



## Is There an Islamist Alternative in Egypt?

Daniela Pioppi

### Abstract

It is a common place in the literature that the Muslim Brotherhood (jama'a al-ikhwan al-muslimin) is - after its re-emergence on the political scene back in the seventies - the main (if not the only) real, organised and mass-based opposition force in Egypt. Events in Egypt in January 2011 have recast attention on this question. This paper aims to evaluate, inasmuch as it is possible, the state of health of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) today, after forty years of co-existence with the Egyptian (neo)-authoritarian regime. Has the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood represented a real alternative to the incumbent regime? Or it is more correct to speak today in terms of an almost 'functional' opposition, tamed by recurring political repression and limited freedom of action? To what extent has the Muslim Brotherhood been able to shape or at least to influence the Egyptian political and social agenda, both with respect to the regime and to other opposition forces?

**Keywords:** *Egypt / Government / Authoritarianism / Political parties / Muslim Brotherhood / Democracy*

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## Is There an Islamist Alternative in Egypt?

by Daniela Pioppi\*

### Introduction

It is a common place in the literature that the Muslim Brotherhood (*jama'a al-ikhwan al-muslimin*) is - after its re-emergence on the political scene back in the seventies - the main (if not the only) real, organised and mass-based opposition force in Egypt. Events in Egypt in January 2011 have recast attention on this question. While the illegal status of the Brotherhood and Egypt's authoritarian setting do not allow for accurate quantitative analyses, the above assertion almost certainly holds true. Yet, it probably tells more about the weakness of Egyptian opposition in general than about the strength of the Brotherhood itself.

This paper aims to evaluate, inasmuch as it is possible, the state of health of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) today, after forty years of co-existence with the Egyptian (neo)-authoritarian regime characterised by "deepening authoritarian rule masked by limited and reversible liberalization" and by "political demobilization enforced by varying degrees of naked coercion" (Beinin 2009: 21).

Has the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood represented a real alternative to the incumbent regime? Or it is more correct to speak today in terms of an almost 'functional' opposition, tamed by recurring political repression and limited freedom of action? To what extent has the Muslim Brotherhood been able to shape or at least to influence the Egyptian political and social agenda, both with respect to the regime and to other opposition forces?

To answer these and similar questions, we will analyse the recent evolution (1990-January 2011) of this Islamist organisation, focusing on:

#### 1) *The Muslim Brotherhood's relationship to the regime*

The MB is the main opposition force in Egypt, but it has generally kept a moderate approach towards the political establishment. This 'accommodating' strategy has, on the one hand, allowed the Islamist organization to survive and even flourish in certain periods but, on the other, it has exposed it to accusations of undue compromise with the regime and lack of political initiative. The Brotherhood's relationship to the regime becomes particularly relevant in view of the transition set in motion in the country in January 2011;

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This paper has been written in the framework of the IAI-GMF Strategic Partnership.

\* Daniela Pioppi is associate fellow at the Mediterranean and Middle East Programme of the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) and lecturer of contemporary history of Egypt at the Faculty of Oriental Studies, University of Rome 'La Sapienza'.

2) *The nature and extent of the Muslim Brotherhood's social programme and activities*  
The Muslim Brotherhood is well known for its widespread and efficient social activities which are considered to be the key to the Islamists' success in popular mobilization in contrast with the regime's lack of legitimacy due to the unfulfilled promises of the post-independence social pact, let alone of the neo-liberal era. Today, increasing poverty and social inequalities are emerging as one of the most challenging issues of Egyptian politics and the MB may - at least in theory - be better placed than other political actors to capitalise on social discontent. However, cyclical repression and political stagnation seem to have affected the Brotherhood's social action as well and their ability to formulate a clear social project.

