



Egypt's Islamists: A Cautionary Tale

[Hillel Fradkin & Lewis Libby](#) — April 2011

Print

Brotherhood has shown its strength with the Egyptian public in recent years. In 2005, in the only semi-free legislative elections in decades, the Brotherhood managed to win 20 percent of the seats. The Brotherhood seems well positioned to benefit from the protests and the departure of Mubarak, and that fact has cast a shadow over the extraordinary events in Cairo—the peaceful ouster of a sclerotic autocrat.

Some observers have expressed the hope that the Brotherhood might actually play a benign role as Egypt moves forward. They cite the soothing words of one of the members of its Supreme Council, Essam el-Erian: “We come with no special agenda of our own—our agenda is that of the Egyptian people. We aim to achieve reform and rights for all, not just for the Muslim Brotherhood, not just for Muslims, but for all Egyptians.” This and other pronouncements have been taken as evidence that the Brotherhood is not the radical organization of old—the organization from whose ranks the assassins of Mubarak’s predecessor, Anwar el-Sadat, emerged, and from whose theoretical seedlings al-Qaeda sprouted.

But even if the Brotherhood hasn’t changed, say, others, we shouldn’t worry too much. It won’t have the legitimacy necessary to dominate the political life of the new Egypt. Common estimates of its public support range between 20 and 30 percent, which suggests to optimists that the Brotherhood would lack the capacity to overpower the pro-democracy elements of the movement. After all, the senior leadership of the Brotherhood was not initially involved in instigating the protests, and once the organization got involved, it supposedly played at best a subordinate role. The public knows this. And the Brotherhood knows it too, they say, which explains why it has announced it will not field a candidate for Egypt’s presidency, nor run a candidate slate sufficiently large to win a majority in the new parliament. Indeed, in offering their hopes for a new Egypt, Brotherhood leaders have invoked the relatively reassuring model of Turkey—present-day Turkey, that is, under the governance of the AKP, a party that grew out of the Turkish branch of the Muslim Brotherhood.

But as the sobering treatment of Ghonim and appearance of Qaradawi on February 18 both suggest, democracy advocates need to keep their wits about them when considering the composition of the new Egypt. The passions that stoked these remarkable events are very fresh and very raw and very powerful. But they will abate over time, and time is the Muslim Brotherhood’s friend. The organization is nearly 80 years old, and it has learned the benefits of both patience and prudence.

It is proceeding with caution, and so, in relation to the Muslim Brotherhood, should we.

Far too many analysts seem to confuse the caution the Muslim Brotherhood has displayed thus far with moderation. There is no conflict between being immoderate and acting with discretion. We know very well from historical experience that successful radical movements and organizations often proceed carefully in pursuit of a violent revolutionary aim.

The Brotherhood’s difficult eight-decade history in Egypt has schooled its leaders in the need for caution. During those 80 years, the Brotherhood has sometimes enjoyed some freedom and even favor, only to

see them replaced by hardship. In the 1930s and early 40s, the Brotherhood's founder, Hassan al-Banna, enjoyed influence—sometimes considerable—under the Egyptian monarchy. But in 1948, Banna was murdered by King Farouk's police. Subsequently, the Brotherhood became friendly and complicit with the group of young officers who overthrew the monarchy in 1952 and established the regime that persisted through the reign of the three generals—Gamal Abdel Nasser, Anwar Sadat, and Hosni Mubarak (it persists today, in spite of the latter's ouster).

But in two years' time, the Brotherhood had fallen out with the regime and found itself subjected to ferocious persecution far worse than anything it had endured under the monarchy. For a time, Nasser relented, but he turned on them yet again and launched another cycle of attacks in the 1960s. This campaign culminated in the 1966 execution of Sayyid Qutb, the anti-Western thinker who was the Brotherhood's most popular figure.

After Nasser's death in 1970, the Brotherhood enjoyed a period of relative freedom under his successor Anwar Sadat, who was more pious than Nasser and needed the group to combat the influence on Egypt of the Soviet Union and its Communist allies. But that second honeymoon, too, soon faded, and ended altogether under Mubarak, in the wake of Sadat's assassination by Islamist radicals who had broken from the Brotherhood.

So we can see how and why the Brotherhood was forced to learn the virtues of caution. At the same time, its vision of Egypt's future, and the Muslim future as a whole, is anything but moderate. From its very beginnings in 1928, the Brotherhood has been explicit about its ultimate goal: the radical transformation of contemporary Muslim society and its political order. Its central pronouncement, authored by its founder, Banna, remains authoritative to this day: "Allah is our objective; the Prophet is our leader; the Koran is our law; Jihad is our way; dying in the way of Allah is our highest hope."

The Brotherhood's strategy for realizing its vision was long term, to put it mildly, and thus has been mistaken for a legitimate effort to effect gradual change from the bottom up through the construction of institutions separate from the government—like providers of social services and communities of like-minded professionals. But these organizational efforts in no way have led to the abandonment of its radical vision in its most comprehensive and ultimately political form.

The Brotherhood's "gradualism" arose from a belief that such an approach was the best way to achieve

Muhammad's "revolution" but secretly conspired against it. It was not obvious who such hypocrites might be. Were they the remnants of Mubarak's regime, or people like Wael Ghonim, who ostensibly had been comrades in arms but might resist an Islamic state?