

July 2012

## About this Series

Op-Med is an ongoing series of opinion pieces on topical issues in Mediterranean politics from a transatlantic perspective. The series brings together European, North American, and southern Mediterranean experts through the German Marshall Fund–Istituto Affari Internazionali strategic partnership. The series examines key questions surrounding the political, societal, and economic evolution of specific Mediterranean countries as well as the broader regional and international dynamics at play in the Mediterranean region as a whole.

## The Muslim Brotherhood and the Illusion of Power

by Daniela Pioppi

Events are unfolding rapidly in Egypt these days. What someone dubbed the “slow motion coup,” i.e., the military-led uncertain political transition, has become a “fast motion” one. On June 14, the Supreme Constitutional Court nullified the election of one-third of the seats in the People’s Assembly. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) then stepped in and dissolved parliament, vesting itself with legislative responsibility. Notwithstanding the looming political crisis, the run-off of presidential election went on as planned. Yet on June 17, the day the polls closed, the military followed up with an addendum to their March 2011 Constitutional Declaration that effectively subordinates the new Egyptian president to the SCAF. The military has thus ensured control, whatever the results at the ballot box, stripping the promised transfer of power to civilian rule of its significance.

Breaking its long quiescent approach to the SCAF, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) reacted first by autonomously declaring the victory of its candidate, Muhammad al-Mursi, then by calling SCAF’s actions a “coup d’Etat against democracy” and promising popular

protest all over the country. Official results were finally announced June 24, confirming the election of the MB candidate, the first civilian president in Egypt’s history. One of the first acts of the new president on July 9 was to issue a decree ordering the dissolved parliament to resume its legislative activities, but the Supreme Constitutional Court responded swiftly with a verdict rejecting the presidential decree.

Events in the next weeks or months will tell if the SCAF and the MB have reached a deal of some sort and if the political compromise will be tenable. The military are certainly determined to keep their political and economic privileges and the control of “national security issues” like foreign policy, defense, and state coercive apparatus.<sup>1</sup> Beyond anti-Islamist rhetoric in the Western media, even the United States seems to be in favor of an Islamist-military alliance in which the Islamist, the junior partner, provide popular legitimacy to the military and good

<sup>1</sup> See S. Marshall and J. Stacher, “Egypt’s Generals and Transnational Capital,” *Middle East Report* 262, Summer, 2012, available at: <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer262/egypts-generals-transnational-capital>

economic governance,<sup>2</sup> without crossing red lines on sensitive strategic issues such as foreign policy (especially toward Israel) or bilateral military-to-military relations.

## The Muslim Brotherhood and the Egyptian “Revolution”

In order to shed light on the current still unpredictable situation, it is worth taking a step back to look at the MB’s political role and strategy in the 18 months since the ousting of Hosni Mubarak.

As noted in the GMF Mediterranean Paper on Egypt published in May 2011,<sup>3</sup> the MB joined the January-February 2011 popular uprising late and with a cautious approach, but then had a crucial role in providing sustainability and mass character. In fact, it was the unity between Egypt’s secular and Islamist forces that made the uprising a success. However, this alliance was soon to end, as the MB’s political ambitions and overly compliant approach toward the military brought about the most damaging cracks in Egypt’s hopes for a true “democratic transition.”

After the demise of the regime’s National Democratic Party (NDP) in April 2011, the MB was the best and most deep-rooted organization in the country as all other old and new actors either had to adjust to the fall of Mubarak or were organizing from scratch. Certain to be rewarded by a fast-moving transition and traditionally wary of popular initiatives, the MB quickly abandoned street protests and backed the SCAF and the SCAF’s constitutional amendments (March 2011) that called for holding elections first, thus creating the initial rift with revolutionary forces that wanted to draft a new constitution before getting bogged down in divisive electoral politics.