## 1. The Muslim Brotherhood and the Egyptian regime

The traditional position of the Muslim Brotherhood towards the regime has always been one of no direct confrontation. Following the *jama'a's* founding principles, the achievement of political power should be postponed until the time is ripe, that is to say until society has been truly Islamized and prepared for an Islamic government. The search for power would otherwise not lead to an Islamic state and could also negatively affect the internal functioning of the organization and its public image. This general principle was briefly contested in the second half of the '40s when the Egyptian liberal regime was coming to an end. However, it was reinforced again in the '70s and '80s: The 'new' Muslim Brotherhood which emerged from the ashes of Nasserism kept a moderate and, at times, even compliant approach towards the regime, which has never been put into question seriously until today. The regime never allowed the Islamist organization to be legalized and periodically limited its political and social activities, but cleverly capitalised on the Brotherhood's willingness to compromise and on its conservative social programme, both to increase its own popular legitimacy, by allowing for some kind of mass opposition, and at the same time to marginalize secular opposition.

In the first decade of his presidency (1981-1990), Mubarak allowed the Brotherhood to flourish and reach what is probably the peak of the *jama'a* presence in society after the golden age of the 30s and '40s. The MB consolidated its presence in student organizations, participated in parliamentary elections in 1984 and 1987 and won elections in the main professional syndicates (doctors, scientists, engineers, lawyers, etc.) (al-Awadi 2004; Wickham 2002). Also, as we will illustrate in more detail in the next section, it consolidated its social presence through the establishment of an efficient network of charities linked to private (*ahly*) mosques.

It was in the early nineties that the honeymoon with the regime ended, to be only partially and briefly re-established between 2000 and 2005. By the mid-nineties, the Brotherhood was effectively ousted or at least its presence seriously limited in all significant professional syndicates and in Parliament and thousands of its members were imprisoned (Kienle 2001: 131-170). However, the MB was not completely erased from the political scene as happened during the Nasser years and maintained its role of main opposition force. The regime's aim was, in fact, to reduce and keep the Brotherhood's public space and political/social impact under control, not to get rid of it once and for all.

This was the situation of the Brotherhood and the regime when Egypt entered the decade of 'Arab reformism', initiated mainly by US pressure after 9/11 and facilitated by a sudden awakening of Arab public opinion in reaction to the deterioration of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (2000 onwards) and to the Iraq war (2003). In Egypt, the reformist debate acted as a catalyst for the opposition's mobilization on the issue of succession to the old and probably sick Husni Mubarak.

A first wave of mobilization took place in the years 2004-2005, facilitated by presidential and parliamentary elections scheduled for 2005. In 2004, the opposition started, in an unprecedented move, to directly criticize the Mubarak family and ask for an end to the emergency law (in place since 1981), for the facilitation of procedures for the legalization of political parties and, above all, for multi-candidate presidential elections, thus making an important shift from the regime-friendly demonstrations focused on foreign issues (Palestine, Iraq) that took place in 2002-2003.

The democratic reform euphoria also influenced the MB, which brought out a more explicit reformist political programme, namely in a document released in March 2004.<sup>1</sup> The Brothers actively participated in the many opposition demonstrations and events until the summer of 2005, often determining their success at least in terms of popular participation. However, the political initiative of that period was not in the hands of Islamists, rather it was the game of new entries onto the Egyptian political scene, such as the well-known Egyptian Movement for Change or the newly legalized Tomorrow Party (*al-Ghad*) of Ayman Nour, which managed to compensate for their lack of a meaningful social basis with effective slogans and efficient media campaigns both domestically and at the international level. The political slogan that hit the newspaper headlines at that time was not 'Islam is the solution' or any other '*ikhwanî mot d'ordre*', but '*kefaya!*' (enough!) the slogan with which the Egyptian Movement for Change came to be known in Egypt and abroad. Indeed, the *Kefaya* Manifesto became the common platform for the so called *intifada al-islam* or the reform protest of all opposition forces.

