



THE DONKEY, THE CAMEL AND THE FACEBOOK SCAM: HOW THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD CONQUERED EGYPT AND CONNED THE WORLD

By Raymond Stock



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Nobel laureate in literature Naguib Mahfouz (1911-2006), whose biography he is writing for Farrar, Straus & Giroux in New York. His translation of Mahfouz's novel Before the Throne appeared through Anchor Books (Random House) in paperback in July 2012.

Closing a celebration on June 30, 2012 for his swearing-in as what the world hailed as Egypt's first civilian, freely elected president, Mohammed Mursi declared, "We will not look back, nor will we look beneath our feet, but we will look forward always." In that simple, seemingly pedestrian statement he summed up the strategy that has brought the Society of the Muslim Brothers from humble but ambitious beginnings in Ismailiya in 1928 to political (if not yet physical) dominance in the largest Arab nation, and most other parts of the region, today.

Mursi's unexceptional imprecation at Cairo University not "to look beneath our feet" has ages of folk wisdom embedded within it. When Egyptians want to say that a leader is foolish or uncertain of where he is headed, they compare him to a donkey—a stubborn but timorous beast that hesitates and looks down at its feet as it walks. When a leader is wise and farsighted, they liken him to a camel—a smart, confident creature that gazes steadily at the horizon as it moves imperturbably toward its goal.

For this reason, President Hosni Mubarak—whose nearly thirty years of rule were marked in many ways (though not in all ways) by caution mixed with obstinance and a fear of rapid action in any direction--was ridiculed on the street with countless jokes like the following:

King Fahd of Saudi Arabia, President (Hafez) al-Assad of Syria, and President Mubarak die and are called to meet their Maker. Our Lord is angry and tells them, "Look, I didn't like the way you three behaved down there before, so I'm sending you back to Earth in the shape of animals."

As the three dead despots gape at each other in dread, God continues, "You, Fahd, because your name means 'cheetah,' I'm sending you as a cheetah. And you, Assad, because your name means 'lion,' you're going as a lion." Then He pauses. "But you, Mubarak—you're a donkey!"

Stunned, Mubarak looks up at the Almighty and whines, “*Again?*”

All the more ironic, then, that in the case of Mubarak’s abrupt fall from power, he arguably was not the real donkey of the story. The then eighty-two year old Mubarak, in fact, though ill and out-of-touch with most daily affairs, accurately foresaw that the moment he left office—especially without arrangements to assure a smooth and stable transition that would increase the chances of preserving a more secular system—his regime would be followed by his (and our) own worst enemies: the Islamists.

Rather than a doddering tyrant stubbornly clinging to power, as so many have portrayed him, Mubarak, with all his grievous faults, and though it came too late to save him, at that moment was really like the camel, seeing clearly what lay ahead of him and his troubled country. If he hesitated, it was not from stupidity, but because he plainly perceived the abyss before him. Clearly he was not afraid for himself and his family, for he, his wife and sons trustingly remained in Egypt after President Obama made it clear to the generals on the evening of February 10, 2011 that he wanted a speedier move to a new regime, and Mubarak thus stepped down the next evening. Meanwhile, the so-called Facebook revolutionaries (whose leaders, we will soon see, were apparently not quite what most people thought they were), Western media and governments—all played a counterintuitive role. Indeed, all of these widely hailed forces of goodness and reason became the convenient vehicle on which Mohammed Mursi, the MB, and their more openly militant allies, the Salafis, have now ridden to power.

How the Muslim Brotherhood, by keeping its eyes fixed on the distant prize of state power for more than eighty years, fooled almost everyone into seeing this situation in the obverse of the truth is the real story of the “January 25th Revolution.” It is also the real joke here—probably the best ever composed in the five thousand year history of a country justly famed for its biting—if often bittersweet—political humor. And maybe even in the history of revolutions, too.

THE FACEBOOK SCAM

From the beginning of what came to be known as the January 25th Revolution, we’ve all heard that it was launched not by Islamists like the MB, but by a group of liberal social media-savvy activists, mainly of university age. For them, the immediate catalyst was allegedly the beating death of a young dissident named Khaled Said by police in an Alexandria internet café in 2010. This led to a protest movement, ostensibly to oppose police brutality, which was used to set a date to start demonstrations whose object was to bring down the Mubarak regime, on National Police Day—Tuesday, January 25, 2011. The organizers were drawn from a national anti-Mubarak coalition that had grown out of a strike of textile workers in the Delta town of al-Mahalla al-Kubra, which led to a massively suppressed (and failed) attempt at a national general strike on April 6, 2009.

