Muslim Brotherhood: fixing ties

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The Muslim Brotherhood must be incorporated within the political process, argues Amr Elchoubaki*. But this requires movement by both the organisation and the regime

Sometimes it appears that conflict between the government and the Muslim Brotherhood has been destined to be Egypt's fate not only for the last century but also for this, an immense, unsurpassable wall standing in the way of political reform and democratisation. Or perhaps it could better be described as something akin to a fearsome time-bomb that everyone fears to approach with a political solution, having taken it for granted that the Brotherhood is a threat to democracy and therefore can only be dealt with as a security problem.

The violent athletic display staged recently by Muslim Brotherhood students at Al-Azhar University brought to the fore the stormy relationship between the Islamist organisation and the regime. Regardless of the actual aim, the display succeeded only in injecting more poison into an already venomous climate, reinforcing rhetoric that favours postponing political reform and democratisation on the grounds of the danger posed by the Muslim Brothers and their "militias".

The fact is the relationship between the Muslim Brotherhood and the government has been difficult ever since the organisation was founded by Hassan Al-Banna in 1928. For nearly four decades the climate between the two sides varied in temperature, from suspicious tolerance to violent confrontation. The Muslim Brotherhood has not succeeded in toppling the government, nor has the government succeeded in eliminating the Muslim Brotherhood. The face-off still persists, though contemporary circumstances have made it increasingly vital to search for a "political solution" that, at least, opens a horizon for the development of a realm of civil political rivalry to replace the longstanding, security-based confrontation.

The Muslim Brotherhood's historical journey overlaps with that of Egypt's governing system. The organisation came into being under a quasi-liberal monarchy, clashed with the Nasserist regime, struck up an accommodation with Anwar El-Sadat and then swung between cool and hot vis-à-vis the Mubarak regime. The government, meanwhile, has occupied a curious middle ground, officially banning the Muslim Brotherhood but never resolving to eliminate it entirely and, today in particular, accepting known Muslim Brotherhood members in parliament while still refusing to deal with the organisation.

The Muslim Brotherhood's 80-year-old life is filled with intellectual diversity; it has been refreshed constantly with a succession of new generations. If the organisation has been the subject of heated controversy, it has also almost always been embroiled in internal controversy and debate fuelled by the waves of detention and imprisonment of many of its members, under both Gamal Abdel-Nasser and Sadat. Yet a constant has always remained: a comprehensive perception of Islam and a certain political/ideological flexibility that has allowed the Brothers to be politicians, if they wanted, or advocates of Islamic morals if they decided to shun political involvement; to run for election to the People's Assembly or the Shura Council, if they thought the time was right, or to remain preachers from mosque pulpits; to be revolutionaries or Sufi mystics; to have as a leader a conservative judge

such as Hassan El-Hodeibi, or a radical intellectual and fighter like Sayed Qotb.

On the whole, the evolution of the Muslim Brotherhood can be divided into three main stages. The first, the formative phase, began with the founding of the organisation by Hassan El-Banna and his followers in Ismailia in 1928. Since then, it has grown to become one of the largest political organisations in Egypt and the Arab world, largely as a result of its ability to avail itself of a broad array of tactics. Depending on the circumstances of the times, it has taken the offensive or moved to the defensive, adopted a high profile or recoiled, opted for dialogue or dug in for the confrontation. The deftness with which it shifted from one strategy to another reflects the organisational capacity that enabled it to survive the monarchy as well as the various stages of the republican era.

Many have often wondered why the Muslim Brotherhood remained intact as an organisational structure for so long and, today, many have expressed their surprise that the Muslim Brothers could remain together given the ideological and generational tensions among them. Perhaps the major reason why the organisation could survive for so long after the assassination of its founder lies in the durability of his ideas. The Muslim Brotherhood is a religious organisation with a strong social and political thrust. Although it has had political agendas it was never quite a political party in the accepted sense of the term but rather a society for the propagation of Islamic morals and principles. This idea still prevails today, even if the organisation as a whole increasingly appears to incline towards civil political involvement.

El-Banna, himself, made it difficult to pin the Muslim Brotherhood down. Addressing his followers he said, "My brothers, you are not a charitable society or a political party or a concrete organisation established for the realisation of limited aims. Rather, you are a new spirit coursing in the heart of this nation and reviving it with the Quran; you are a new light come to dispel the darkness of materialism through the knowledge of God; you are the voice that reverberates loudly with the call of the prophet. It is your unmitigated right to feel that you can bear this burden after others have shed it."

In addition, strongly influenced by the acrimony within and between political parties in the pre-revolutionary era, the Brotherhood was adamantly opposed to the very concept of a political party: "I believe, gentlemen, that Islam — the religion of unity in everything; the religion of a sound mind, a pure heart and true brotherhood; the religion of sincere cooperation among all human beings, not to mention the members of a single nation and a single people — does not approve or condone the political party system. The Holy Quran says, 'And hold fast, together, to the rope that God has given, and remain undivided'."

