



Power Change in Egypt – Islamist Roots

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Executive Summary

The path of the Ikhwan al-Muslimin (Muslim Brothers) to dominating the populist riots in Tahrir Square, Cairo, started in June 2007. These long preparations, and their links to Iran, were paying huge dividends in the Egyptian turmoil of early 2011. By then, the supreme leadership of the Muslim Brothers was waiting patiently for the conducive conditions to emerge. This time the Ikhwan would not be cheated out of their hold onto power in Egypt.

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ANALYSIS

The path of the Ikhwan al-Muslimin (Muslim Brothers) to dominating the populist riots in Tahrir Square, Cairo, started in June 2007.

Toward the end of that month, the Ikhwan leadership contrasted two major events: the abuse which the Ikhwan suffered in the parliamentary elections in Egypt (two rounds on June 11 and 18, 2007, respectively) and the concurrent (June 10 - 14, 2007) clear victory of the HAMAS in its military coup in the Gaza Strip.

Earlier, in Spring 2007, the Ikhwan's supreme leadership decided to participate in the forthcoming parliamentary elections in order that the organization would not be seen as an anti-democratic obstructionist force. Moreover, pre-elections polls suggested that the Ikhwan enjoyed the support of about two-thirds of the would-be voters. Hence, cognizant that Egyptian Intelligence would never permit any other party to gain majority over Mubarak's NDP (National Democratic Party: Hizb al-Dimuqratiyah al-Wataniyah), the leadership nevertheless expected to secure a sizable presence in the new parliament. Elections, therefore, were considered an instrument of expediency for furthering the Brothers' quest for establishing an Islamic Republic in Egypt.

The Brothers' platform stated that the party was participating in the elections because "the Muslim Brothers preach the path of Allah" and therefore its participation in the electoral process was intended "to fulfill Allah's commands in peaceful ways, using existing constitutional institutions and a decision determined by the ballot box". Under present conditions, democracy was to be Islam's best way to power. The 2007 platform stressed that "the rule in [Egypt] must be republican, parliamentary, constitutional and democratic in accordance with the Islamic sharia" because "the sharia ensures liberty for all". According to the platform, the Brothers would not accept the principle of the separation of mosque and state because sharia-based Islamic rule was the sole legitimate way for the realization of a true democracy.

By late June, the official results found that the Muslim Brothers won only 88 seats – 20 percent of the total 508 seats.

Also in mid-June 2007, HAMAS – itself a branch of the Egyptian Muslim Brothers – seized power in the Gaza Strip after four days of intense fighting against the Palestinian Authority (PA). The HAMAS effectively transformed its electoral success in the January 25, 2006, US-sponsored elections into a complete control through a military coup. The HAMAS decided to act after an 18-month relentless campaign by the US, Egypt, the PA and Israel to deprive the Islamists-jihadists of their electoral victory.

If HAMAS could do it, the Ikhwan's frustrated Guides concluded, so could the far better-organized and more influential Egyptian Ikhwan. The Ikhwan's decision was commonly known in Cairo. On June 23, 2007, for example, Tariq Hassan warned in the Government-owned *Al-Ahram* that the Muslim Brothers was already preparing a violent takeover of Egypt. The Ikhwan's "masked militias" were being readied "to replicate the HAMAS seizure of power in the Gaza Strip," Hassan wrote.



Indeed, the Ikhwan started comprehensive preparations to seize power by force. On the advice of senior Egyptian jihadists operating in Iran since Summer 2005 – most notably Sayf-al Adel (one of Ayman al-Zawahiri's closest confidants and strategic advisers), Shawqi al-Islambuli (the brother of Pres. Anwar as-Sadat's assassin, Khalid) and Abu-Muhammad al-Misri (a veteran of East Africa operations and a Sudan-based trainer of Egyptian jihadists) – the Ikhwan sent numerous operatives to study in Iran under the auspices of al-Quds Forces. As well, starting late-2007, Ikhwan-affiliated underground networks actively assisted HAMAS, HizbAllah, and Iranian intelligence in setting numerous espionage and sabotage networks throughout Egypt aimed to strike key government facilities and such strategic objectives as the Suez Canal, as well as smuggle weapons to HAMAS in the Gaza Strip.