The leaders and passionate members of that group, dubbed the April 6 Movement, were themselves largely drawn from an array of anti-Mubarak and anti-Israeli forces (in Egyptian politics, they are one and the same) galvanized by the bloody start of the Second Palestinian Intifada in the fall of 2000. April 6 was also in a tacit alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood, partially outlawed under Mubarak, hundreds of whose members languished in prison. April 6 strove to free the MB detainees, while pushing for a goal on which the two groups were formally agreed: cancellation of the Egypt-Israeli peace treaty signed by President Anwar al-Sadat in 1979 with then-Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, under the auspices of U.S. President Jimmy Carter. Even more than police brutality and the arbitrary arrests and torture inflicted on dissidents through the hated Emergency Law (first imposed by Gamal Abdel-Nasser, then prolonged and expanded by both Sadat and Mubarak), no other issue so united the Islamists and the generally secular Egyptian Left than their mutual virulent rejection of peace with—and the existence of—the Jewish State.

Ironically, as part of its efforts to appease its domestic critics—and because the cultural elite had grown up with hatred of Israel (and, increasingly, hatred and fear of Jews) since the days of Nasser—the Mubarak-controlled media as well as the opposition deliberately incited an air of hysteria against what it called the mass murder of children by the malevolent Zionists in the Intifada. (This peaked, of course, during the global uproar over the Muhammad al-Durra affair early in the Palestinian uprising, which in February 2012 the French Supreme Court in effect ruled a hoax meant to frame Israel for the boy’s death.) Supposed experts on Judaism delivered anti-Semitic rants on television, newspapers published letters by readers calling for the completion of Hitler’s extermination of the Jews, and a general portrayal of Israel and the Jews as the epitome of evil helped found and motivate the very

movement that would eventually bring Mubarak down, more than a decade later. Despite his close security cooperation with Israel—particularly against Hamas and Iranian infiltration of Gaza and the Sinai—which he downplayed, and his sometimes helpful role in the ever-troubled peace process (of which he boasted), to divert attention at home he used Israel as a scapegoat. Hence he didn't mind when his wife's reputed fashion consultant, an abstract painter whom he'd made Culture Minister named Farouk Hosni, forbade Egyptian artists and intellectuals to have any contact with any Israelis (including peace activists), a practice mirrored in the professional syndicates and on university campuses around the country, including even the faculty senate of the American University in Cairo.

However dishonest, self-contradictory and ultimately self-defeating his public posture on the issue, Mubarak nonetheless bravely kept the peace with Israel for thirty years, breaking forever, it seemed, the endless ruinous cycle of repeated war and defeat. A key result was that in his final years—though there was little hope of keeping pace with Egypt's booming population—the economy was growing at an impressive 5-6 percent per annum. But thanks to the arrogant ostentation of the *nouveaux riches*, the crass cronyism of Mubarak's circle and the ignorance of the young about the lean years of war, few appeared impressed by this remarkable achievement. Hence the revolution was supposed to be about the economy, stupid. But journalists did not seem to notice that some of the signs in Tahrir depicted Mubarak with a Star of David on his forehead, or hear the rumors that he was a Zionist agent, about to flee to Israel. Thus, under the surface and in the back of many minds, the revolution was also about the Jews next door.

To this day in Egypt, Jews appear largely as malignant caricatures, in pictures and in words, in the press. *Mein Kampf* and *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, whose translation into Arabic were commissioned by the Mufti of Jerusalem, a Hitler protégé and close friend of Himmler and Eichmann based in Berlin during the war (from which he broadcast Nazi propaganda to the Muslim world) were—and still are—prominently displayed and much in demand in almost every bookstore and street kiosk in Cairo. Learned (and sometimes lurid)-looking tomes and “encyclopedias” of Judaism peddling half-baked and often offensive theories filled whole shelves in upscale bookshops. Like Mohammed Mursi, most people deny that Arabs were to blame for the 9/11 attacks (though many had cheered them on the day itself). They insist that it had to be an inside job, aided if not planned by Mossad. Then they will tell you, “But if America doesn't watch out, we'll do it again.” Dwelling in a sea of lies (much of the Egyptian press is what American supermarket tabloids would look like if directed by Joseph Goebbels and Ayman al-Zawahiri), with few trustworthy sources of information, coupled with growing access to the open data (and disinformation) highway of the Internet, the conspiracy theory reigns supreme. There is a virtually all-enveloping belief that Israel and America lurk behind every problem in Egypt and the Middle East. Yet the real tragedy is not that they believe in conspiracies, because some of those do exist. The trouble is that they—and the Western media, governments and academe—typically don't believe in the real ones, especially those hatched by the Islamists to exploit this seething mass of ignorance and discontent. This is an art form the MB has mastered through many years of patient struggle and organization from the bottom up, going back most of a century.

In this circus of misinformation and delusion, it is not surprising that one of the most basic common beliefs of how the revolution began should be founded on a falsely mythic separation of secular and Islamic forces. For among the leaders of the January 25th revolt were the two co-founders of the famous Facebook page that helped to launch it, *Kullana Khaled Sa'id* (We Are All Khaled Sa'id), named after the early social media martyr from Alexandria. On March 13, 2011, the Egyptian channel ON-TV, in a program called “Egypt in a Week” (*Masr fi usbu*), hosted by Hassan Fouda and Amani al-Khayaat, featured as the evening's main guest Essam El-Erian, one of the top members of both the Freedom and Justice Party (of which Mohammed Mursi is president), and of the Muslim Brotherhood that formed it.

