

Policy Brief: The Political Future of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt Following its Exit from Parliament

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One of the most prominent features of the future political life of Egypt will be the absence of the Muslim Brotherhood from the Parliament for the first time in a quarter of a century. This raises questions over the impact that the movement's exit from the Parliament will have on it, representing not only its estrangement from the fount of legislation and oversight, but also – and perhaps particularly for the Brotherhood – the loss of an important arena of societal, political and cultural interaction. In addition, activism within the electoral constituencies provided a means for the Brotherhood of being closer to the concerns of the people. To what extent will this event influence the political project of the Brotherhood, formulated in the early 1980s, one of the most important items of which was entering the Parliament?

The parliamentary elections in November and December 2010 were of no less importance than the 2005 elections, despite the obvious difference in their results. Interesting is the onset of the decline of the Egyptian opposition, most of which emerged empty-handed from these important elections, while the ruling party gained decisive control over the legislature, a state of play that will undoubtedly characterise Egyptian politics for the next five years. Also striking is the complete departure of the Muslim Brotherhood, the largest political

opposition force, from the Egyptian Parliament. The Brotherhood first entered Parliament in 1984, allied at the time to the Wafd Party. And there they remained with the exception of 1990, when they joined the majority of other political forces in their boycott of the legislative elections. The protest was directed at changes made to the electoral system, which were seen as being tailored to the specifications of the ruling party.

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Today, the Brotherhood faces a dual challenge: first, how it is to continue its political project in the absence of deputies to represent and articulate it. The second challenge relates to a potential setback to the political and social presence of the movement. The latter concern is justified with the correlation between the growth of the conservative wing within the movement and the Brotherhood's exit from the official institutions of the state. This takes place against the backdrop of a declining scope for political and economic action due to unabated pressure from the regime. With the movement's conservative wing now in control of the most senior positions, a third, internal, challenge may arise that relates to the fate of the Brotherhood's political arm, which has steered the movement over the past decade.

Parliament as a key platform for the Muslim Brotherhood

Over the past three decades the Muslim Brotherhood was, with the ruling party, the most important player in the Egyptian political arena, an experience that transformed them into something resembling a political "dinosaur". Early in the term of President Hosni Mubarak, the Brotherhood had reached a stage of maturity and voices within and around the Brotherhood encouraged the organisation to engage in the political system. The movement chose to participate in the parliamentary elections and formed an alliance with the Wafd Party in 1984 and with the Labour Party in 1987. In the 1990s the Brotherhood had a strong and active presence in the professional unions, which became its strongholds. In successive legislative elections the results obtained by the Brotherhood improved: in 1995 they won one seat, a figure that rose to 17 seats in the 2000 elections, following which the movement made a quantum leap forward to reach a high point of 88 seats in 2005.

The political practice of the Brotherhood developed and a political class within the Brotherhood emerged, grew and gained experience in the minutiae, means, pragmatics and exigencies of political action. As a result of the legacy of the Brotherhood's experience with Nasser's regime, developments in the Egyptian sphere in the early 1980s and the assassination of Sadat, the Brotherhood adopted and internalised the idea that radical change was futile and that the pursuit of violence as a means of achieving political change had failed. A shift in the group's internal structure, created when the students' movement joined its ranks in the 1970s, also led to a shift in its political approach, which became increasingly oriented towards public action.

The Muslim Brotherhood thereby transformed into a political grouping in real terms, even in the absence of legal status. This political dimension became firmly established in the consciousness of the people as well as among the members of the Brotherhood itself, and came to dominate the other facets of the movement. Despite that, it was able to preserve a particular attribute of the movement's legacy, namely its role as a social incubator, providing its members with various channels and mechanisms of protection and social advancement. However, the new reality of a political grouping reduced the movement's social reach beyond its membership and also forestalled an atmosphere in which one can voice criticism or dare to differ with the leadership. Anyone who does so faces organisational sanctions, now akin to a social embargo imposed on someone who has strayed from the path of righteousness. In light of these developments, the question is how and to what extent the movement will be able to continue to manage its social role, uphold internal discipline, and indeed maintain "commitment" to the Brotherhood within its environs. With the politicisation of the Brotherhood's discourse over the past three decades and its absorption in

the race to the Parliament, its social work, which was the foundation of the organisation, still exists, but its importance has diminished significantly. Politics has gained ascendancy over other areas, leaving a gap into which other groups have moved. The expanded al-Jamiyeh al-Shari'a, for instance, took over most of their charity work. Al-Da'wa al-Salafiya, gained control of Brotherhood-affiliated mosques. In addition, for the past two decades the Brotherhood has not been genuinely concerned with establishing community work as a means of guaranteeing a presence for itself within society. As a result, the movement faces a challenge in how to manage and absorb the thousands of individuals within its ranks who worked almost exclusively in politics.

