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Article

*What is the Future of the Muslim Brotherhood
and the Egyptian Revolution?*

Dr. Amani al-Tawil

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Articles & Commentaries

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WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD AND THE EGYPTIAN REVOLUTION?

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WHY THE BROTHERHOOD?

Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood occupied a more prominent position than any of the other political forces during the events of the recent Egyptian revolution, despite the fact that the movement did not plan the protests, or even contribute to it in its early stages. The Brotherhood's prominence is due to a number of reasons, including the fact that former President Hosni Mubarak had used the group throughout the period of his rule as a scarecrow, both internally and externally, insisting that rule by the Muslim Brotherhood would be the only alternative to his rule and to a civil state in Egypt. In short, the Brotherhood became the perennial scapegoat which needs to be rewarded. Moreover, the Brotherhood possesses a historical organizational structure that dates back eighty years, and has an international reach, through the International Muslim Brotherhood organization.

In addition to this, the Muslim Brotherhood enjoys a great popular appeal, which is based on two different types of efforts: the first is one of religious advocacy while the second is a social one, based on its unimpeded enmeshment in the Egyptian social fabric, using Islamic reference. Furthermore, the Muslim Brotherhood has political experience across all the strata of the regime and with external political forces, which gives it a considerable amount of influence, and must be taken into account when reflecting on the political equation.

In this context, one cannot ignore the role of the external focus on this group, amidst fears that Egypt will become a religious state, which would mean the upheaval of the geopolitical balance in the Middle East, and would possibly be a threat to Western interests in general, particularly in light of the religious nature of the Iranian state and the possibility of increased threats against Israel.

In light of the Muslim Brotherhood's relative weight, and its announcement that it will form a political party (The Freedom and Justice Party), it is important to identify the development of the political dynamic between the Brotherhood and the various forces behind the Egyptian revolution. Such work is necessary in order to be able to predict the results of this dynamic relationship, looking at its ability to contribute to the legitimization of the Egyptian revolution, as well as the establishment of a democratic, civil state capable of not only providing Egypt with the tools of progress and modernization on all fronts, but also transforming it into a strong force on the Arab and African regional scales.

Based on a detailed examination of the Muslim Brotherhood and their political discourse during the first week of the Egyptian revolution, it is impossible to deny their maturity and awareness. Their discourse insisted that they were merely one component of the revolutionary constituency, and not its only expression. The slogans that they raised demanded change, freedom, and social

justice, and members refrained from raising their habitual slogans proclaiming that “Islam is the solution”. This was partly due to the fact that prior to their visible presence as a political movement on the ‘Day of Rage,’ Friday January 28th, their presence had been meek and hesitant, with individuals protesting on their own behalf, without relying on party directives. In fact, the party had succumbed to the regime’s pressure on it to not participate in the January 25 protests called for by young Egyptians.

However, the Brotherhood’s political behavior has not convinced the hard core elements within the Egyptian state institutions that the group only played a marginal role in the acceleration of events. They counter that there have been decades of confrontation between both sides, and note that police stations and government buildings were set on fire at the same time across all provinces; they also point out that the Muslim Brotherhood provided some of the logistical support in Tahrir square.

This opinion of the Egyptian state and civil society elites was further consolidated by the increasing messages by the Brotherhood, which began on the day of departure (February 4), making it seem as if they had ignored all the results that the revolution had achieved in creating a new paradigm on the Egyptian scene, settling once again into their own, narrow-minded interests, regardless of the effects that these may have on the national course, or the role they play in stifling the hopes of the revolutionaries that Egypt was being brought to a new democratic moment.

THE PATHWAYS OF POLITICAL PERFORMANCE

We can monitor the aspects of this change in the separate protests organized by the Brotherhood, which raise their own religious slogans in Alexandria and Asyout, in Upper Egypt (known as AsSa’id), in addition to isolated attempts to raise Qurans in Tahrir Square. This can be explained, most probably, within the context of the Brotherhood’s desire to gauge how willing the Egyptian public is to accept a religious state in Egypt.