During his conversation with al-Khayaat, El-Erian chose to reveal something that few knew about the initiators of the Egyptian revolution. He said that both of the men who ran “We are all Khaled Sa'id” on FB, Dubai-based Google executive Wael Ghonim, and an Alexandrian activist, Abdel-Rahman Mansour, had links to the MB.

El-Erian boasted that Mansour's “political loyalty” then belonged to his organization. (He specifically used the term “*al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin*”—the Muslim Brotherhood—and not the Freedom and Justice Party, though at any rate there is no daylight between the two.) Even more startlingly, he said of Ghonim, who had seized the world's imagination with his charismatic and emotional TV appearances, his hip but shy demeanor, and his brave defiance of the regime: “He joined us for a while, as a *muhibb*,” but had since left the group.

According to Eric Trager, who has done state-of-the-art field studies of the organization before and during the uprising, in a piece on the MB's organization and recruitment methods in *Foreign Affairs*:

When an aspirant is first admitted into the Muslim Brotherhood, he becomes a *muhib*, “lover” or “follower.” During this period, which typically lasts six months but can last as long as four years, the *muhib* enters a local *usra*, or “family,” a regular meeting group where his piety and ideology are closely monitored. “At the *muhib* level, they try to educate you and improve your morals,” Islam Lotfy, 33, another leading Muslim Brotherhood youth activist, told me. “If there is no improvement, they won't take you.”

While there had been rumors of his connection to the group, this was the first and so far only known public confirmation of it—which attracted little public comment until now. Perhaps in response to a July 2, 2012 piece in Pajamas Media by Barry Rubin (in which he quotes this writer on the contents of El-Erian's interview, above), on July 10 Ghonim issued an official statement confirming that he had become an MB *muhibb* when he was aged 17, and remained one “for a year and a half.” However, he did not reveal who was in his *usra* (family) or why he left, and denied that he now belongs to the Ikhwan. (As Trager states, one must spend at least five to eight years of closely supervised indoctrination, training and personal testing, to have become a full-fledged member of the organization.)

In any case, El-Erian's disclosures utterly destroy the fiction that there was or is a clear separation between the “secular-liberal” youth cadre and the Islamists. Essentially, El-Erian is bragging none too subtly that the MB played a key role in launching the uprising.

Similarly, even the basic outline (and timeline) of how the MB got involved in the “Lotus Revolution”—an early, soon-discarded tag for what has morphed from widespread demonstrations to a fifteen-month (to date) deadly rumble—is almost entirely misunderstood. As Samuel Tadros, a veteran anti-Mubarak activist, outlined in *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, at first the MB assumed that the January 25 demonstrations would not garner much support—few such actions have in the past—and feared that they, as the regime's *bête noire*, would pay the heaviest price when the government cracked down. But sensing this time would be different, on January 23 it agreed to verbally support the protests, simply as part of the broad Egyptian opposition—while cautiously refraining from organizing on their behalf. But as Tadros explains:

After being surprised by the rapid increase in the number of protestors (which, while still small, exceeded the size of usual demonstrations), the Brotherhood began to sense an opportunity. They calculated that the regime was much weaker than it was previously thought to be—a reality that became increasingly evident with the government's internet and mobile phone ban. The next demonstration, which was scheduled for Friday 28 [January], 2011, was an ideal setting for the Brotherhood to show its power. After Friday prayers, the movement began mobilizing its members, and, by using each mosque as a launching site for a demonstration, the Brotherhood was able to pour an enormous amount of people onto the streets. The results were spectacular. In a few hours the police force was being hammered. Contrary to earlier exaggerated estimations of the strength of the Egyptian police, the police force in Cairo was a mere 17,000 strong. Under siege from every corner, the moment of collapse took place when 99 police stations across the country were attacked. The only solution for the regime was to call in the army.

In other words, the MB endorsed the uprising before it began, not afterward—and clearly was in communication with its organizers then as well. And thereafter, rather than playing only a minor role, as most accounts claim, it was in fact the MB, more than any other group, that really brought the crowds into Tahrir and elsewhere. The Muslim Brotherhood was not a sheepish junior partner and Johnny-come-lately, as the media and experts portrayed it, but the most important player as of the second day of demonstrations, right through the end—and beyond.