Victory of the conservative camp

From the mid-1970s, local conditions have allowed the importance of organisation within the movement to re-emerge. Its institutions were restructured after the new blood of the elites from the Islamic groups, religious students from the campuses of Egyptian universities joining the organisation, began to pump through it. The Brotherhood benefitted intellectually from this regeneration. It would prove to be the dawn of an important episode in its history, with the appearance of what would later be known as the movement's "reformist" camp. This camp entered into the mêlée of elections in the trade unions and the student unions, and took part in the subsequent parliamentary elections. It thereby inaugurated the beginnings of greater political openness and closer contact with the various forces on the Egyptian street. This brought with it challenges to the movement on two levels.

Firstly, the reformist camp became a sort of political stratum that ran the most important part of the Brotherhood's activities and contact with the street, to which Parliament has been a principal gateway. It dealt with the media, for

example, and with broad issues of necessity. Media, legal, public relations and service committees were set up in the offices of the Muslim Brotherhood MPs, some of which worked directly on the needs of Egyptian citizens through hundreds of branch offices and a staff of thousands. Secondly, the 1990s were to be an important episode in the history of the movement. The consequences of the movement's entry into politics and its ambitions to integrate into the political system would gradually begin to appear, and affect the "major" issues on which the Brotherhood's political project was based: the problematic of the local and the international in the movement's thought; the management of organisational structures; its concept of the nation-state; and its positions towards citizenship, including for women and the Copts, and competition in elections with political parties of a secular orientation.

As it opened itself up to the country's issues, the Brotherhood faced powerful challenges to its political project, at a period when the issue of political reform was beginning to gain momentum, in particular between 2004 and 2007. Between the date of the publication of the political reform programme proposed by the Brotherhood (2004) and the publication of a draft project for its political party (2007), a dispute would arise between the two camps within the movement. One of these camps holds the strings in the organisation and attaches great importance to issues of internal cohesion, while the other prefers to deal with the arena of public action and supports the option of party politics, openness towards other elements in the political regime and developing the movement's vision towards issues of political participation. This debate was embodied in the dispute, indeed turmoil, that surrounded the assignment of roles to women and Copts. However, the successive internal elections held in 2008, 2009 and in early 2010 resulted in the elimination of the reformist approach within the movement,

particularly in its institutions, and swept figures from its conservative wing into leadership positions, including the post of Supreme Guide and his deputies. In some way this development represented a resolution of the Brotherhood's dispute and set the character and boundaries of its political project. The comprehensive campaign the regime had launched against the Brotherhood from the mid-1990s and that gradually mounted, served to resolve matters in this way. The confrontation limited the opportunities for the assimilation of "politicised" executives of the Muslim Brotherhood, even in economic terms: the regime orchestrated a precise and organised campaign to liquidate the movement's financial resources and investment projects, and even imprisoned its leading economic minds (Khairat Shater and Hassan Malik head this list). It then conducted a campaign to blockade the Brotherhood: the campaign targeted the movement's political presence in the trade unions and in the elected assemblies, the latter via constitutional amendments made in early 2007.

The future of political reformism within the Muslim Brotherhood

It has now become legitimate to raise the issue of the future of political reformism in the Muslim Brotherhood, given the repeated retraction of statements made over the previous two decades. This has clearly occurred in tandem with the policy of containment that has targeted the movement as a whole as a result of its confrontation with the regime. As a consequence, the areas of internal consensus are contracting, even with regard to the question of participation in the recent legislative elections. For example, most of the calls for a boycott of the elections, which came in the footsteps of the alliance forged with the National Front for Change, were made by reformists (Abdel Moneim Abul Fotou, Khaled Daoud, Ibrahim al-Za'farani, etc.).

The coming period will therefore be one of real political withdrawal for the Muslim Brotherhood. Arguably, for the coming year or so the Brotherhood will be unable to engage deeply in political action. This is because of the most important event due to take place in this period, namely the presidential elections. The Brotherhood has lost any chance of playing a possible role in the elections: the new electoral system requires that candidates from any non-legally registered parties to obtain 250 signatures from elected representatives in order to run for the presidency. The ruling National Democratic Party though enjoys a near-total domination of all the elected assemblies (the local councils, the Shura Council, and finally the People's Assembly or Parliament). Therefore the opportunity for the movement to converge with political forces with which to form a potential alliance and field a candidate is virtually non-existent, let alone the prohibitively high cost that political action against the regime may incur during this period. The Brotherhood has previous experience with that.

