



BULLETIN

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Crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood and the Presidential Election in Egypt

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Egypt will hold a presidential election on 26 and 27 May, almost a year since an extensive policy of repressing the opposition, including the Muslim Brotherhood, its strongest representative, was imposed. This policy exceeds the level of anti-opposition repressions in other authoritarian countries such as Russia or Algeria, and confirms Egypt's return to an autocratic system of government. The future president of Egypt, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, will either choose a policy of liquidating the Brotherhood, or start limited dialogue with its elements. In the former case, the EU, together with the U.S., should impose substantial sanctions, such as an arms embargo and a cessation of financial aid, on Egypt.

Crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood. In the post-Mubarak era the military authorities began their policy of repressing the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) on a large scale on 3 July 2013, when General, later Field Marshal Sisi, now the only presidential candidate apart from Hamdeen Sabbahi and the favourite to win, deposed the MB-backed but democratically elected president Mohammad Morsi. The move was supported by a large part of society who opposed Morsi's inept rule. The new interim government arrested top MB members and Morsi himself. In August 2013, the army stormed two camps of MB supporters in Cairo. On 14 August, in front of the Rabaa' al-Adawiyya mosque, more than 1,000 people died in clashes in a matter of hours. The number of victims matches that in Tiananmen Square in June 1989. The military-imposed government froze more than a thousand bank accounts of organisations supporting the MB, closed more than a hundred MB-run schools, seized their mosques, and shut their media outlets. Journalists who reported on these policies were jailed, including four Al Jazeera reporters, whose trial is still ongoing.

The MB was designated a terrorist organisation in December 2013, only six months after they officially registered as an NGO. They had been delegalised in 1954, and it was not until 2011 that their political wing, the Freedom and Justice Party, began activity as a legal political party. Charity, educational and medical MB services were made illegal. A terrorist attack in Mansoura served as pretext for the December designation, even though the organisation condemned it outright and there was no evidence for the MB's involvement in it. The decision is part of a policy of identifying terrorist activity of different jihadi groups such as Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis with the Muslim Brotherhood, although such correlation has not been proved. However, the delegalisation of the MB allows the authorities to prosecute MB members on the basis of anti-terrorism law (Articles 86 and 99 of the Penal Code), under which terrorism carries a penalty of between five years imprisonment and capital punishment.

The policy of MB repression coincides with the drafting of the new anti-terrorism law. It stipulates that membership of or aiding an organisation that harms "national unity" or "social peace" is an act of terrorism. According to official figures, there are now 16,000 MB supporters in prisons, arrested since July 2013, but the real number may exceed 20,000. Furthermore, in March and April 2014, more than 1,200 MB supporters and members were sentenced to death in a controversial trial that lacked credibility and failed to meet international standards.

The MB and the Presidential Election. Designating the MB as a terrorist organisation does not put an end to its political activities. Despite arrests of its members and the dismantling of its central organisational structures, the MB continues to operate, and its Freedom and Justice party, constitutes the most important element of the National Alliance to Support Legitimacy (NASL, also known as the Anti-Coup Alliance), made up of Islamist political parties opposing the removal of President Morsi. The NASL decided to boycott the imminent presidential election, which it

deems a “farce.” In response, the two candidates, Sisi and Sabbahi, have unequivocally stressed their lack of interest in seeking political rapprochement with the Islamists. Nonetheless, certain differences in their approach have materialised, as Sisi has called for a total liquidation of the MB, while Sabbahi hopes to curry favour with the rank and file members of the NASL by declaring his support for the release of political detainees and granting the Islamists the right to peaceful protest.

The main weapons in the MB and NASL arsenal for challenging the Egyptian political order are street demonstrations, held every Friday after prayers, and protests on the campuses of Cairo universities. They are aimed at maintaining the political mobilisation of the Islamist alliance’s supporters around their rejection of the unconstitutional character of the interim president and the government, and the illegality of this year’s presidential election. Additionally, in their official pronouncements, some Islamists attempt to put forward an offer of political cooperation towards the left-liberal political milieu which could, in theory, support the MB and NASL’s demands for political pluralism and the army’s return to barracks.