What explains their enormous success? Partly it was another crucial blunder by Mubarak's regime, when it tried to complete with the Islamists in religion. During the 1980s and '90s, alarmed by the appeal of the Islamist message, for the first time in modern Egypt, thanks to state policy, religion became the principle medium of political discourse. Due to this strategy of attempted cooptation, which may have bought it a certain amount of time, the formerly secular media as well as the mosques were dominated by state-approved clerics. Yet it was a game in the

long term that the regime could only lose; due to its corruption, nobody believed in its piety, any more than in its sincere dislike of Israel (though the latter at least had a basis in fact). In neither of these areas could the government hope to match the MB. By sticking to founder Hasan al-Banna's strategy of *al-Da'wa*, or building new civil and model state institutions through education, charity and political activism from the ground up on an Islamist basis, the Ikhwan successfully penetrated every major and minor public agency, from the student and professional unions to the vast bureaucracy (the oldest in the world), to the police and even the military. Rather than co-opting the MB, the MB had subverted the state's own machinery, until the entire apparatus fell almost effortlessly into its hands last year.

That co-optation, at least to some degree, also included the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF). This is the permanent group of senior military commanders that deposed Mubarak, in the end using the crowds on the streets as cover for their own desire to nix his plan to place his non-military son Gamal in the presidency after the elections then scheduled for September 2011. (Yet given their closeness to Mubarak—including, it is said, in his business affairs—they waited to take decisive action until pushed by President Obama.) According to my own sources, the majority of the officer corps, including the staff around SCAF's senior member, Mubarak's twenty-year defense minister, Field Marshall Mohammed Hussein Tantawi, lean toward or belong to the MB—though they were careful not to flaunt it under Mubarak. Hence it was no surprise that the SCAF quickly freed numerous Islamists held in prison, and permitted—or invited—the MB's spiritual leader, Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, exiled to Qatar for the past forty years, to address the great celebration of the victorious revolution on the first Friday after Mubarak's resignation. Al-Qaradawi—whose program on al-Jazeera has made him the most popular preacher in the Islamic world—has called on the Muslims to “chastise” the Jews, as Hitler had before them in the Holocaust—drew the largest crowd then seen in Tahrir Square. Rather than focusing on Egypt and its promised new democracy, he used the occasion to urge the believers to liberate Gaza and Jerusalem through jihad. Tellingly, Wael Ghonim—the darling of the international community as the face of the revolution—also tried to address the crowd, but was refused. (He later tweeted his admiration of Shaykh al-Qaradawi.) That day it became obvious who really ran the revolution—but again, those who should have caught let it pass or worse, denied it.

The MB's reach into every aspect of life is due not only to the enormous amount of money donated by wealthy patrons in the Gulf and the profits of its far-flung business empire, but because, since antiquity, Egypt has always been an extremely pious country. Herodotus, the “Father of History,” thought it the most devoutly—if not fanatically—religious nation in the world, a trait frequently observed by countless travelers to the Nile Valley since. Thus when the brief flame of secular Arab nationalism died with its defeated hero, Gamal Abdel-Nasser, in 1970, his successor, Anwar al-Sadat, sought to revive the spirit of the Islamic faith to beat the Jewish state whose previous victories many Egyptians attributed to its belief in God (and their own defeats to their neglect of Islam). He also used the MB as shock troops against the Nasserist Left that continued to threaten his rule. In contrast, Mubarak, wounded in the hand as Sadat was murdered next to him in the reviewing stand on October 6, 1981, saw how the Islamist furies his boss had freed from the prisons where Nasser had thrown them had shown their gratitude by killing him as an apostate for making peace with Israel. Determined not to meet the same fate, he drove the Islamists back deep underground. When the MB remained the only functional opposition group by the end of his rule, critics said he had simply wiped out the secular alternatives in order to use the MB as a boogie man to retain Western aid. But in fact it meant that the Brotherhood was the one group that was so well-organized and widespread that he could never completely destroy it. Convinced that he was only trying to save himself, and that the MB had little chance of achieving an electoral majority, neither President Obama nor the protesters were willing to grant him any more time. None have yet admitted what this haste has wrought.

What that haste has wrought, in addition to an Islamist triumph—first of the MB and the even more blatantly militant Salafis in parliamentary elections in the fall of 2011, and the presidency last month—was needless chaos. Though street crime was rising in Mubarak's final days, the collapse of the police after his fall has led to skyrocketing theft, murder and mayhem, and an alarming rise in attacks as well as threats against the Coptic Christian minority, many of whom have fled abroad in fear. Meanwhile, the ongoing disorder and frequent bloody demonstrations have caused a massive loss of tourism and foreign investment, and rapidly dwindling hard currency reserves. None of this (especially the rise of the Islamists, whom we were assured were both harmless and unpopular) was predicted when the revolt first began, and many continue to ignore or minimize it now. But eighteen months later, none of it is going away.

CAN DEMOCRACY MEAN CATASTROPHE?

Still some would ask, is Mursi's victory really a catastrophe? Isn't he, after all, some sort of solution? What should we fear from the birth of what's billed as a vibrant new democracy on the banks of the Nile?