In February 2005, Mubarak reacted to the opposition's requests by announcing the amendment of Article 76 of the Constitution, introducing presidential multi-candidate elections for the first time in Egyptian history.<sup>2</sup> The Muslim Brotherhood, together with other opposition forces, denounced the constitutional amendments as cosmetic and called for a boycott of the May referendum convened to approve the new norms (Arafat 2009: 173; El Amrani 2005). Yet, they carefully skirted the issue of presidential elections to be held only a few months later in September 2005, publicly encouraging their members to vote as their consciences dictated, a move which has been interpreted as not-so-tacit support for Mubarak. A similar lack of coherence was demonstrated by other important opposition parties, such as the Wafd and al-Ghad,

<sup>1</sup> The Muslim Brotherhood Initiative for Reform, Declared in Syndicate of Journalists, 3 March 2004. For an Italian translation of the Arabic text, see Guazzone (2005: 407-421).

<sup>2</sup> The amended Article 76 lays out two paths to presidential candidacy: the first through membership in a party, provided that the party has been in existence for at least 5 consecutive years and has at least 3% of the seats in Parliament. The second is for "independents," who must obtain the signatures of at least 250 elected officials from the Parliament and municipal councils, which are completely controlled by the National Democratic Party.

which filed their no-chance-to-win candidates for the presidential elections immediately after having boycotted the May referendum.

Some observers argued that the Brotherhood's success at the parliamentary elections later that year (the MB obtained 88 seats or 20%, a record not only for Islamists, but for the opposition in general) was the regime's reward for not boycotting the presidential elections and, in fact, the Muslim Brotherhood had organised their electoral campaign in a particularly tolerant atmosphere that lasted till the first day of election.<sup>3</sup> Only after the Islamists' positive results in the first provinces that voted became clear, did the regime ignite the repression machine, which became even harsher after the elections (El Amrani 2005; ICG 2008).

The Muslim Brotherhood's electoral success had probably gone too far. In the following years, the *jama'a* suffered from what has been labelled the worst repression cycle since the Nasser years. Thousands of militants were arrested and the Brotherhood was not allowed to participate in municipal elections in 2008, while the regime launched a smear campaign portraying the Brotherhood to domestic elites and foreign partners as an organization of Nazis and Talibans. To foreign partners the message was clear: if liberalization is too fast, you won't get a more democratic Egypt, but an Islamic one. More importantly, the Islamist organization's financial base was also hit by the arrest of businessmen and financiers whose combined investment was estimated at around USD 4 billion (al-Anani 2007).

From 2006 to 2010, the regime managed successfully to curb the Islamists' political influence, thus demonstrating once again that it was perfectly able to control the space allowed the Brotherhood.

In 2007, the MB declared - for the first time since its establishment in 1928 - their intention to form a full-fledged political party, the programme of which was leaked to the media by the independent newspaper *al-Masry al-Youm*. The programme, though not officially recognised by the Brotherhood's leadership, was much criticized for being a step back with respect to the March 2004 Reform Initiative (Brown *et al.* 2008). Observers and academia saw the 2007 party platform as the end of the Brotherhood 'reformist' experiment, with more so-called 'grey areas' or points of ambiguity in the Brothers' democratic 'conversion,' probably to be ascribed to the old guard of *salafis* inside the organization, thus reinforcing the position of those advocating the theoretical incompatibility between Islamism (or even Islam) and liberal democracy.

However, the ambiguities in the Muslim Brotherhood's political programme point more to the organization's unwillingness or inability to build a real and solid alternative to the current regime, leaving - as already stated - the initiative to much weaker (in terms of social basis and organizational capacity) opposition forces, such as Kefaya or, since 2010, Muhammad al-Baradei, etc.

