

MB goes Rural

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Rather than merely taking advantage of rural popularity, it is rural ways that are influencing the Muslim Brotherhood, writes **Hossam Tammam***

The May 2008 elections of the Muslim Brotherhood Guidance Bureau show that the group has undergone a major transformation. The Muslim Brotherhood used to be an urban group in its membership and style of management. Now its cultural patterns and loyalties are taking on a rural garb. As a result, the Muslim Brotherhood is losing the clarity of direction and method it once had.

Over the past few years, the Muslim Brotherhood has been infused with rural elements. Its tone is becoming more and more patriarchal, and its members are showing their superiors the kind of deference associated with countryside traditions. You hear them referring to their top officials as the "uncle *hajj* ", "the big *hajj* ", "our blessed one", "the blessed man of our circle", "the crown on our heads", etc. Occasionally, they even kiss the hands and heads of the top leaders. Not long ago, a Muslim Brotherhood parliamentarian kissed the hand of the supreme guide in public.

These patterns of behaviour are new to the Muslim Brotherhood, a group that emerged and operated mostly in an urban context. The new ways of speech and behaviour, which I will refer to as the "ruralisation" of the Muslim Brotherhood, have affected every aspect of the group's internal operations. In its recent elections, the Muslim Brotherhood maintained a tight lid of secrecy, offered the public contradictory information, and generally seemed to be operating with little regard for established procedure.

The Muslim Brotherhood Shura Council elections emphasised ritual over order. The main concern of the Brotherhood, throughout the recent elections, seemed to be with maintaining an aura of respect for the leadership and getting the rank-and-file to offer unquestioning loyalty to top officials.

A system of secondary loyalties has emerged inside the Muslim Brotherhood, in near independence from all considerations of institutional work. Entire geographical areas, indeed entire governorates, are now viewed as political fiefdoms pertaining to one Muslim Brotherhood leader or another. Muslim Brotherhood members would refer to a certain city or governorate as being the turf of certain individuals.

Duplicity, another trait of rural communities, is also rampant. Feigned allegiance is common, with members saying one thing in private and another in public. As is the custom in the countryside, deference to authority is often coupled with resistance to change. As a result, you'd see members pretending to listen to their Muslim Brotherhood superiors while paying little or no attention to what they say. Many of the new ideas put forward by Muslim Brotherhood leaders have been ignored, or at least diluted and then discarded.

When a Brotherhood member comes up with a new idea, the Muslim Brotherhood leadership reacts as if that member spoke out of order. Self-criticism is increasingly being frowned upon and the dominant thinking within the Brotherhood is becoming traditionalist and unquestioning.

The Muslim Brotherhood has been active in recruiting teachers and professors. But most of the new recruits are rural in their culture and understanding of public life. Despite their scholarly pedigree, many of the academics that have joined the Brotherhood are parochial in their understanding of the world. The Muslim Brotherhood has nearly 3,000 university professors in its ranks, and few or any of those are endowed with the habit of critical thinking. They may be academics, but they are no visionaries.

In the recent Muslim Brotherhood elections, five members of the group's Shura Council won seats in the Guidance Bureau. Most of those were either from rural areas or people with a pronounced rural lifestyle. Four were from the countryside, including Saadeddin El-Husseini from Sharqiya, Mohamed Hamed from Mahala Al-Kobra, Saadeddin El-Katatni from Minya. Only one was from a metropolitan centre: Osama Nasr from Alexandria.

Over the past decade or so, most of the newcomers to the Guidance Bureau were from the countryside: Mahmoud Hussein from Assiut, Sabri Arafa El-Komi from Daqahliya, and Mohamed Mursi from Sharqiya. Rural governorates, such as Assiut, Minya, Daqahliya and Sharqiya, are now in control of much of the Muslim Brotherhood, especially middle-ranking posts, while Cairo and Alexandria have seen their status gradually erode. The Brotherhood leadership is encouraging the trend, for rural people are less prone to challenging their leaders.

There was a time when the Muslim Brotherhood appealed mainly to an urban audience. But since the late 1980s things have changed. Due to the long-running confrontation with the regime, the Muslim Brotherhood has found it harder to recruit urban supporters. Also, the lack of innovation in Muslim Brotherhood ways has turned off many city dwellers. Instead of joining the Muslim Brotherhood, the young and disgruntled, as well as those seeking spiritual salvation, have joined the Salafi current or become followers of the country's new breed of well-spoken televangelists. The fact that the Muslim Brotherhood has mostly abandoned religious propagation in favour of politics may have accelerated this trend.

What the Muslim Brotherhood has to offer is something that city dwellers don't really need. The Muslim Brotherhood offers an alternative family, a cloning of the village community with its personalised support system. This is something that appeals best to new arrivals from the countryside, to people who miss the stability and comfort of a traditional community.

The attraction of countryside people to the Muslim Brotherhood over the past two decades coincided with the disintegration of the extended family and the weakening of communal ties. Moreover, the Westernisation of city life may have pushed many people with a rural background into seeking a moral and social refuge in the Muslim Brotherhood.

In universities, the Muslim Brotherhood attracts newcomers to the cities rather than original city dwellers. It is more successful in recruitment among students in Al-Azhar University than in other universities, and more successful in rural governorates than in Cairo and Alexandria.

Following the 1952 Revolution, Egypt as a whole underwent a wave of ruralisation. But even then, the Muslim Brotherhood focussed its recruitment on people with an urban lifestyle. Fifty years ago, the Muslim Brotherhood recruited mostly among the sons of government employees, teachers, and generally the white-collared class. Egypt's countryside was not welcoming to the Muslim Brotherhood or its outlook. Now, the Muslim Brotherhood has gone so conventional that it is gaining ground in the countryside.

The Muslim Brotherhood can run effective campaigns and even win elections in many areas in Egypt's countryside. Yet, it is my belief that the countryside is affecting the Muslim Brotherhood more than the Muslim Brotherhood is affecting it.

In Hassan El-Banna's time, Muslim Brotherhood leaders were mostly urban in their ways: Hassan El-Hodeibi, Omar El-Telmesani, Hassan Ashmawi, Mounir Dallah, Abdel-Qader Helmi and Farid Abdel Khaleq. Even in the countryside, top Muslim Brotherhood members were known for their urban lifestyle: Mohamed Hamed Abul- Naser and Abbas Al-Sisi, for example.

By contrast, the new breed of Muslim Brotherhood leaders is rural in its ways. This goes even for Cairo-based Muslim Brotherhood leaders including Mohamed Mursi, Saad El-Katatni, Saad Al-Husseini and Sabri Arafa El-Komi. And the Muslim Brotherhood supreme guide, Mahdi Akef, is more rural in his leadership style than his predecessor, Maamoun Al-Hodeibi.

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