In the following months, the MB concentrated on preparing the elections with its newly established Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) and on closing its ranks under the pragmatic leadership of Khayrat al-Shater, the multimillionaire

member of the Guidance Bureau, with unrivalled leverage on both the larger organization and on its party.<sup>4</sup>

As expected, the FJP won the election with a 47 percent majority, thus dominating the only democratically elected institution in the country. Incidentally, however, the big surprise of the elections was the success of new Salafi parties and the MB’s lost hegemony of the Islamist field. The Salafis, largely considered apolitical before the 2011 uprising, “came out into the open.” They proved they had been replacing — especially in lower class contexts — the MB’s proselytizing machine that has been steadily eroding since the mid 1990s.<sup>5</sup> The consolidation of a more open political environment could eventually challenge the MB’s dominant position.

## The consolidation of a more open political environment could eventually challenge the Muslim Brothers dominant position.

### Institutional Uncertainty and the Difficult Path to Democratic Accountability

From the start, the new Islamist-led parliament was stripped of any relevant power, under the constant scrutiny of the SCAF and in a context of institutional uncertainty.<sup>6</sup> The FJP continued to accept the biased and constantly changing rules of the game. At the same time, it ignored rising protests coming from other political forces and civil society at large that criticized the SCAF’s ambivalent role, but also parliament’s lack of transparency, isolation from

4 See A. Huweidy, “Meet the Brotherhood’s enforcer: Khairat El-Shater,” *Al-Ahram Online*, March 29, 2012, available at <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/37993/Egypt/Politics-/Meet-the-Brotherhood%E2%80%99s-enforcer-Khairat-ElShater.aspx>.

5 On Salafis, see S. Lacroix, *Sheikh and Politicians: Inside the New Egyptian Salafism*, Policy Briefing, Brookings Doha Center, June 2012, available at <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2012/6/07%20egyptian%20salafism%20lacroix/stephane%20lacroix%20policy%20briefing%20english.pdf>

6 See N. Brown, *Judicial Turbulence Ahead in Egypt, Fasten Your Seat Belts*, Commentary, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 6, 2012, available at <http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/06/06/judicial-turbulence-ahead-in-egypt-fasten-your-seat-belts/blek>

2 On the positive international welcoming of the MB economic program, see for instance “Vote for the Brother. A Muslim Brother is better than a Mubarak Crony,” *The Economist*, June 16, 2012, available at <http://www.economist.com/node/21556941>

3 D. Pioppi, M.C. Paciello, I. El Amrani, and P. Droz-Vincent, “Transition to What: Egypt’s Uncertain Departure from Neo-Authoritarianism,” German Marshall Fund, May 2012, available at <http://www.gmfus.org/archives/transition-to-what-egypts-uncertain-departure-from-neo-authoritarianism/>

## Op-Med

the country at large,<sup>7</sup> and, most of all, the MB's perceived preference for backroom deals with the SCAF over building the necessary alliances with democratic forces.

The first constitutional assembly (March 2012) — dominated by Islamist MPs — was struck down by an administrative court, but it was widely interpreted as proof of the Islamists' (this time MB and Salafis together) arrogance and reluctance to compromise with the other political and social forces. The second constitutional assembly — the one that is currently working, but that could in the end be invalidated again by the SCAF's last constitutional declaration given that many of its members are MPs of the dissolved parliament<sup>8</sup> — is no better in this respect, although it has a 50-50 Islamist/non-Islamist quota.

Much of Ahmad Shafiq's success can be attributed to the restoration of the NDP's tactics, including patronage networks and the mobilization of state institutions.

The reversal of the initial decision of the MB not to field a presidential candidate was a further blow to the MB's credibility among revolutionary and secular forces. At the end of March 2012, the FJP presented Kayrat al-Shater as its candidate. The MB didn't react when the Presidential Electoral Commission, with a flimsy legal justification, struck down three of the strongest presidential candidates including al-Shater, and readily presented as its second choice the president of the FJP, Muhammad al-Mursi. Meanwhile, the old regime's electoral machine started cranking again. Much of Ahmad Shafiq's success can be attributed to the restoration of the NDP's tactics, including patronage networks and

the mobilization of state institutions. Many previous NDP members and MPs mobilized their own local networks to collect votes for Shafiq, distributing money and other benefits in the same way they did in Mubarak's days.<sup>9</sup>

Again the MB decided to accept the SCAF's interferences in the transition and ignored the request of an alliance with the "revolutionary" candidates (such as the former MB members Abu al-Futuh or Hamdin Sabahi that together garnered almost 38 percent of the votes in the first round) as well as the call for a boycott after the dissolution of parliament two days before the run-off.