Two main factors undermine the Brotherhood's credibility and efficacy or its capacity to dictate the terms of the political debate without always being on the defensive. First of

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<sup>3</sup> In 2000 and 2005, parliamentary elections were organised over a span of three weeks to allow for judicial supervision.

all, the authoritarian environment, implying cyclical repression and limitations to the freedom of action, has had the effect of ossifying internal debate and potential disagreement. The MB - not dissimilarly from the ruling National Democratic Party - is not a coherent political organization, but rather a sum of different political trends that in a more open political context would certainly split into different political organizations or parties. What is the point of splitting up over the question of forming a political party, if that party will not be allowed to run in elections anyway?<sup>4</sup> The authoritarian environment has thus had the paradoxical effect of preserving both the ruling National Democratic Party and the main opposition representative, the Muslim Brotherhood, as organizations united by their lack of serious external competitors in their respective spheres.

A second and probably more central factor is the inherent contradiction of the Brotherhood's programme since its founding: should the regime be considered legitimate or illegitimate? Considering it illegitimate would of course imply direct confrontation and the risk of being completely erased from the political arena. Accepting the regime as legitimate, however, could also pose some risks. Could the Brotherhood accept the rules of the game imposed by the regime for 40 years without losing credibility and political coherence in the eyes of its constituency? This dilemma - faced by all opposition forces when operating in an authoritarian setting - reappeared in the new round of parliamentary elections in November-December 2010. In the parliamentary elections, the regime made it perfectly clear after five years of heavy repression that it would not allow the Muslim Brotherhood to repeat the electoral success of 2005. Still the Brotherhood did not budge from its traditional position of participation, ignoring the fact that any form of participation in elections that are held in an unfair environment is tantamount to an endorsement of the regime.<sup>5</sup> Together with the legal and regime-loyal opposition (the liberal Wafd and the leftist Tagammu'), the MB did not adhere to Muhammad al-Baradei's call for a boycott of the parliamentary elections. In the case of the MB and even more so of the Wafd, participation was seen as an attempt to appease the regime, as well as a reflection of the fact that despite its limitations, parliament can serve opposition groups as a platform from which to reach out to the media and claim some leadership roles. However, the secular and regime-loyal opposition represented by the Wafd and the Tajammu' had more reason, at least in theory, to participate as the prospects of getting a few seats were much better than those of their Islamist rivals. As it turned out, participation did not pay off as the election results were even worse than the Brotherhood (or perhaps even the regime<sup>6</sup>) predicted.

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<sup>4</sup> This is probably the case of people such as Abd el-Moneim Abu al-Futuh, representative of the so called 'reformist trend', who is fully convinced of the futility of splitting up the mother organization after the *al-wasat* experience in the 1990s. Author's interviews with Abd el-Moneim Abu al-Futuh, Abu Ela Madi (al-Wasat), Hussam Tammam (independent analyst), Cairo, November 2010.

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Essam El-Erian interview with Michel Dunne (31 May 2010) <http://egyptelections.carnegieendowment.org/2010/10/01/interview-with-essam-al-arian>. There was of course some internal disagreement, but the Brotherhood remained firm on the position expressed by its spokesperson. Author's interviews with MB activists, November 2010, Cairo. See also Amr Hamzawy, "the Brotherhood enters elections in a weakened state", *al-Masry al-Youm*, 17/11/2010, <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/en/opinion/brotherhood-enters-elections-weakened-state>.

<sup>6</sup> The paradox underlined by various observers of the Egyptian political scene is that the election results are not completely positive for the NDP as they have too little opposition for next year's presidential election to be legitimized. Michelle Dunne, "From Too Much Egyptian Opposition, to too little", *al-Masry al-Youm*, 15/12/2010. <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/en/opinion/too-much-egyptian-opposition-too-little>.

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The Muslim Brotherhood got no seat in the first round and finally decided to boycott the December 5 run-off election together with the Wafd.

From the foregoing, the Muslim Brotherhood emerges as a moderate reformist force willing to compromise with and not fundamentally challenge the regime. The result is a loss of initiative of the Brotherhood, which is still the main opposition force in the country but runs the risk of losing credibility as an alternative to the regime, suffering as it does from the same diseases as the other regime-loyal opposition forces.