One of these networks was exposed in late-2008, demonstrating the sophistication and lethality of this Iran-sponsored undertaking. However, the exposed network was not the only one then operating throughout Egypt. (On January 30, 2011, a HizbAllah-HAMAS joint special operations team unit stormed the Wadi Natrun prison north of Cairo and freed the 22 members of the captured Iran-sponsored network. Several thousand security prisoners – most of them jihadists and Ikhwani – also escaped. Most of the 22 freed operatives have already made their way to the Gaza Strip, Lebanon, and Iran.)

Petrified by the discovery of the Iran-sponsored network, Hosni Mubarak instructed Omar Suleiman, his chief of intelligence, to make the deal with Hassan al-Turabi and the jihadist leadership in Khartoum. The deal stipulated that Egypt would tacitly permit the uninterrupted supply of weapons, funds, and jihadist cadres to HAMAS in Gaza via Sinai in return for the Sudan-based jihadists not exacerbating the Ikhwani cells and networks along the Nile Valley. In early 2009, Israel bombed convoys carrying Iran-made Fajr-3 SSMs in north-eastern Sudan as a reminder to both Khartoum and Cairo that Jerusalem was both cognizant of, and dissatisfied with, their deal to help HAMAS. Nevertheless, Israel elected to not interfere with the Egyptian-sanctioned smuggling operations in order to reduce the jihadist pressure on Egyptian intelligence at the heart of Egypt.

Meanwhile, while the jihadist leadership indeed reduced the level of militant activities along the Nile Valley, the Ikhwan-affiliated underground networks intensified their preparations for an Islamist uprising in Egypt. The leaders prepared a set of electronic (PDF-format) instruction booklets and manuals under the title "How to Protest Intelligently: Important Information and Tactics". The Ikhwani networks distributed these manuals by direct e-mail chains to avoid monitoring by the security forces. The manuals were written in straight-forward language and in non-Islamist terms in order to appeal to the widest possible audience. The manuals included instructions for organizing protests, choosing their location, holding demonstrations and responding to various actions by the security forces, as well as plans for attack on key government installations (accompanied by illustrations and satellite images downloaded from Google Earth).

The Ikhwan-affiliated underground networks also organized several redundant command centers with computers and mobile-phones. Most significant was the emergency communications network made of satellite phones acquired in the Gulf States by Islamist supporters to be ready in case the mobile-phone and internet systems were brought down by the security forces, as was indeed the case. Consequently, since late January 2011, the leadership of the rioters has been able to sustain communications and effective control despite repeated and drastic efforts by the government to silence them by shutting down the entire internet and phone system. (By coincidence, Naguib Sawiris, the Egyptian chairman of and chief executive officer of Orascom Telecom Holding, which provided most of the fall-back communications systems, arrived in Pyongyang on January 21 for a meeting with Kim Jong-Il.)



In late 2010, Egypt had another cycle of parliamentary elections. (The first round was held on November 28 and the second was held on December 5, 2010.) The Ikhwan were now led by Supreme Guide Muhammad Badie, who, since his nomination in January 2010, had been taking increasingly hard-line and assertive stands on international affairs. He repeatedly declared that “Jihad is the only path to restoring the Muslim Ummah to its former glory”. On September 23, 2010, Badie stressed the Ikhwan’s principled position regarding the political process in Egypt. “The noble Quran is the constitution that sets out the laws of Islam.” The Brothers, he stated, insist that Cairo establish the Quran as “the basis for the constitution and the first source of legislation, the scales of justice in the courtrooms and one of the bases of the [school] curricula at all levels [of education] ... All clauses of the [state] constitution which Islam and its precepts do not permit must be removed,” Badie warned on the eve of the elections.

For the supreme leadership of the Ikhwan al-Musulimin, the behavior of the Egyptian Government and the intelligence services during and after the 2010 parliamentary elections constituted the turning point and provided the justification for the decision to launch the Islamic intifada against the Mubarak Government.

The spontaneous outbreak in Tunisia in mid-December 2010 of the intifada – which is also supported and sustained by the Ikhwan-affiliated Hizb-ut-Tahrir – only provided the Egyptian Islamists with the impetus to expedite their own. As well, the venomous incitement by Al-Jazeera TV radicalized and incited the region’s youth, making the Ikhwan’s need to mobilize the masses almost superfluous. Thus, it was the publication of the official results in mid-December 2010 which propelled the Ikhwan leadership to decide to activate the plans for the intifada.