The MB's choice of acting alone and of being substantially compliant with the military instead of helping to build a democratic front during the roller coaster-like ups and downs of the transitional period has so far seriously undermined the possibility of making the SCAF accountable to democratic forces.

Looking at the long history of the Brotherhood, one is led to believe that the MB played the old strategy of searching for a political compromise with the regime (this time represented by the SCAF) at the expense of a truly democratic posture. Will this strategy pay off in the long run?

Looking at the long history of the Brotherhood, one is led to believe that the MB played the old strategy of searching for a political compromise with the regime at the expense of a truly democratic posture.

<sup>7</sup> *Egypt's New Parliamentary Politics*, Chatham House, Workshop Summary, March 2012, available at <http://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/papers/view/183941>

<sup>8</sup> See N. Brown, "Cairo's Judicial Coup," *Foreign Policy*, June 14, 2012, available at <http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/06/14/cairo-s-judicial-coup/bz0h>

<sup>9</sup> See R. Khazbak and M. Elmesad, "Shafiq Campaign Takes Pages from the NDP Handbook," *Egypt Independent*, June 15, 2012, available at <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/shafiq-campaign-takes-pages-ndp-handbook>.

Whatever will happen next, the Egyptian case shows that autocrats are incredibly adaptable and that the Egyptian authoritarian regime could very well survive and even flourish again after sacrificing its *Rais* and the Gamal Mubarak business cohort and reshuffling its ruling coalition.<sup>10</sup> Former NDP personalities just announced that they will form a new party, and there is a legal case pending for the dissolution of the Brotherhood and of its party that has recently been postponed to September. The “deep” authoritarian state might soon not need to compromise with the Brothers anymore. In the long run, the only way the MB could consolidate its position in the Egyptian arena is to reverse its riding-alone strategy and to fight for a fair, even if gradual, transitional process, searching for genuine alliances with democratic forces. It might still not be too late.

### About the Author

Dr Daniela Pioppi is temporary research fellow at the Department of Oriental Studies, University of Rome ‘La Sapienza’ and associate fellow at the International Affairs Institute (IAI) of Rome. Her main research interests are comparative politics and international relations of the Middle East and North Africa region. She is the co-editor of *The Arab State and Neo-Liberal Globalization. The Restructuring of State Power in the Arab World*, Reading, Garnet and Ithaca Press, 2009.

### About GMF

The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) is a non-partisan American public policy and grantmaking institution dedicated to promoting better understanding and cooperation between North America and Europe on transatlantic and global issues. GMF does this by supporting individuals and institutions working in the transatlantic sphere, by convening leaders and members of the policy and business communities, by contributing research and analysis on transatlantic topics, and by providing exchange opportunities to foster renewed commitment to the transatlantic relationship. In addition, GMF supports a number of initiatives to strengthen democracies. Founded in 1972 through a gift from Germany as a permanent memorial to Marshall Plan assistance, GMF maintains a strong presence on both sides of the Atlantic. In addition to its headquarters in Washington, DC, GMF has seven offices in Europe: Berlin, Paris, Brussels, Belgrade, Ankara, Bucharest, and Warsaw. GMF also has smaller representations in Bratislava, Turin, and Stockholm.

### About IAI

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), founded by Altiero Spinelli in 1965, does research in the fields of foreign policy, political economics, and international security. A non-profit organization, the IAI aims to disseminate knowledge through research studies, conferences, and publications. To that end, it cooperates with other research institutes, universities, and foundations in Italy and abroad and is a member of various international networks. More specifically, the main research sectors are European institutions and policies, Italian foreign policy, trends in the global economy and internationalization processes in Italy, the Mediterranean and the Middle East, defense economy and policy, and transatlantic relations. The IAI puts out an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*Affari Internazionali*), a series of research papers (*Quaderni IAI*) and an Italian foreign policy yearbook (*La Politica Estera dell'Italia*).

<sup>10</sup> See J. Stacher's excellent book, *Adaptable Autocrats: Regime Power in Egypt and Syria*, Stanford University Press, 2012.