## 2. The Muslim Brotherhood and social action

It could be argued however that, quite differently from other opposition forces, the MB is not just a political organization but also has an important or even preponderant social component. In view of the political repression of the last five years, the Brotherhood started refocusing its attention on its *da'wa* activities, that is to say proselytism and social work. The election of Muhammad al-Badie', a conservative, as the new general guide in January 2010 was widely interpreted as a sign of this 'retreat from politics' (Hamzawy *et al.* 2010). But what are the Brotherhood's social activities and social project? Has the political repression of the last 15 years or so affected the social (charitable) side of the organization?

Considering the importance of social action for Islamist mass movements of which the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood is the prototype or mother organization, it is surprising to note that there is no updated study on the state of the Brotherhood's social activities in Egypt. Most of the studies on the MB take for granted that (1) the organization has a large social basis and (2) that this social basis mainly comes from its efficient network of charities providing popular services in health and education. Additionally, it is assumed that precisely this social charities network is the most important challenge the Islamists pose to the state-regime in Egypt, as elsewhere. According to this view, Islamists could 'easily' decide to abandon their strictly political activities to concentrate on social work and *da'wa*.

Indeed, social action linked to a project of social justice was a central feature of the Brotherhood until the '40s (Lia 1998). The MB was established as a *social* movement and only later devoted its attention to politics in the strict sense. However, the relationship between social and political work was reversed when the Brotherhood was allowed to re-organise after Nasser's repression and when its new leadership started to give priority to *political* participation and activities (al-Awadi 2004; Elshobaki 2005). Experience in the professional unions was of paramount importance for the training of a new generation of activists with the know-how it provided on the public administration, but also for the organization of social services at the national level. The often quoted episode of the Brothers' efficient intervention after the Cairo earthquake of 1992 was precisely an example of a rescue operation organised by the professional syndicates, mainly doctors and engineers.

The '80s and '90s were also the decades of the revitalization of religious charities, partly spontaneous and partly encouraged by the regime. Starting with the '70s, the regime authorised the building of private mosques and the private and local collection

of *zakat* funds which could be used to finance charitable associations (*al-jam'iyya al-khayriyya*) providing basic social services to the population in health and education (Ben Nefissa *et al.* 1995; Sullivan *et al.* 1999). The regime was starting to search for a palliative for the otherwise potentially explosive socio-economic situation caused by the state's increasing difficulty in providing social services (Pioppi 2007). What could be better for that purpose than a revalued religious charity, provided it was kept under state control and not politicised? The Muslim Brotherhood, of course, participated in the charity boom even though, with respect to the whole Islamic sector, the MB-controlled charities remained a minority.<sup>7</sup>

When the new cycle of repression started in the mid-90s, the social activities of the MB were also heavily limited. Not only were the Brothers' activities in the professional syndicates effectively reduced, but mosques and relative charitable associations started to be '(re)-nationalized'.<sup>8</sup> It is difficult to provide a detailed reconstruction of the MB's social activities after the mid-'90s. Due to the tense relationship with the regime and the organization's illegal status, no formal list is available to the public. Also, there is no central organization coordinating the Brotherhood's social activities today, as was the case in the '30s and '40s. The charity section (*Qism al-Birr*) is mainly responsible for small-scale charitable activities, such as the distribution of food and other goods during Ramadan.<sup>9</sup> All MB social activities are organized in the form of independent charitable associations (*jam'iyya khayriyya*) founded by individual members of the Brotherhood (often businessmen or well-off individuals) on a private basis. They have a 'spiritual' link with the *jama'a* and use the Brotherhood's informal network, but are both financially and administratively independent.<sup>10</sup>

A charitable association is usually financed by an initial donation by the founder or a group of benefactors. But once the association starts functioning, it becomes self-financing through a system of fees applied to the offered services, not unlike the private commercial sector. Furthermore, associations do not rely on volunteer work, but have waged employees who do not necessarily have to be members of the Brotherhood. The same thing goes for the users, who can be of any religion, sex and political affiliation. All charitable associations are under the supervision of the Ministry of Social Affairs, which also grants the initial permission to operate, together with the Ministry of Health or Education, depending on the service provided.

