


Mirages of the Anxious Brotherhood¹

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Egypt has squandered its constitutional moment and the Muslim Brotherhood has been shown up as a group eager to accumulate power even at the risk of splitting the country down the middle. If a constitution's quality is gauged according to its capacity to create a consensus, respect diversity and make coexistence easier, it is evident that the recently-adopted one in Egypt is highly deficient and polarising, with the potential to give rise to more problems than it resolves. The methods employed in its drafting and approval deprive Egypt of the hope of acquiring political stability and of allowing its economy to take off in the short and medium terms.



From a short-term point of view, the first six months of the presidency of Mohammed Morsi, the candidate presented by the Freedom and Justice Party –the Muslim Brothers' political wing–, suggest that the Brotherhood has won all the political battles it has engaged in over the past 22 months. It could be argued that it has been able to consolidate its position as the leading political force of the post-Mubarak era, winning the legislative elections at the beginning of 2012 and then the presidential elections, having dislodged the military from power and drafted a constitution to its own liking and subsequently having it approved in a referendum.

Despite the Muslim Brotherhood's apparent successes, its leaders rush to acquire and accumulate power has led them to resort to authoritarian means, abruptly pushing aside all those who think differently. This has generated widespread rejection and set against them the rest of non-Islamist political forces, several state institutions, the religious authorities of Al Azhar and the Coptic Churches, in addition to the non-governmental media. Furthermore, several presidential advisors and other high profile personalities have resigned in protest at decisions made by Morsi and his hierarchical superiors within the Brotherhood.

Over their more than 80 years in existence, the Muslim Brotherhood had been patient, almost always acting cautiously and in semi-clandestine ways in order to gain power. However, over the past few weeks their leaders have started to show signs of nervousness and authoritarian tendencies. After having secured executive and legislative power, Morsi's decree of 22 November placed presidential decrees and decisions 'temporarily' above the law, among other measures more typical of an authoritarian regime. This led to extreme social polarisation between the Brotherhood's followers and some of their Salafi allies, on the one hand, and the non-religious, liberals, leftists, Christians and non-Islamist Muslims, on the other.

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The Muslim Brotherhood's current leaders appear to view Egypt as the 'booty' to which they are entitled following the previous regime's overthrow. Hence, they are ignoring not only the rich diversity of Egyptian society but the profound changes that brought down the wall of fear that sustained Mubarak in power. The Muslim Brotherhood has focused its efforts on accumulating power and subjecting the state's institutions and structures to their will. Many Egyptians complain that similar efforts are not being made to resolve the serious socioeconomic problems that led to the revolt against the Mubarak regime at the beginning of 2011.

One thing the Islamists have proved since they came to power is their scant managerial ability and their frequently erratic decision-making process. Many Egyptians attribute the government's disfunctionality to the fact that many decisions announced by Morsi are dictated by the *murshed* (the Muslim Brotherhood's political and spiritual guide), Mohammed Badie, and his number two –the Brotherhood's first choice for the country's Presidency–, Khairat al Shater.

Morsi held a referendum on the Constitution as though its approval were the subject of a competitive election, rather than an attempt to create a legitimate and long-term consensus framework for society. Hence, many augur that a Constitution drawn up by a constitutional assembly completely dominated by Islamists –after the withdrawal of those members who were not of the same conviction– is likely to have a short and turbulent life. The supposed success of the Muslim Brotherhood is, in fact, proof of their steady weakening and of the general disenchantment with their way of governing.

Even though the constitutional referendum was logistically disastrous, most judges refused to supervise it, there were no international observers, it was held on two separate days with a week in between and there were accusations of widespread irregularities committed by the Islamists, only one third of the electors voted on 15 and 22 December. To counter the 'No' promoted by the entire opposition, the Muslim Brotherhood mobilised their supporters to vote 'Yes' but only managed to obtain the backing of 20% of the Egyptian electorate.

In a country that is moving towards democracy following an antiauthoritarian revolt, such a result is a complete failure. Blood was spilt on Egypt's streets following the Constitution's ratification and it has not gone unnoticed that there were violent clashes in several mosques between devout anti-Brotherhood Muslims and imams who were using mosques to promote a 'Yes' vote for the Islamist Constitution.

To all appearances, the new Constitution guarantees several rights. The problem is that they are all subject to a specific interpretation of the *Sharia* (Islamic law) which, in its more restrictive versions, can be used to thwart the exercise of those rights, be they individual, civil or economic. The Constitution also has contradictions and loopholes that might be used to impose a fundamentalist reading of the *Sharia*, especially if the Muslim Brotherhood and its Salafi partners gain control of Al Azhar, the foremost Sunni religious authority.

The battle over the Egyptian Constitution has occurred at a time when the government is facing serious liquidity problems, with a high public deficit, a sharp drop in revenue and increased inflation. Foreign currency reserves are estimated to account for less than three months of imports, a worrying problem in a country like Egypt that has an enormous food deficit. Furthermore, the government has suspended its negotiations with the IMF for a



US\$4.8 billion loan with which to relieve its public accounts and attract foreign investment. The loan would imply an increase in tax revenues and the elimination of subsidies, with public opinion predictably turning against the government and possibly an outbreak of civil disobedience.

The next jolt to hit Egypt will be the legislative elections scheduled for spring. Considering the 'booty' mindset of the Muslim Brotherhood's leaders, they are likely to do all they can to hold on to power, even if the electorate decides to penalise them. Any attempt to replicate Mubarak's repressive authoritarianism will only aggravate the crisis engulfing the country. The opposition political forces (who are to a significant extent responsible for the current situation, having failed to present a unified front in successive elections) now have the opportunity to prove that they have learnt from their mistakes and that they can unite and engage with the majority of Egyptians who do not vote for the Islamists.

On 25 January many Egyptians will be commemorating the second anniversary of the revolt that brought down the Mubarak dictatorship. If the Muslim Brothers' grass-roots and youth supporters fail to correct their leaders' authoritarian drift, the revolutionaries' rage may well be directed at the Brotherhood. Should this occur, the Armed Forces might have no choice but to back the protesters, as they did two years ago.