On the level of political discourse, an analysis of the speeches given by some members of the Brotherhood on satellite channels in the week of departure reveals that they express individual presumptions about the amendment of some constitutional articles. Some members reminded people of the Brotherhood’s eighty-year struggle in Egypt. These speeches also affirmed that the party was not interested in naming a presidential candidate, but that it expected to receive one-third of parliamentary seats during the next election.¹

¹ See Brotherhood leader Sobhi al-Saleh in *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 24/2/2011

Friday, February 18th, the day of victory, can be considered to be the beginning of the schism between the Muslim Brotherhood and the other political forces. The Brotherhood's political performance did not reach the levels expressed in the inclusive speech by Sheikh Youssef al-Qaradhawi, which stressed national unity between Muslims and Christians, and recognized the needs of the Egyptian nation at this point in time. The Muslim Brotherhood's actions in preventing Wael Ghoneim, one of the main figures of the youthful revolution, from climbing to the podium on Victory Friday, diminished them. This action was a significant indicator that the Brotherhood's political practice was exclusionary. Brotherhood leaders later presented two conflicting explanations of the incident that confirm, rather than deny, such fears. In al-Hayat Channel, Issam al-'Aryan denied that the incident had occurred, accusing the press agency (AFP) that broke the news of not having any legitimacy.² Mohammad al-Baltaji, who had been responsible for the podium on that day, confirmed that the incident had taken place on the program *Manchette*, but denied that he had played a role in it, saying that a member of the leftist groups had been responsible for Wael Ghoneim's dismissal from the podium, not him.³

Continuing the Brotherhood's increasing isolation and separation from the Egyptian Revolution, on the Day of Demands, February 25, they were absent from the protests in Tahrir Square. This carried a double message: the first was addressed to the other political forces, indicating that it's the Brotherhood that gives the protests their real weight; the second directed to the regime, saying that they were the ones deserving to have their demands listened to.

This performance cannot be isolated from the Brotherhood's attempt to forge their own agreement with Omar Suleiman separately from all the other national forces prior to Mubarak's resignation. They also reneged on the alliance with Mohammad El-Baradei, former head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), initiator of the seven demands for change, after agreements had been reached on several points: the Brotherhood's commitment to only gradually decrease the numbers of its members in the demonstrations, if no further attacks against protestors occurred, something that the government had promised, would not recur. The deal did not state that the Brotherhood's role would be diminished, but allowed that some members would establish their political party.⁴ This retreat was opposed and rejected by younger members of the party, and the political elite considered it a betrayal of the Tahrir revolutionaries of all colors, including the youthful component of the Brotherhood.⁵

² Egyptian satellite TV, 20/2/2011

³ Egyptian NTV, 24/2/2011

⁴ *al-Shuruq*, 7 February 2011.

⁵ Prominent author Fahmi Huwaidi asked the Brotherhood, "Are you with Lathu Ali (the Interior Ministry building), or with Tahrir?" in Lebanese *as-Safir*, 11/2/2011

Furthermore, it revealed the nature of the schisms within the Brotherhood at a time when all the political forces in Egypt were demanding that the revolutionary forces be given the chance – and time – to establish political parties, or enjoy some basic liberties. On the other hand, only the Brotherhood and the military council⁶ agree that the transition period should be limited to six months,⁷ which would mean that the upcoming Egyptian election would just bring into power already-established forces, namely, the Muslim Brotherhood and the remnants of the National Party, which is currently undergoing a structural rearrangement. This would mean that the country would enter into a new cycle of tension and instability, particularly because the Brotherhood's assertions that they are not interested in having more than one-third of the Parliament or a candidate run for presidency; additionally, they claim that they are not interested in legislating new laws without a popular referendum.⁸ None of these are genuine concessions, especially in light of the fact that the Brotherhood's recent political opportunity did not result from the success of a certain political platform, but came as a result of its advocacy efforts and social influence, which is based on a general Islamic reference that does not include a discussion of the pivotal, foundational details over Egypt's political future; moreover, it includes a degree of obfuscation about the group's position towards their control of the social space under the umbrella of *shari'a* law (Islamic legislation).

For example, Sudan is ruled by a regime that imposes a specific dress code on women, and whips them if they do not comply. Sudanese are also forbidden from having weddings and other parties after 11 p.m. This regime harasses people in public spaces, or in entertainment venues like cafes.

The recent political performance of the Muslim Brotherhood could be perceived as a confirmation of the regime's accusations against them, as it has been historically on the internal and external fronts. This is a scare tactic that has hindered and continues to hinder true democratic progress in Egypt, and supports the transmission of a lack of confidence between the Brotherhood and the other political forces.