This somehow 'decentralized' or, rather, fragmented nature of the system, with no formal organization coordinating the different charities established and administered by the Brothers, has apparently been reinforced after the repression cycle of the '90s in parallel with a general reduction in social activities linked to the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Sullivan *et al.* 1999; Author's interviews Cairo, November 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Kienle 2001; al-Awadi 2004. Author's interviews, Cairo, November 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Author's interview with Dr Medhat 'Asem, Director of Islamic Medical Association and member of the Muslim Brotherhood, Cairo, February 2010 and with Abdel Rahman al-Barr, Responsible of the Qism al-Birr, Cairo, November 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. and author's interview with Hussam Tammam, Cairo, February and November 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Author's interview with Abdel Moneim Mahmud, journalist and author of the *Ana Ikhwan* blog, Cairo, February 2010.



Today, in the field of health care there is only one Brotherhood-linked charity: the Islamic Medical Association (IMA, *al-jam'iyya al-tibbiyya al-islamiyya*<sup>12</sup>), which controls 23 health units in all of Egypt and is currently building a central hospital in Madinat el-Nasser, Cairo.<sup>13</sup> In the education sector, there is no comparable association, but about 30 independent schools scattered around the country.<sup>14</sup> In general, these social activities are located in the bigger cities and in middle to upper class neighbourhoods, that is in the areas in which the potential donors and users live. Consequently, their target is not the most disadvantaged social strata, but the middle classes who do not want to use public services for low quality, but cannot afford the most expensive private services in health and education.<sup>15</sup>

As a result of this brief analysis, it could be argued that Brotherhood-related social activities are extremely reduced today and certainly not enough to play a relevant role in mobilization. This is confirmed by the lack of an explicit political or social project linked to these associations. Of course, the regime has imposed specific limits on the possibility of political expression inside the charitable associations: associations cannot host political meetings or any other event or sign of politicization (banners), especially if Brotherhood-related. Yet, the result is that there is no way of distinguishing a Brotherhood-linked charitable association from a non-Brotherhood one, unless the names and political affiliation of the members of the administrative board are known.

Muslim Brotherhood documents and political statements in recent years regarding health and education in Egypt reveal a programme that is not very detailed and lacking a clear distinction from the welfare policies and reforms presented by the regime. The Brotherhood is in favour of greater reliance on private providers of social services and partnership between the public administration and private entrepreneurs, both in terms of private investments and private charities to compensate the deficiencies of the welfare state. Even the wording of the programmes is very similar to those of the National Democratic Party.<sup>16</sup>

In addition, the Brotherhood's parliamentary activities on social issues are concentrated on general questions such as the fight against corruption or public inefficiency without, for instance, entering into the specifics of the reforms that are being carried out in the country and will have a great impact on Egypt's future welfare system. This is even more striking given that there is a relatively large debate on and opposition bloc in the country to the health and education reforms. In the last five years, the opposition bloc has managed to inform Egyptian public opinion through events, media campaigns,

<sup>12</sup> The IMA was established in 1977 by Ahmad al-Malt, a doctor and vice general leader of the Muslim Brotherhood (<http://www.imaegypt.net/p02.htm>).

<sup>13</sup> The IMA has 10 medical units in greater Cairo, the largest of which - the Faruq Hospital in Maadi - has a 50-bed capacity. Author's interviews with Dr Medhat 'Asem, Director of IMA, Cairo, February and November 2010 and with the director and vice-director of the Faruq Hospital, Cairo, November 2010.