Maybe it's this: On June 24, a pregnant young woman in the formerly cosmopolitan, now culturally conservative (under MB influence) Mediterranean town of Alexandria refuses to vote for Mursi. Enraged at her rebellion, her husband, a Mursi supporter, beats her into a coma. Hours later, she dies in hospital of her injuries. That afternoon, Mursi had been declared the winner of the election, promising to be president "for all Egyptians." (Since then, supposedly unofficial morality police reportedly have killed two musicians in Sharqeya Province for the sin of, well, being musicians, as well as a young man out in Suez City with a woman whose relationship to him he failed to explain to their satisfaction.)

Or this: in an echo of Shaykh al-Qaradawi's speech in Tahrir, at an MB-sponsored rally to launch Mursi's presidential campaign in Cairo on May 7, 2012 a radical cleric, Shaykh Safwat Higazi, declares that Mursi will lead the reestablishment of the caliphate of "The United Arab States," with Jerusalem as its capital. (Of course, after the brief reign of the Prophet Muhammad's first successor, Abu Bakr, no such purely Arab caliphate has ever existed, and Jerusalem has never been the capital of any state but of both ancient and modern Israel.) Higazi also calls for jihad, and for Jews all over the world "to wake up" to face their coming defeat at the hands of millions of Muslim martyrs. Mursi and other top MB officials smile and clap approvingly at a table next to the podium. And less than a week after Mursi becomes president, the MB's Supreme Guide, Mohamed Badie, told a crowd in Cairo that it was the duty of every Muslim to take part in the jihad against Israel, using the same language as al-Qa'ida—as pointed out by Raymond Ibrahim of The Middle East Forum. Yet an astounding number of commentators think it credible that Mursi's pledge to uphold all of Egypt's international agreements and commitments also refers to the Egypt-Israel treaty, though he fails to mention it by name.

And most probably, it also means this: In his first Friday speech in Tahrir Square after the election, Mursi pledges to a wildly cheering crowd that he will work to free Shaykh Omar Abdel-Rahman. Known as the "the Blind Sheikh," Abdel-Rahman is now serving a life sentence in North Carolina for plotting to blow up the World Trade Center, the U.N. building, and numerous other major sites in New York in the 1990s. His fatwas justified the assassination of Mursi's predecessor, President Anwar al-Sadat in 1981 and anti-Islamist activist Farag Foda in 1992, the sectarian civil war that culminated in the massacre of 58 foreign tourists in Luxor in 1997, and the attempted murder of Egyptian Nobel laureate in literature Naguib Mahfouz in 1994—not to mention the September 11, 2001 terror attacks in the U.S.

While there has been bi-partisan outrage in Congress at this pledge, so far the Administration's response has been limp and self-contradictory. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton simply said that Abdel-Rahman's release "is not happening," while President Obama has said nothing. Meanwhile, Hani Abdel-Nour, a representative of the Gama'a al-Islamiya—the "Islamic Group" that targeted tourists at Abdel-Rahman's command in the 1990s—parts of which have renounced violence (but still work toward an Islamist state by legal means)—was granted a visa come to Washington to press the case for the Blind Sheikh's "humanitarian" release. (He is old and suffers from diabetes.) As a member of the GI, Abdel-Nour had previously been banned from entering the U.S. Yet if the Administration was sure from the start there would be no deal to free Abdel-Rahman, then why was he allowed into the U.S. in the first place.

This raises the question, is Mursi himself, as a major MB official, on a blacklist to visit America? Apparently, he is on the reverse sort of list at home. A July 5, 2012 report from the opposition newspaper, *al-Dustur al-Asli* says that he is still on a no-fly list in Egypt imposed during the Mubarak era on top leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood. "It goes without saying," the still-unverified report concludes, "that with all the conferences and trips that that the new Egyptian president attends, that he will not be surprised before he boards the planes that he is banned from travel. Yet he is the first president to be handed his exalted position while he is officially forbidden to go abroad." Whether or not he has ever been banned from leaving Egypt, his first foreign trip, on July 11, was to Saudi Arabia, whose King Abdullah had tried to prevent his rise, while other Saudis have subsidized the MB.

And regardless of any past blacklisting in the U.S., on July 8, came a report that the American head of state has invited his Egyptian counterpart to meet him at summer's end. According to *The Jerusalem Post*, quoting Mursi's

aide Yasser Ali, after a visit to Mursi in Cairo by William Burns, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State, “President Obama extended an invitation to President Mursi to visit the United States when he attends the UN General Assembly in September.”

Once again, a major irony, Mursi is the successor to the man who had thrown him and his fellow MB leaders into prison when the demonstrations began in January 2011—America’s former (and hastily dumped) “friend,” now sentenced to life in prison himself for having failed to stop the killing of demonstrators against his rule. His deposed predecessor, though he liked to remind his countrymen of how he warned this or that American president against various misadventures, never plotted to destroy our country or way of life. Yet that is just what the Muslim Brotherhood is sworn to do, and has been from its origins. And it sees the “Arab Spring”—which it played a much greater role in organizing as well as inspiring than is commonly believed—as its best opportunity to work toward that lofty purpose to date.

