

PolicyWatch #1588

Transition in Egypt: Radicals on the Rise?

By [Myriam Benraad](#) and [Mohamed Abdelbaky](#)
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PolicyWatch #1588 is the second in a two-part series discussing trends within the Muslim Brotherhood. This piece addresses the potential for the group's return to violence in Egypt, while [PolicyWatch #1585](#) focuses on the organization's divisions in Jordan.

Amid the uncertainty over Egypt's impending political succession, Egyptian security forces have cracked down on the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), the country's largest opposition group, in an attempt to curtail MB participation in Egyptian political life. Since late June, the government has arrested dozens of mid- and high-level Islamists, including the leader of the movement's guidance council, Abd al-Muanem Abu al-Fatouh. These Islamists oppose President Hosni Mubarak's bid for a sixth presidential term and reject his son Gamal as a potential replacement in 2011. After more than a decade of relative political moderation and successful deradicalization of the main Islamist groups, Cairo's policy of exclusion and persecution threatens to foment a return to radical Islamism in Egypt.

Muslim Brothers at an Impasse

Although formally outlawed, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood has achieved important political gains over the past few years. In 2005, the group won eighty-eight seats in the national assembly through "independent" candidates, representing the largest opposition bloc to President Mubarak. The growing role of the MB in the political arena has emboldened its historical confrontation with the regime and found new impetus this summer after Egyptian security forces arrested hundreds of its members and leaders. While the current campaign is reminiscent of Egyptian presidents Gamal Abdul Nasser and Anwar Sadat's repression of the Islamist movement in the 1960s and 1970s -- which resulted in the emergence of other radical factions -- this crackdown has created an unprecedented crisis for the MB.

As a result of constitutional amendments passed in 2007, it has become difficult for the movement to run in either parliamentary or presidential elections. In fact, the restrictive new electoral law, which allows only registered political parties to campaign, bans religious parties, and imposes tough conditions on "independent" candidates, makes it nearly impossible for the MB to participate. Last year, these restrictions resulted in the rejection of more than 800 MB candidates for local council elections. The movement also failed to win in elections for professional lawyers and journalist syndicates.

Internally, the MB has gone through a significant crisis that prevents its members and leadership from operating as they once did. Serious ideological disagreements within the ranks -- particularly between conservative, reformist, and "new generation" wings -- emerged in June 2008 during the guidance council elections, when the conservatives led a campaign to remove reformers from the council and marginalize their influence within the MB. In addition, the movement's deputy chairman and largest funder, Khairat al-Shater, was arrested in 2006.

The MB is taking a number of steps to withstand the crackdown. For example, according to the Egyptian media, the movement plans to reduce its participation in the upcoming parliamentary election and to establish

civil society-oriented structures to strengthen its social and religious grip on Egyptian society. This development comes amid speculation that the MB is negotiating a deal with the ruling National Democratic Party whereby the MB would withdraw from the 2010 polls in exchange for the release of several of its detained members.

Although in the short term Cairo's actions might reduce MB representation in government, in the long term the persecution strategy could backfire. The arrest of moderate elements of the MB could lead to factionalization, pushing younger members to embrace violent protest or to call for civil disobedience. Some in the movement likely see a return to violence as a way out of the present impasse. Anticipating this backlash, MB leadership has already urged its youth to stick with peaceful, political, and legal means in its struggle against the regime.

Radical Islam: A Comeback?

The combination of severe repression and the increasingly difficult economic situation faced by most Egyptians could contribute to a reradicalization of Egyptian society at large and the Islamist sector in particular. Egyptian society would seem to be fertile ground, with the ideological and social influence of Salafism taking hold. In addition to its appeal among the young generation, the spread of Salafist doctrine has been the product of decades of expatriate workers returning from Saudi Arabia with Wahhabi sensibilities. This radical and puritanical trend has reached into all social classes, as evidenced by the mounting numbers of woman wearing the *niqab* (full veil). Beyond the influence of radical imams in mosques, television satellite channels with an overt Salafist tone (al-Naas for instance) have become very popular among in Egypt, no doubt winning over new recruits in the process.

While these dynamics are troubling, perhaps the most compelling evidence of the Egyptian MB reradicalization is the group's unprecedented affiliation with and public support of the Iranian-backed militant organizations Hamas and Hizballah. In recent months, the Egyptian MB has issued strong statements in support of these organizations, provoking a government counteroffensive.

In May 2009, for example, after the arrest of a large Hizballah cell in Egypt, the MB took the unpopular position of supporting the Lebanese militia's efforts to help Hamas, in spite of Hizballah's clear violation of Egyptian sovereignty. Egyptian MB supreme guide Muhammad Mahdi Akef directly contradicted Cairo by announcing at a press conference that Hizballah "does not threaten Egyptian national security."

Earlier in the year, during Israel's Operation Cast Lead, the MB issued a communique on Gaza, demanding, among other things, expulsion of the Israeli ambassador from Cairo, opening of the Rafah crossing to Gaza, cutoff of gas and oil supplies to Israel, and that all Arab governments "bolster the resistance and support [Hamas] by every possible means." Akef's deputy, Ibrahim Munair, went one step further, criticizing the Mubarak regime's relations with Washington. Munair told al-Alam television that the Egyptian regime "wants to send a message to the Zionist entity, which supports [Egypt], and to the West, especially America, that there remains a role for [Egypt] in the so-called war against terrorism."

Conclusion

For decades, the Mubarak regime has restricted individual freedoms, leaving only the government's National Democratic Party and Egypt's Islamist opposition to compete politically. With this latest crackdown, what little space there is to legitimately influence domestic politics through nonviolent means has been closed off for the Islamists. In a context of unparalleled economic crisis and uncertainties surrounding succession, this policy may prove counterproductive.

During his historic Cairo address, U.S. president Barack Obama expressed his desire to integrate "peaceful and law-abiding" and "moderate" Islamists into a partnership with Washington. How the Obama administration would deal with these "moderates," however, remains an extremely sensitive and double-edged issue.

Accepting the commitment of Islamists -- moderate or extremist -- to respect the political rules of the road is clearly not an option. Neither is Cairo's answer -- to crush them altogether -- which may work in the short term but poses multiple challenges further on. Instead, the Obama administration should reprioritize human rights and find ways to empower democrats and civil society organizations as the best long-term mechanism to counter reradicalization in Egypt. Given the administration's larger foreign policy preoccupations, however, it remains unlikely that it will do so. Egypt's difficulties will deepen in the meantime, with profound negative consequences for both the country and the region.

Myriam Benraad is the Keston Family scholar for The Washington Institute's [Project Fikra](#), focusing on radicalization and counterradicalization in the Middle East, North Africa, Europe, and the United States. Mohamed Abdelbaky is Project Fikra's Keston visiting fellow, focusing on economic and political reform, democracy, governance, and youth development in the Middle East.

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