According to the official results, Mubarak’s NDP won 440 of the 508 parliamentary seats. The Muslim Brothers had only ONE seat, and that would be Muhammad Ashour who had broken ranks with the Ikhwan leadership over boycotting the elections. Simply put, the Brothers were prevented from winning even a single constituency. The Muslim Brothers now formally called the elections rigged. “Egypt doesn’t have a parliament that represents the will of the people,” Ikhwan senior official Essam al-Aryan wrote. “It represents the will of the riggers and the thugs who have kidnapped the will of the nation.”

The growing political tension in Egypt starting in the autumn of 2010 attracted tremendous international and expert attention. Several foreign intelligence services sponsored thorough and large-scale opinion polls and studies of the Egyptian public (mostly in the cities). The findings of these polls and studies – which closely overlapped – provide the best explanation for the events of late January 2011.

According to these foreign polls, had the parliamentary elections been free and fair, then the “pro-Western”, liberal-progressive opposition would have won five percent of the votes. The polls which narrowed further on the identity of specific aspirant leaders found that Muhammad ElBaradei would have won only 1.5 percent of the votes (or about a third of the opposition’s votes). Many of these voters were the old communists, al-Wafd activists, and other old-time opposition activists.

Mubarak’s NDP would have won about 10 percent of the votes. The vast majority of the NDP voters are government functionaries, security personnel, and business people who benefit/profit from their relations with the Government. Simply put: The NDP’s voters had distinct personal stake – power and/or money – in the sustenance of the Mubarak Government.



The rest of the voters – that is, 85 percent of the total – would have voted for the Muslim Brothers. Significantly, the vast majority of Egypt’s youth – 52.3 percent Egyptians are under 25 – said they would have voted for the Ikhwan. This, however, was a most diverse population of voters which can best be divided into three subgroups:

- 35 percent of the total voters – mostly in the urban slums and rural areas, but also surprisingly many in the upper middle class – would have voted for the Ikhwan because they genuinely believe in the Islamic orthodoxy they preach.
- 30 percent of the total voters – mostly the bazaaries, the entire middle class, some intellectuals, and many in the military and security services – would have voted for the Ikhwan because they believe that the Ikhwan leaders are the most qualified to run the country (given the failures of the NDP).
- 20 percent of the total voters – mostly the educated westernized youth, engineers and intellectuals – would have voted for the Ikhwan because they believe that the endemic corruption of the Mubarak coterie is the greatest threat facing Egypt, and that only the Ikhwan can ruthlessly and efficiently cleanse the country. Significantly, these youth acknowledged that their personal way of life is adamantly contradictory to the Islamic ways advocated by the Ikhwan. They were, however, willing to sacrifice their personal convenience for the common good. These computer-savvy youth would play a decisive rôle in making the January 2011 intifada happen.

Indeed, westernized progressive intellectuals were noticing the trend. They began warning of the impending radicalization and chaos in Egypt unless the travesty of the parliamentary elections was quickly reversed. In early December 2010, Bahey El-Din Hassan, the director of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, wrote in the independent daily *Al-Masry Al-Youm* that a radical eruption was inevitable. “Say hello to radicalism...!” He predicted that the NDP’s “scandalous actions” would soon unleash “radical political trends” throughout Egypt. “Election fraud has consequences and the NDP could experience a political backlash,” Hassan warned. Also writing in *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, Amr El-Shoboki admonished the NDP leadership for “playing with fire” which would soon consume the country.

In the first days of the Egyptian intifada, the Ikhwani remained quietly in the background, letting the incited and enraged mob dominate *Al-Jazeera* and win over the sympathies of the West. For example, on January 23, 2011, Essam al-Aryan stated that Brothers would “support any group which has [political] demands and is seeking change in Egypt”. He asserted that the Ikhwani youth “will certainly take part in the protest slated for January 25th, however, they will be following numerous conditions, primarily adhering to peaceful methods and abstaining from any violence”. The large number of members, he added, “will join the other political groups in the scheduled Day of Rage and will respect the guidelines, calling for respect of private property in addition to abstaining from any violence”. There was no reason to unduly alarm the West with indications that the unfolding Intifada would soon be transforming into the forthcoming Islamic revolution.