In October 2010, an Egyptian veterinarian and high MB official named Mohammed Badie, declared that the Muslim Brotherhood is committed to the global jihad against America and Israel, and—for the first time—to revolution against the Mubarak regime. (Previously it always claimed to work for change peacefully, within the system.) Six months later, Badie became the MB’s *Murshid*, or Supreme Guide, the authoritative leader of the largest and best organized opposition group in Egypt and the Middle East as a whole. Yet at the time, Badie’s statement—which he made in Arabic—went almost entirely unremarked in the foreign media. Only one person—Tel Aviv based Barry Rubin—noted it in English when he made it. Yet it would have tremendous importance when the MB had to choose whether or not to join the mass protests against Mubarak just three months later.

But already *The Egypt Independent* says that he is hedging on his promise to name a cabinet representative of all the parties that took part in the race. There have been repeated reports that he will name Mohammed ElBaradei, former chief of the International Atomic Energy Agency (and an erstwhile MB ally) as prime minister to unify all factions behind him, but ElBaradei has denied being approached on this. (People close to him have suggested that the president is claiming to have asked him to serve, so that they can claim they gave him a chance but he refused—but this cannot be confirmed.) There have even been reports that novelist and political columnist Alaa al-Aswani, an outspoken secularist who, like many who feared a return of the *ancien regime* with Ahmed Shafiq (Mubarak’s last prime minister, beaten by the MB candidate in the run-off), has become a major booster for Mursi, will be appointed as culture minister. (After al-Aswani rushed to greet Mursi personally at Mubarak’s old office, many of his former admirers accused him of selling out to the very Islamists he had previously hammered in his columns.) All this remains speculation for now.

And there is every reason to expect he will try to portray himself as the right man for all reasons. There is an almost universal desire to see him as the leader who will fulfill the dream of the January 25th Revolution—to bring liberal democracy to Egypt in the wake of the overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak.

Each has their own impulse to read Mursi’s “destiny on his forehead,” to paraphrase another Egyptian expression. Even those worried that he doesn’t mean all the nice things he says console themselves that if goes too far in any direction, the assumedly jealous and insecure generals of the SCAF will hold him back. Others fear that the nascent democracy will be nixed by the nervous generals, oblivious to the dangers of an extremist government in control of the largest Arab nation, which straddles the Suez Canal. Meanwhile, a Muslim Brotherhood-dominated government has been elected in Tunisia (where media censorship and outrages by Salafis are now common), another seems set to succeed the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria (should it finally fall) as well, while an MB offshoot has won the recent legislative elections in traditionally moderate and stable Morocco. (Only in Libya, where the Ikhwan was expected to win the recent elections for parliament, have they experienced a notable setback—but even there they lost to a coalition led by a “moderate” Islamist.)

For those who have hope that Mursi will live up to his liberal promises, reality offers reason only to despair. For Mursi as candidate, and the MB as his organization, have each repeatedly lied about they stand for, and what they want to do. Their record of dishonesty is so indisputable that it shocks the ear to hear the voices that still trust them.

After Mubarak’s fall, the MB, assuring the public that it did not seek state power, announced it that would seek only one third of the seats in the new parliament. Then that changed to half the seats, and finally to all of them. And from the start, the MB foreswore running a candidate for president—then put forward Kheirat al-Shater, a charismatic,

extremely wealthy businessman in its top leadership, to succeed Mubarak. But with al-Shater ruled out on a legal technicality, the stodgy, uninspiring Mursi—who for many years had been the hardline ideological enforcer inside the MB—stepped in. In the first round, he spoke out vehemently for the traditional MB program, telling one crowd that “the Qur’an is our constitution,” that the law of the land must be shari`a, and that to die in jihad for the sake of God was the highest aspiration. He opposed allowing either a Christian or a woman to become president, for shari`a would not let either rule over Muslims. But when he took a quarter of the votes (narrowly edging out Shafiq and a so-called “moderate” Islamist competitor, Ahmed Aboul-Futouh, whom he had drummed out of the MB), he dropped this harsh rhetoric in the second round. And so he beat Shafiq—the genuinely moderate, highly-successful manager of the air transportation sector that briefly had been Mubarak’s last prime minister during the eighteen-day uprising.

On June 14, just two days before the second round, the Supreme Constitutional Court, ruled that one third of the seats in the MB-and-Salafi dominated parliament had been illegally contested, and that parliament should be dissolved. At the time, to again reassure voters that he was a man of law and did not seek a confrontation with the military, Mursi said that he accepted the decision—while the MB officially said it would not. When the SCAF formerly ordered the dissolution of parliament and assumed its legislative powers, the issue went to the Higher Administrative Court for a ruling that Mursi hoped would allow a quick special election to fill the one-third of illegitimate seats, while preserving the Islamist majority of the original body.