Assessments and projections

In light of the above it seems clear that the Muslim Brotherhood will do its utmost to extricate itself from the blockade imposed on it by the regime. And this can only happen if the possibility of alliance-building is revisited in the search for alternative opportunities. It is therefore unsurprising that the discussion over the need to activate the alliance with ElBaradei and the National Front for Change resurfaced within the movement, particularly in the run up to the Egyptian presidential elections. The results of the elections held to date have demonstrated the merits of the boycott called for by ElBaradei. More importantly, however, he represents an opportunity to project the voice of the Brotherhood abroad (see, for example, the report "Religious Freedoms in the

World”, which was published by the US State Department and found that the Brotherhood was subject to persecution and harassment). The Brotherhood cannot risk forging close ties other than those it has already established. This will be the case as long as the sword of the authorities remains poised over any attempt to disturb the current balance of power, at least not until the presidential elections are held in late 2011.

It is likely that the Brotherhood will decide to participate in activities proposed by other political and social forces. These may include ones that seek legal and political escalation against the new Parliament, which has been marred by suspicions of fraud and a loss of legitimacy. It also seems likely that the street will become a major channel for the Brotherhood, given that they continue exclusively to represent political Islam. And thus the Muslim street will join in the Brotherhood at every political opportunity. The Egyptian street itself is largely Muslim, as it is dominated by issues from Da’wa (‘call’, or the propagation of Islam) to charity and social work. And while the Brotherhood may not undertake such work itself, it possesses the ability to mobilise it politically, particularly in the new spaces provided by modern technologies. Indeed, the logic of the “net” will give the Brotherhood an ideal opportunity to avoid the potential costs of the coming period. While they may integrate the paradigm of the new protest movements, they will not be able to depart from the organisation’s general track that is incompatible with these movements. The Brotherhood is sensitive to activities that entail any threat to the regime – given that the movement may be unable to bear the political and societal costs involved. This precaution has grown stronger in light of the movement’s inclination towards conservatism and tendency to stick to its principles.

These mutually-reinforcing factors will play a major role in shaping the Brotherhood’s political vision. However, the Brotherhood will be thrown into a state of turmoil in the absence of any imminent political prospects. Two different opinions will conflict within the group (and which are related to its internal composition, as discussed above): between those who will undoubtedly demand increased opportunities for political action, and those that want to maintain a slow-moving, orderly grouping, averse to risk-taking due to the expansion of conservatism both in intellectual and political terms. The latter’s priority is to ensure the survival and continuation of the Brotherhood and maintain its presence. This amounts to a continuation of the track that was embarked upon approximately two years ago.

Such a state of affairs will clearly lead to the gradual erosion of the Brotherhood’s political stratum, in terms of both politics and the media. The regime is likely to close down the offices of former Muslim Brotherhood MPs, thereby paralysing their movement and shrinking the spaces in which they can interact with the people. Major schisms are unlikely to develop, because of the character of the Brotherhood and its relationship to its members, its ability to discipline, the high costs involved in leaving its ranks, and especially because of unfavourable political circumstances. It is likely that the movement will see individual and disparate cases of departure from its ranks, as a result of this erosion and the controversy that will accompany it. However, those individual departures will depend on the extent to which other opportunities are available to those who leave or “escape”, as in the case of MP Magdy Ashour, for instance, who defied the decision to withdraw from the second round of the parliamentary elections. There also exists the case of the opposition front that continues to assert its presence and established status within the Brotherhood day by day, and has become a

recognized fact, even by the movement's leadership.

Questions remain over whether the group's political discourse will evolve within this new context, something that is difficult to predict. The Brotherhood's participation in politics has afforded the most important events in the organisation's political and social environment, and has offered most opportunities for the manifestation of anything novel in its discourse. In the absence of elections in which the Brotherhood has a role, the chances of any new developments emerging within its discourse are extremely remote. The policy of exclusion will reinforce the group's withdrawal into itself, aimed at strengthening internal cohesion. In addition, the various elements of this confrontation – which include the political restrictions that followed from the

constitutional amendments of 2007; the propaganda campaign to strip the movement of its political legitimacy for posing a direct threat to political stability (as a prelude to undermining its legitimacy within the community); and the hounding of its senior members and economic ventures – are factors that will all lead to a genuine curtailment of the role and discourse of the Brotherhood. They will similarly provide further reasons for the dispute and confrontation to be transferred to inside the movement itself. We will therefore perhaps see conflicts develop that will influence the movement's future political project and the extent to which it is "effective" and "feasible." And this allows for the possibility of then discussing issues that have been deferred or prohibited so far, first and foremost the question of the formation of a political party.