The Ikhwan started asserting their central rôle on January 28, 2011. Sheikh Yussuf al-Qaradawi, the Qatar-based spiritual leader of the international Muslim Brothers movement and the world’s most prominent Sunni cleric, devoted his Friday Sermon, which sets the tone not only for the Ikhwan but most devout Sunnis worldwide, to the situation in Egypt. He called for the overthrow of Mubarak and the establishment of an Islamic State in Egypt. “President Mubarak ... I advise you to depart from Egypt ... There is no other solution to this



problem but for Mubarak to go,” al-Qaradawi declared. He accused Mubarak of turning “blind, deaf and dumb” during his decades in power. “He doesn’t live in our world. He doesn’t feel the anger and hunger of this people,” al-Qaradawi charged. “He’s detached from reality. Mubarak must give up his position and leave Egypt. There is no other solution, except for Mubarak’s departure.”

Al-Qaradawi then appealed directly to Hosni Mubarak. “On behalf of hundreds of thousands of religious clerics in Egypt and in the Muslim world I’m calling on you to leave your country. There is no staying longer, Mubarak, I advise you [to learn] the lesson of Zine El-Abidine Ben ‘Ali” and leave Egypt before disaster struck. “Go Mubarak, have mercy on this people and leave so as not to increase the destruction of Egypt,” al-Qaradawi advised. There is no escape from justice, al-Qaradawi warned Mubarak. Should you stay and attempt to hold onto power, “you will be tried before a court for the oppression”, al-Qaradawi warned. “Get up, leave Egypt, and let the people decide.”

Al-Qaradawi concluded by appealing to all Egyptians to “continue the intifada” but cautioned against unnecessary fratricidal violence and “attack on state institutions”. The intifada “must come through peaceful means,” al-Qaradawi said. He concluded by predicting that Egypt was on the verge of an Islamic Revolution, and stated that “nobody can stop history from being made.”

On the same day, the Islamists in Cairo and other cities also launched a concentrated outreach campaign to the troops, NCOs and junior officers. They were invited to participate in the mid-day prayers in the neighborhood mosques. They were offered food and drinks. The prayers ended with both sides – the civilians and the soldiers – swearing brotherhood to each other. The soldiers also vowed not to harm the people and resist all orders to use their weapons against the crowds. With that, Mubarak’s army was no more.

Starting Saturday, February 5, 2011, there was been a discernable increase in the number of the Islamists in the forefront of the rioting on Cairo’s Tahrir Square and elsewhere. The Ikhwan now appeared enmasse – with their distinct Islamist clothes, white head caps and beards. They led the crowd in shouting “Allah hu Akbar” in addition to the usual abuses of Mubarak and his family. The mob chanting was no longer devoted to merely urging Mubarak and his ilk to leave. The loudest chants were now thanks to Allah and his support, as well as vows to implement Allah’s ways; that is, establish an Islamic state. Significantly, there were no protests in the mob – even from the few Christian Copts – about the overt Islamicization of their populist intifada.

On February 2, 2011, the Muslim Brothers articulated their political demands.

They did so in a circumspect way so as to not unduly alarm the West and thus reduce the international pressure on Mubarak to leave. Badie insisted that “Mubarak resign immediately if there was to be any constructive dialogue” with the Ikhwan. Moreover, there was no substitute for “the abolition of the state of emergency, and the dissolving of both the Shura council and the parliament” because they are “both illegitimate institutions who forced their way ignoring the people’s will after forfeiting elections”. Badie noted that “the regime imposes only violence and does not understand the concept of mature and civilized dialogue where its only solution to the people’s uprising is violence”. Hence, the Brothers “welcomed dialogue with all political opposition” having “agreed on uniting in the call for peaceful political reform that would serve Egyptians as a whole”. Badie added that “the current uprising is not an Islamic Revolution but an Egyptian People’s revolution that included all Egyptians from all sects, religions and political trends”, and reiterated that the Muslim Brothers “do not seek power and have no intention in [their] agenda in nominating any of its members for presidency or being part of the interim government”.