But then on Sunday, July 8, Mursi took virtually everyone by surprise by officially recalling the entire old parliament, perhaps as early as the next day, where he said it would meet until a new body could be elected in two months time. Evidently he would rather not wait for a ruling that might not have delivered what he wanted, and did not worry that the SCAF might crack down heavily for violating the order of the highest court in the land and challenging its own authority so brazenly. Perhaps, as they seem to have maintained during the entire transition until the Court’s fateful finding against parliament, they even have worked out a deal with the military. For example, they may have agreed not to pursue court cases against the SCAF officials with tight ties to Mubarak, and to drop their demand that the military’s budget come under parliamentary oversight for the first time in decades, which have been the main issues between them during the transition. Or perhaps Mursi was emboldened by the emphatic letter of support for the economy of the new democratic Egypt that he received earlier that very day from President Obama during the visit by William Burns, which also allegedly extended his invitation to the U.S. With such legitimacy so rapidly conferred by the world’s only superpower, Mursi may feel he now has the international strategic depth he needs to take on the generals even sooner than anticipated. We will shortly see if he judged that right, or acted prematurely.

Yet one fears that the military will be unwilling, no matter what the provocation, to depose a man they so recently accepted as the President of the Republic, and who (reluctantly) agreed to take the oath office in the Supreme Constitutional Court, whose legitimacy he hailed (now retracted, as it were), as they demanded. Of course, he also insisted upon taking it before his wildly cheering followers in Tahrir a day earlier, and to the cashiered parliamentarians an hour or two later—standing at the same podium from which Obama had addressed the Muslim world—an undefined new nation that has had no prior existence in American diplomatic relations. It was there, when Obama broke protocol and insulted Mubarak by asking for the MB leadership to attend, that one could say the January 25th Revolution really began. (Still others would trace to it George W. Bush’s Freedom Agenda and the 2003 war in Iraq—when the subsequent drive for democracy in Egypt first raised real hope for a needed change.)

Though renouncing violence at home, the MB has endorsed terrorism abroad, and has been preparing for possible civil war throughout its existence. The SCAF may have more military power, but Mursi evidently believes he has the White House and perhaps the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia—which initially opposed him—behind him. The Ikhwan’s praise and defense of al-Qa’ida and its mourning for Osama bin Laden are obviously more worrying to Riyadh than to Washington. But they both seem to think—or hope—that they can somehow guide or even buy the MB. While Mursi’s move to recall parliament has split public opinion, this may matter little if he is able to use his swelling strategic depth abroad to isolate the generals internationally. The U.S. Administration could justify backing him as offering aid to democracy against military dictatorship, but if Mursi wins he will in fact be proving that there is no law in Egypt—and there can be democracy without the rule of law. Moreover, it may well be done against the will of the majority: both the MB and the Islamists lost nearly half their total popular support after their bizarre performance in parliament before it was dissolved. Even the legal body to which the (illegally) reconvened parliament voted to refer it in its brief session on July 10—the Court of Cassation—has no authority over the Supreme Constitutional Court. (The SCAF only carried out the latter’s order—and though the Court’s members

were appointed by Mubarak, they have always been seen as notably independent.) The Court of Cassation, however, does have a record of supporting at least one important pro-Islamist decision—when, in 1996, it upheld a lower court’s finding that Prof. Nasr Hamid Abu Zeid of Cairo University was an apostate for his post-modernist literary analysis of the Qur’an. (Thus ordered to divorce his wife, Ibtihal Yunis—a fellow Cairo University professor—on the grounds that a Muslim woman cannot be married to an unbeliever, the couple fled to Europe for their lives.) Of course, the army can still win this round, but unless President Obama changes his apparent position in favor of Mursi and the MB, they are apt to lose the struggle in the end.

Though the Brotherhood announced the cancellation of Mursi’s membership immediately after this election, given his lifetime investment in their cause and his (and their) proven economy with the truth, there is little doubt that the new president will remain loyal to its principles and its goals. Some have argued that he now has the chance to build an independent base as a pragmatic, centrist politician. They believe that the experience of working with so many different factions, from secularists to Salafis, in the presidency will change him. But MB itself has always sought to build coalitions on the Left and the Right. For much of the 1980s and ‘90s it was in formal alliance with the Wafd, its traditional enemies before the 1952 Free Officers’ coup that brought Gamal Abdel-Nasser to power, which they tried to revive last year. They were, as we have seen, also in a common front with the April 6 Movement against Mubarak—then campaigned for the Constitutional amendments drafted by an Islamist-dominated body of experts appointed by the SCAF in another early sign of where their ideological commitments lie, which the liberals opposed. And, of course, they won in a landslide. And the MB continued to abstain from anti-SCAF demonstrations that their erstwhile secular allies launched over the last year and a half.

