affirming the right of the people to choose its political system freely." [4]

This strategy rests on three premises. First, that authoritarian secular nationalism in the Arab world – manifested in the majority of Arab regimes since the 1950s – is too powerful to overcome by force, as indicated by the militant Islamist defeats in Syria during the 1980s, and in Algeria and Egypt during the 1990s. In Jolani's words: "We need to reach a point where everybody must understand that they can't eliminate each other. No one is going to be able to eliminate anyone." [5] Second, that the route of revolutionary violence will serve only to empower hardliners on both sides, including militants of the al-Qaida type whose primary targets include precisely the democratic Islamists of the Muslim Brotherhood. Third, that the electoral route, by contrast, is likely to lead to success because the Muslim Brotherhood's message is the one that resonates most powerfully among Arab public opinion.

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But do the developments of the past year cast doubt on this last premise as well? The Brotherhood's electoral confidence grows out of the AK Party's repeated – and, with each national election so far, increasing – success at the ballot box; on the fact that even in the rigged parliamentary elections of 2005, the Egyptian Brotherhood won 55% of all the races it contested; and on the fact that Islamists of various stripes garnered no less than 69% of the total vote in Egypt's first free election in November 2011. A closer look, however, reveals a somewhat more complicated picture. As far back as 2005, for example, one poll found that whereas huge majorities in four Arab countries preferred democratic over authoritarian forms of government, opinion was split on "Islamic democracy" (favored by 39% of Algerians, 43% of Iraqis, 47% of Jordanians, and 45% of Palestinians) versus "secular democracy" (favored by 45% of Algerians, 43% of Iraqis, 44% of Jordanians, and 37% of Palestinians). [6] Another poll later that year found that 34% of Egyptians, 33% of Jordanians, 39% of Lebanese Muslims, and 36% of Moroccans (but only 14% of Saudis) did not "trust a popularly elected Islamic government to abide by the rules of a democracy." [7]

These indications of a significant secularist/nationalist counterforce to democratic Islamism are borne out by more recent evidence. In Tunisia, for example, the Nahda Party won 37% of the vote in the 2011 elections, and had to form a governing coalition with two secular parties. A poll held two years later found that the number of those who still retained confidence in the Nahda had fallen to 28%. [8] In Egypt, the Brotherhood's Muhammad Morsi received 25% of the vote in the first stage of the 2012 presidential election, and defeated his secular-nationalist rival (a retired air force commander who had been Mubarak's last appointed prime minister) by just 52% to 48% in the run-off. After Morsi was overthrown, another poll showed that 46% of the public supported the coup, and 50% believed the Muslim Brotherhood should be banned. Equally striking, the number of those expressing confidence in the anti-Morsi Tamarrud protest movement (35%) edged out those expressing confidence in the Brotherhood's political party (34%). [9]

A number of tentative conclusions suggest themselves:

First, that the democratic Islamists have a core support hovering around 30-40%; second, that the secular nationalists have a core support that is perhaps only slightly lower; and third, that there is a substantial segment of the electorate that can swing either way. This is comparable to the situation in Turkey, as is the fact that powerful state institutions in the Arab world – such as the military and judiciary – typically favor the secular-nationalist side. It is a tableau that may tempt some Islamists to abandon the electoral strategy and take up arms instead – particularly if, as in Egypt today, the electoral path is blocked altogether and the Brotherhood is suppressed as a terrorist organization. The majority, however, are likely to stick with the Brotherhood leadership in concluding that there is no viable alternative to following in the footsteps of their Turkish counterparts – embarking on a protracted campaign for democratization in which political compromises and accommodations eventually translate into electoral success. In Atif al-Jolani's view, for example, speaking with regard to the current situation in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood needs to work on regaining public support, reach out for alliances with liberal political forces, remain an "incessant gadfly" against an authoritarian regime that has no solutions to the country's political and economic problems, and simply wait for the inevitable transition back to pluralism: "The outcome is foreordained… Sisi's mentality is from fifty years ago. It is impossible for the regime to succeed." [10]

How quickly the normalization of the Muslim Brotherhood as a political actor in a democratizing context unfolds, then, will depend in part on how quickly the authoritarian secular nationalists learn the inescapable lesson the Brotherhood already appears to be internalizing: that neither side will be able to demonize or suppress the other out of existence.

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[1] Interview with author, Amman, 18 March 2014.

[2] Tilmisani quoted in Hasanayn Tawfiq Ibrahim and Huda Raghib `Awad,*Al-Dawr al-Siyasi li-Jama`at al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin fi Zill al-Ta`addudiyya al-Siyasiyya al-Muqayyada fi Misr* (Al-Ma`adi: Markaz al-Mahrusa lil-Buhuth wal-Tadrib wal-Nashr, 1996), p. 10.

[3] Dhunaybat quoted in Nachman Tal, *Radical Islam in Egypt and Jordan* (Brighton, UK: Sussex Academic Press,

2005), p. 191.

[4] Syrian statement entitled "Mukhtasar al-Mashru` al-Hadari li-Suriyya al-Mustaqbal" posted on Syrian Muslim Brotherhood website (www.ikhwansyria.com) on 16 December 2004.

[5] Interview with author, Amman, 18 March 2014.

[6] Mark Tessler and Eleanor Gao (p. 91), "Gauging Arab Support for Democracy", *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 16, no. 3 (July 2005): 83-97.

[7] Zogby International, *Six Arab Nation Survey Report*, November 2005, p. 8.

[8] Zogby Research Services, *Tunisia: Divided & Dissatisfied with Ennahda*, September 2013, p. 2.

[9] Zogby Research Services, *Egyptian Attitudes: September 2013*, pp. 6, 7, 11.

[10] Interview with author, Amman, 18 March 2014.

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