El-Banna's thinking informed the activities of the Muslim Brotherhood from 1928 until the 1948 War in Palestine. During this period the focus was on socio-religious proselytising, which spread rapidly across Egypt, while the level of political activism paled in comparison with the organisation's growing numbers: throughout the so-called liberal era not a single Brotherhood member became a member of parliament. However, this absence is explained not only by the nature of the Brotherhood's organisational structure and its ideological priorities. The civil political arena was not the void we see today and the liberal project of the Wafd Party was the primary source of inspiration for broad segments of the middle class and dominated the grassroots drive for national independence and a civil constitution.

The war in Palestine, and the growing strength of the Brotherhood's paramilitary wing, ushered in what we might term "the violent phase of entrenchment". It was at this juncture that, by force of the activities of a segment of its membership, the Brotherhood shifted from fighting the Zionist occupation in Palestine to confronting authorities at home. Beginning with the assassination of prime minister Mahmoud El-Noqrashi in 1948, MB militants mounted several other assassination

attempts culminating in the attempt against Nasser in 1954.

Clearly, the Muslim Brotherhood had placed itself on the other side of the law and many of its members were rounded up and imprisoned. Even so, the Nasserist regime took pains to integrate a faction of the Brotherhood into Al-Azhar, the Waqf (religious endowments) Ministry and other institutions of the post-revolutionary regime. Al-Baqouri, rector of Al-Azhar, was a Muslim Brotherhood member, as were Sheikh Mohamed El-Ghazali and Sayed Sabiq, both of whom served in the Waqf Ministry.

Upon coming to power president Sadat ordered the release of imprisoned Brotherhood leaders. During the 1970s, apart from the activities of MB radicals in the universities, the Brotherhood insulated itself behind a doctrine of isolation from society and political affairs, and ceased all political, social and even religious activity. This, however, came to an abrupt halt in the wake of the Camp David Accords, which the Muslim Brothers protested against vehemently, leading Sadat to clamp down on them again and arrest large numbers in September 1981.

If anything, the second phase demonstrated that the Muslim Brotherhood did not have quite the strength to remain as unified as many imagine. If its Catholicism succeeded in keeping political hardliners and reformers, mystics and revolutionaries, proselytisers and social activists together under a single umbrella during its formative phase, this loose formula for cohesion was unable to withstand the political complexities and harsh circumstances of confrontation with the authorities.

Perhaps it was partially the result of splintering that the Brotherhood entered its third and current phase, characterised by a re- engagement with society and, for the first time, an engagement in the political process. Since the early 1990s the Brotherhood renounced all forms of violence, abandoned its former justifications for maintaining a paramilitary wing and consistently espoused peaceful mechanisms for effecting change. Brotherhood members had already begun to field themselves in parliamentary elections. Not a few gained entry into parliament in the legislative elections of 1984 and 1987 and, more significantly, the Brotherhood succeeded through democratic processes in dominating a number of professional syndicates. With the beginning of the new millennium, 17 Brotherhood members were elected to parliament, a figure that leaped to 88 in the elections of 2005.

Still, to many it is still difficult to believe that the Muslim Brothers have totally espoused democratic principles (as opposed to the democratic process as a means to an end). After all, their admixture of politics and religion makes it hard to accept them as a political organisation committed to the concept of civil society.

On the other hand, the Muslim Brothers, themselves, regard their religious dimension as one of their greatest assets. In any political contest with other parties, they tend to come across as more "correct". And, in a sense, this is true. They may not be angels and incapable of error, but their religious orientation and training often makes them comport themselves with greater integrity than opponents who have honed their skills solely in the "political jungle". In addition, they are far better organised than both the ruling party and the official opposition. Their keenness to cling to their association with Islam also stems from the fact that it offers them a form of protection. Any attack against them can be portrayed as an attack against Islam or against pious Muslims.

But while this overlap between religion and politics also makes for a powerful recruitment mechanism, it must be borne in mind that no Christian could become a member; there are certain religious strictures and conditions to which any prospective member must subscribe. Herein may reside one of the Brotherhood's weaknesses if ever it is permitted to establish itself as a normal political party.

Certainly, the Brotherhood would have to pay a considerable price for making the full transition from a religious proselytising society with a political agenda to a civil entity. However, the government, too, would have to pay a price in the event it accepts the Muslim Brotherhood as a legitimate political party that respects the constitution and the republican system and that subscribes in practice and in theory to democracy. After all, taking such a step requires a strong government, brought into power by free and fair democratic elections and capable of competing on equal terms with other legitimate political forces, be they the Muslim Brotherhood or any other strong political party. In other words, a government that does not consist of apparatchiks whose life in power is contingent upon the support of the bureaucratic and security apparatuses and who can only compete with weak, fragmented and illusory parties.

P.S.

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