All these lessons notwithstanding, many of the most militantly anti-Islamist liberals sided with the Brotherhood against Shafiq in the presidential race, and are now backing Mursi against the generals. Wael Ghonim, who in November 2011 promised there was “nothing to fear” from an Islamist state, said, unsurprisingly, that he voted for Mursi, tweeting after he won, “The revolution continues.” And the April 6 Movement continues to boost him. With the exception of some liberals who are appalled at Mursi’s unconstitutional defiance of the judiciary, neither they nor the White House have learned from what happened to the secular opposition in Iran, when it formed an alliance with the clerics against the Shah in 1978 and ’79. That revolution likewise won the early blessing of a U.S. administration, which hailed it as moderate and its leader, the Ayotollah Ruhollah Khomeini, as a pragmatic nationalist, continuing to offer it aid and cooperation. Within a year the liberals were all either dead, in prison or in exile, and the “moderate” Islamists had seized the American embassy in Tehran.

THE DONKEY’S RETURN

The stubborn failure to heed the actual declarations by the Islamists of what they want to do—to impose shari’a, wage jihad against the West and Muslims they hold to be lax, restore the Caliphate and eventually dominate the earth—brings to mind a story about the character Goha, the perpetual “wise fool” of Middle Eastern folklore. Sometimes he is more foolish than wise:

One day Goha borrows his neighbors’ donkey to do his errands—during which he grows fond of the useful beast, and decides to keep it for himself. When he comes home that night, he sneaks the donkey into his barn. He then tells the neighbors that it had run away from him during the day, and could not be found. After much wailing and lamenting, the grief-stricken neighbors finally retire for the night, and Goha goes to his own bed as well.

Suddenly, in the middle of the night, the neighbors are roused from sleep by the sound of their donkey braying in Goha’s barn. Crying with relief, they rush to Goha’s house and pound excitedly at his door.

“Goha! Wake up!” they shout with joy. “Our precious donkey has returned!”

“Go back to bed!” Goha tells them. “There’s no donkey here!” Yet the neighbors insist, “But we can hear him, Goha! Come, let’s look in your barn!”

“What?” Goha answers. “You mean you believe the donkey—and you don’t believe me?”

On January 30, 1933, after a decade of Nazi electoral struggle, Reich President Paul von Hindenburg appointed Adolf Hitler, a vicious ideologue with a gift for insincere diplomacy, as Chancellor of Germany in a coalition cabinet

of “national concentration.” “Just like a fairy tale,” Goebbels, soon to be his propaganda minister, wrote in his diary. As noted by Ian Kershaw in *Hitler: A Biography*, few would have believed it possible but a year earlier. Hitler quickly set out to eliminate his Leftist enemies, his Rightist rivals, and—with slowly gathering lethality—the Jews. So skillfully did he play the moderate that, when he unleashed his first orgy of violence that February he was able to blame undisciplined underlings for the bloodshed. That is what he continued to do right through *Reichskristallnacht* in November 1938, the first great pogrom against Germany’s Jews, and even in the Holocaust, which some historians blame more on his subordinates than on the Fuehrer himself. Yet he had made his intentions clear in numerous speeches over the years, and even in the pages of *Mein Kampf* as well. Tragically, few wished to listen.

The Muslim Brotherhood, with an implacably anti-Western, anti-secular, anti-Christian, anti-Semitic, anti-female, Muslim-supremacist ideology, plus organization and tactics directly influenced by the Nazis—who armed and financed it in the 1940s—has waited even longer for this moment. The MB seems finally in a position to take the prize of total state power, toward which it has been plodding through the sands of the political wilderness since 1928, its eyes always fixed on that longed-for horizon. Yet most of the world still sees its leaders not as they are, but as they wish them to be: moderate, liberal, interested more in economic well-being than holy war, at least for the sake of being reelected next time. But we have no evidence at all at that they have changed so far, no reason to think that they will change later, nor that there will be a chance to vote them out in future. The MB, like Hamas, its Palestinian branch (which won elections in 2006, then grabbed power in a coup in 2007, and has not let go since), is not apt to yield control peacefully. Like Hamas, they deserve not to be bribed with aid that they will only use against us, but to be offered help only if they loudly and repeatedly renounce—in Arabic, the only language that counts to their constituents—their most deep-seated beliefs and objectives. Yet even that would likely prove illusory: bitter experience with Hamas, Hezbollah, the Taliban and other Islamist movements, shows that their ideology is far more important to them than their people’s security and prosperity. Still, from officials, experts and pundits who should know better, despite some pro forma appeals for vigilance, we are mostly asked just to wait—until it could be too late.

We now have a choice: to hear the braying of Goha’s borrowed donkey—or to be the donkey on which the MB and its fellow travelers ride to ultimate power in Egypt, and the Middle East (which their dreams stretch far beyond, past our own horizon). With Mohammed Mursi as president of our largest Arab ally, there may remain little time left for us to decide.

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