<sup>14</sup> An example is the *Madaris al-Rodwan* in Madinat el-Nasser, Cairo. Author's interview with the Director, Cairo, February 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Author's interviews, Cairo, February and November 2010.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, the Brotherhood campaign platform for the 2008 municipal (<http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=16257>) or for the 2010 parliamentary elections (<http://egyptelections.carnegieendowment.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/brotherhood-platform.pdf>) on health, and compare with the NDP "Health and population policies", [http://www.ndp.org.eg/ar/Policies/\\_1.aspx](http://www.ndp.org.eg/ar/Policies/_1.aspx).

publications and so on and to legally engage the government denouncing the unconstitutionality of the most extreme privatization measures, thus effectively reducing the regime's freedom of action. The activists of the Committee for the Defence of the Right to Health<sup>17</sup> lament the absence of the main opposition force, the Muslim Brotherhood, in this important battle and accuse it of being 100% in favour of the regime policies.<sup>18</sup>

On another front, the Brotherhood has been visibly absent from the workers' protest movement in the last years.<sup>19</sup> Besides some timid attempts to be represented in the workers' trade unions in 1998, 2002 and again in 2006, there is no sign of an active role by the Brotherhood in organizing the workers' strikes and demonstrations. In this respect, the Brotherhood has kept its traditional paternalist and corporatist approach aimed at reconciling capital and workers, more than taking advantage of social conflicts. The mainstream Sunni Islamist view, represented by the Brotherhood, is deeply hostile to class conflict. The ideal society is a harmonious one in which labour is productive and capitalists generous through charity (Beinin *et al.* 1998; Heanni *et al.* 2009).

To sum up, the Muslim Brotherhood's social activities after the Nasser parenthesis have never reached the levels of diffusion and organization of the '30s and '40s. Furthermore, they are generally aimed at the middle to upper classes rather than the most disadvantaged social strata. Since the repression cycle that started in the '90s, the Muslim Brotherhood's social activities have been drastically reduced and do not seem to play a significant role in popular mobilization, not least for lack of a clear political and social project.

### 3. Conclusions

Today, after 40 years of co-existence with a (neo-)authoritarian regime, the Muslim Brotherhood is not in a good state of health. Besides an internal lack of coherence and unity, the Brotherhood does not have an original agenda, nor is it able to influence the national political arena very much. Most of the time, the *jama'a* reacts to the initiatives of the regime or other (weaker, but more active) opposition forces. In terms of social activities also, the Brotherhood's reach has been severely reduced to the point that some argue that the only real links to popular constituencies till November 2010 were the members of parliament and their local offices, which were the only visible sign of the *jama'a* in many popular districts around the country.<sup>20</sup> While this provides a further explanation for the MB's unwillingness to boycott the November 2010 parliamentary elections, it also casts an even grimmer light on the current state of the organization. Certainly, the main explanation for the current state of affairs should be sought in the

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<sup>17</sup> This is a network of NGOs working on health and sustainable development (<http://www.ahedegypt.org>).

<sup>18</sup> Author's interview with Dr. Muhammad Khalil, activist of the Committee for the Defence of the Right to Health, Cairo, February 2010.

<sup>19</sup> al-Hamalawy, Hossam (2007), "Comrades and Brothers", *Middle East Report*, n. 242, Spring, <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer242/hamalawy.html>; and author's interview with Hossam Hamalawy, Cairo, November 2010.

<sup>20</sup> Author's interview with Abdel Moneim Mahmud, journalist and author of *Ana Ikhwan* blog, Cairo, November 2010.

regime's repressive policies, but perhaps also in the excessive moderation of the Brotherhood which, not unlike other opposition forces in Egypt, is paying the price of survival in an authoritarian context.

*Updated: 04 February 2011*

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**Istituto Affari Internazionali**

Via Angelo Brunetti, 9 00186 Roma  
Tel.: +39/06/3224360 Fax: + 39/06/3224363  
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