The repression aimed at the MB and the lack of immediate success of the street demonstrations have led to an increase in internal divisions in the movement and in NASL. Some MB members question the point of continuing with the demonstrations, which only, in the short term, result in more arrests. Other NASL members, which would prefer to be less exposed to further repression and arrests, are also in favour of a more conciliatory approach. Moreover, the MB cannot count on the support of the Islamist radicals from the al-Nour party, which in the parliamentary election of 2011/2012 headed an Islamist bloc rival to the MB. In 2013, al-Nour supported president Morsi’s removal from power and declared its support for Sisi in the ongoing electoral campaign. This allows the party to function openly throughout Egypt and increases its ability to strengthen its position vis-à-vis the MB in Islamist circles.

Conclusions. Anti-MB repression is portrayed as a struggle against terrorism, and from a legal point of view sanctions the introduction of a non-democratic regime. A string of decisions by the interim authorities clearly confirm this trend. November 2013 saw the introduction of the “anti-protest law,” which allows demonstrations to be banned or quashed if, for example, they threaten “the interests of the people.” Last month, the April 6 Movement, one of the most important socio-political movements in Egypt and a source of 2011 protests against president Mubarak, was delegitimised. Moreover, activists campaigning for a “no” vote in the referendum on the Egyptian constitution were also arrested. The provisions of the constitution, approved in January 2014, are in many instances modern and liberal in character, although the army is still excluded from civilian scrutiny. However, it is likely that, just as under President Mubarak, these provisions will remain null and void, and will not reflect the situation on the ground in Egypt.

It is almost certain that Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, former Field Marshal of the Egyptian armed forces, will win the presidential election. After his victory, two scenarios of political developments in Egypt are possible. These are limited dialogue with elements of the MB, or continuation of the movement’s liquidation by the Egyptian state. The ongoing support that the MB commands in Egyptian society seems to point the new Egyptian president in the direction of the former scenario. Even if the MB and its allies are supported by no more than 10% of society, this, in a time of crisis, and given Egypt’s population, might result in up to a million people out in the streets demonstrating. The new president will most probably want to avoid the disruption this could cause to the functioning of the state, and could be tempted into some sort of an agreement with, for example, the MB youth wing. He could also use prerogatives bestowed upon him by the new constitution and invoke Article 155, which gives him the right, after consulting the cabinet, to pardon or reduce the sentences of MB members awaiting the death penalty.

Such actions could help the Egyptian government to destabilise the internal unity of the MB, and could potentially lead to the creation of other state-sanctioned Islamist groups and political parties. This would de-escalate the political conflict in Egypt, and could pave the way for broader Islamist participation in the forthcoming parliamentary election, to be held this autumn. The EU, which sent an observation mission to Egypt for the duration of the presidential election campaign, should encourage the future president to reconcile with elements of the Islamist circles and support all the actions that lead to the strengthening of political pluralism in the country.

However, if Sisi and his newly formed cabinet opt to continue liquidation of the MB, this will amount to the foundation of one of the most repressive and authoritarian regimes of the Middle East, located in the immediate neighbourhood of the EU. The EU is not able to prevent this development single-handedly, and could only withdraw all forms of aid to Egypt and attempt to impose an embargo on arms sales. Moreover, this could prove unsuccessful, as Saudi Arabia has already expressed its willingness to fill in any gap left by Western donors withdrawing from Egypt. Nonetheless, if the EU, the EU Member States and the United States, which still has influence in Egypt, were to coordinate joint efforts and, as in the case of Iran, agree on a common sanctions approach, this would yield far better results, as even the Gulf monarchies are not in a position to finance a state with a population of 90 million people indefinitely.