

The Muslim Brotherhood: caught between resistance and compromise

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The Muslim Brotherhood is Egypt's largest opposition organisation—more a movement than a political party. It has millions of supporters. Many are involved in the uprisings.

Why then did the Brotherhood enter talks with the regime—defying the protesters who are clearly insisting that, before discussing any reforms, Mubarak must go?

Initially the Brotherhood opposed involvement in the movement. Its supporters were absent from marches and demonstrations.

But the momentum of the movement was so great that Brotherhood leaders could not contain their members, who flooded onto the streets.

Credible

Under immense pressure from the protests, the regime sought organisations with which to negotiate, hoping to strike deals that will divide the movement.

But Mubarak's men have a problem: for decades they banned independent political organisation. Now they find that there are no credible "mediators" to whom they can turn to defuse the movement.

Recent talks involved two tame parties—the Wafd and the Ghad. Each operates strictly within limits set by the regime. They cannot engage in public activity—like holding rallies, major meetings or demonstrations—even at election time. Neither party has an activist membership.

The Brotherhood is different—it is illegal but has a huge base. So by inviting its leaders to talks the regime has shown its desperation to find a way out of the crisis.

The Brotherhood's long history is one of contradiction and compromise with reformism.

In the 1930s and 1940s it played a leading role in the movement to expel the colonial power, Britain. At the same time its leader, Hassan al-Banna, collaborated with the pro-British monarch King Farouk.

Counterweight

Violently suppressed by the Nasser regime in the 1950s, it shrank to a few hundred members, most of whom fled to Saudi Arabia. They returned in the 1970s by arrangement with President Sadat, who was keen to use the organisation as a counterweight to the growing workers' movement.

In the 1980s leaders of the Brotherhood were key beneficiaries of economic liberalisation—the programme of infitah or "opening"—under which Sadat and then Mubarak dismantled the state

sector, favouring private capital.

One study of Brotherhood businessmen suggests that at this point they controlled 40 percent of all private economic ventures.

They soon prospered as a mass organisation. Egypt's communist party had dissolved in the early 1960s, leaving a vacuum.

As millions of people suffered the effects of infitah they gravitated towards the Brothers, with their talk of social injustice and of an Islamic alternative.

They launched a network of social welfare organisations: clinics, hospitals and schools—which served many local people. When an earthquake hit in 1992 it provided vital services as the state stood by.

Fearful of any opposition, the regime jailed many of the Brotherhood—but they did not respond, refusing to organise protests and retreating from public activity.

Like many Islamist organisations it is beset by contradictions. Its members have suffered cruelly from the violence of the regime, yet its leaders crave a share of power. They are politically conservative while among the activists are many with hopes for radical change.

Will Brotherhood leaders swallow an offer of mild reform and rein in their members? For many activists this would be the ultimate act of betrayal.

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P.S.

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* Phil Marfleet is joint editor of Egypt: the Moment of Change, Zed Books. Available from Bookmarks, £13 (normally £16.99) <http://www.bookmarksbookshop.co.uk/cgi/store/bookmark.cgi>