These recent developments pose a basic danger to the ultimate goals of the Egyptian revolution which have crystallized around the necessity of moving Egypt towards a true democracy that is completely divorced from the Mubarak regime's repression and tyranny and will redraw the social map of Egypt on more equitable grounds. In other words, it is neither acceptable nor allowable that any group or political party present itself without a political program based on clear demands, including the creation of Egyptian civil society that is inclusive of all, without

⁶ Issam al-Aryan, conference on "Egypt Tomorrow", Grand Hyatt Hotel, 23/2/2011.

⁷ On the "10 PM" program, Egyptian *Dream TV*, 24/2/2011.

⁸ *Ibid.*

discrimination, and in which no one group holds sway over the public, whether through spiritual or political authority. One of these requirements also has to be the acceptance of the idea of citizenship for all without discrimination on religious or gender grounds. It would be unacceptable for the Brotherhood to join the political process in Egypt without clearly separating between their religious doctrinal beliefs and their politics.

The political forces in Egypt, which always insisted that the Brotherhood had the right to political participation, will be involved in any future negotiations calling for the cancellation of the current political party law, and the establishment of a law based on the freedom of organization and political organization. This will pave the way before the Brotherhood and others to develop their presence and the form it will take in the future.

THE BROTHERHOOD'S RESPONSIBILITIES

I believe that the Muslim Brotherhood should pay close attention to their position and performance at this delicate moment in Egyptian history. On them falls the responsibility to continue behaving in a politically mature and aware fashion, as they did at the outset of the Egyptian revolution, and accept that they are a part of a whole. Clearly, this Egyptian revolution has successfully brought the Muslim Brotherhood down to their true size and presence in the Egyptian street, a feat that the previous regime had failed to do. We do not want to see a political rule in Egypt that is similar to Sudan's: the Muslim Brotherhood in that country bears a great amount of responsibility for this rule, and for the division of their nation, and they also bear the ethical responsibility for the emergence of a racist, bigoted stance towards religious and ethnic Others. In this context, it is necessary to demand that the Brotherhood comply with the change in the Arab world, and encourage them to establish our Arab nations based on conditions that accommodate standards of modernization and progress. Now, it appears that the Muslim Brotherhood is at the moment of political and ethical truth on many fronts; this includes the need not to abuse the Brotherhood's religious credit to mobilize political support, and to work on actively shaping the newly-announced political party to embrace the principles of egalitarian citizenship, which in turn would mean that their stance on the right of women and Copts to run for the presidency must be re-evaluated. This move demands a considerable amount of courage, akin to the courage the Brotherhood showed when they cancelled the *'Ulama* council from their program since it would be a Higher Council for monitoring the laws issued by parliament, and would place the Brotherhood at the danger of contradicting the constitution, which must state the principle of egalitarian citizenship, reflecting a global trend and national demands.

In my opinion, the announcement that they will not push to acquire the majority in the transitional parliament does not seem adequate in light of the need to allow a fair opportunity –

of no less than two parliamentary rounds – to the rest of the political powers with civil society backgrounds to work freely and seek out voters, so that the ballot will reflect equality for all at elections.

It also appears that the Muslim Brotherhood must agree to write an Egyptian constitution for a modern state that can keep up with global progress through the mobilization of the freedom of thought and belief for all, and re-addresses the current situation which creates a schism in society due to the second article of the current constitution that states that Islamic *shari'a* is the basis of legislation, which was imposed by Sadat for political reasons, including his conflict with the left and the Nasserists. This article deliberately ignores the social structure of Egyptian society, in which Copts are 10% of the population, a constant source of worry for this group, which should not be strong-armed by the relative number of Muslims.

Perhaps one of the most crucial things at this point is for the Brotherhood to immediately renounce its traditional methods of striking deals with the authorities, whoever this may be, and instead of using other political forces like its religious authority, and trying to achieve political gains based on this religious strength, they should progress towards adopting the hopes of the Egyptian people in achieving freedom and democracy.

In conclusion, it appears that the lack of change in the Muslim Brotherhood's political behavior in this politically delicate time will allow the counter-revolutionary forces to manipulate them in order to hinder the wheels of progress towards true democracy, and contribute to weakening the revolutionary forces, especially since the Egyptian revolution is at a crossroads: it will either continue to move towards its goals in toppling the remnants of the Mubarak regime, or produce a cosmetic change that only changes some of the faces of the regime, but not its policies, and in the end will be a miserable result unworthy of the blood of the martyrs and the attempts to regain power in the Egyptian state.