Concurrently, however, both the jihadist leadership and the Ikhwan supreme leadership outside Egypt issued warnings about the prospects of escalations should the Ikhwan's demands were not met. Most outspoken, was Muhammad Ghanem, the Muslim Brothers' representative in London. In a January 30, 2011, interview with *Al-Alam TV* of Iran, for example, he anticipated the escalation of the intifada into a violent Islamic Revolution if the political negotiations with the regime did not deliver the opposition's demands. Under such circumstances, Ghanem warned: "I am absolutely certain that this revolution will not die, and that the next step must be one of civil disobedience. This civil disobedience will generate strife among the Egyptians. This disobedience must include halting passage through the Suez Canal, stopping the supply of petroleum and natural gas to Israel, and preparing for war with Israel." On February 5, 2011, the main pumping station of the natural gas pipeline delivering Egyptian gas to both Israel and Jordan was blown near El-Arish, northern Sinai. Egyptian gas constitutes 30 percent of the Israeli requirements for electricity production and 80 percent of Jordan's. Cairo announced that it might take two weeks before supplies are resumed. The huge flames shown on both *Al-Jazeera* and Egyptian TV ensured that the message was not lost.

On February 6, 2011, the Ikhwan's supreme leadership relented and agreed to join the rest of the opposition in talks with Vice-President Omar Suleiman. "We are starting a round of talks to know how serious they are about responding to the demands of the people," the Ikhwan's spokesman Gamal Abul Nasser said. "The demands of the people are clear. Mubarak has to step down." The mere beginning of negotiations does not guarantee success. "We will join the talks today," al-Aryan explained. "We have been invited. We will go. But our participation is conditional on giving the youth representation. If the demands of the youth are not met, we have the right to reconsider our position."

At the insistence of the Ikhwan, the meeting was started by a moment of silence to the memory of the intifada's "martyrs". The Ikhwan then demanded the formation of a national coalition transitional government to be run by "The Council of Wise Men" which is comprised of distinguished and largely apolitical Egyptians. Suleiman was only interested in assuming presidential powers for an interim period pending elections. This was not ruled out provided Mubarak left Egypt immediately. Meanwhile, Rashad al-Bayumi, the Ikhwan's second-in-command, told *Al-Hayat* that the Ikhwan would agree to join a transitional government on condition it immediately cancel the peace treaty with Israel because it "offends the Arabs' dignity and destroys the interests of Egypt and other Arab states".

On the night of February 6, 2011, there were growing indications that the intifada and the threat of escalation were far from over. In a series of bright political maneuvers, Suleiman pitted the US- and EU-supported liberal opposition movements and parties (who have zero grassroots support) against the Ikhwan and the street groups' representatives. In return for promise of a prominent rôle in the Government, this group agreed to Mubarak remaining in power until the end of his term in September 2011. Meanwhile, "the peaceful transition of power should be achieved in accordance with constitutional stipulations. ... According to the agreement, a committee of judicial experts and political figures will recommend the necessary constitutional and legislative amendments by the end of the first week of March." The consequent postponement of the elections would enable these minuscule movements and parties to attempt and build electoral support on the basis of their international support and fear-mongering of the Ikhwan.



Immediately, the military – led by Suleiman’s arch-rival, Defense Minister Muhammad Hussain Tantawi – rallied to attempt and defuse the conflict with the Ikhwan. The military high command argued that given Mubarak’s rôle as commander in the wars against Israel he must not be humiliated by the same kind of overthrow and flight which Tunisia’s Ben Ali had to endure. “We can on no account permit an Egyptian general, hero of the October War against Israel, to be humiliated, whatever the political price may be,” the high-command’s statement read. Tantawi seemed convinced, and not without reason, that the Ikhwan would be sympathetic to respecting Mubarak’s wartime rôle. Tantawi further suggested that Mubarak would not serve out his term, and instead step down in June 2011 “on grounds of ill health” and with an all-encompassing immunity to himself and his family. By that time, Mubarak would have unconditionally signed into law all the constitutional amendments to be proposed in March 2011. Reportedly, the street groups refuse to consider giving Mubarak even one day in office, while the Ikhwan were pondering the offer.

Ultimately, this is the beginning of a lengthy and a tortuous process.

The results, however, can already be discerned. With the military opposed to firing on the crowds filling Tahrir Square, the perseverance of the mob seem likely to determine the endurance of the crisis. The Ikhwan seem in no hurry to leave the scene, and the street groups were rallying behind the Ikhwan for they have the mature skillful leaders, and the Ikhwan have now emerged as the sole source of food, drinking water, medical support, and tents.

Hence, it seems clear that the supreme leadership of the Muslim Brothers will wait patiently for the conducive conditions to emerge. Unlike Mubarak’s parliamentary elections, this time the Ikhwan will not be cheated out of their effective hold onto power.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

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About the Author of this Issue

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