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Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood: Losing Popular Trust?

By Taufiq Radja Nurul Bahri

Synopsis

The long-outlawed Muslim Brotherhood thrived in electoral politics after the Egyptian revolution. However, recent political missteps over the presidential election may have proved costly to their reputation.

Commentary

The Muslim Brotherhood, along with other Islamist groups, emerged as a major political force following the ouster of President Hosni Mubarak by the Egyptian revolution of March 2011. The Freedom and Justice party, established as the group's political arm went on to win nearly half the parliamentary seats in the general elections early this year. Though long suppressed as an illegal organization, the MB had won wide support as a civil society network of social empowerment and religious reform. Its sweeping victory in 47 percent of the seats in the House of Representatives was attributed to its long history of social service, religious appeal and public sympathy for its oppression. However, its very success in political contestation has undermined its popular trust.

Robbing the revolution?

Having emerged only following the popular uprising, the MB now faces accusations that it has robbed the revolution. Indeed the MB was never in full agreement with the Tahrir Square protests and only intermittently endorsed the revolution after Mubarak was ousted. The MB later even began to denounce protests and labeled those who demonstrated as "sinners"

According to experts such as Khaled Elgindy of the Saban center for Middle East policy at Brookings Institute, the first major rupture came about when MB supported the military council's plan to hold elections before a new constitution was drafted, no doubt hoping that the short period would prevent other parties from organizing themselves. Although rumours of an alliance between the MB and the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces were not proven, there were instances of cooperation that confirmed those claims, such as SCAF's employment of MB manpower to neutralize street protests. Another controversial move by MB was its backing away from popular demands that Egypt's new parliament should immediately replace the military-appointed government.

Tainting their reputation with unfulfilled promises

A major blow to the MB's reputation was the failure to keep its promises. MB had earlier stated that it would not

seek to dominate parliament and promised to contest only 40 percent of the seats, but ended up running for 77 percent and ultimately won 47 percent, thereby acquiring control of the legislature. MB also placed 27 of their members in the 100-member constituent assembly to draft the constitution. The assembly however was later suspended as it was Islamist-dominated.

The biggest misstep was the MB's backtracking on their promise not to field a candidate for the presidency when they nominated their leading member Khairat Shater with FJP president Mohammad Morsi as alternate. Late last year, Abdel Moneim Abul Futooh was expelled by MB for insubordination when he announced his intention to run for president contrary to the organization's stance then. The reasons given for Shater's nomination however were to detract support from Abul Futooh and to meet the urgent need to deal with a mounting economic crisis as well as unspecified "threats to the revolution"

Escalating distrust

Shater however was disqualified from standing, leaving "spare tire" Morsi as MB's candidate. Still, the MB's actions in the run-up have aroused public doubts about their intentions. Consequently, Abul Futooh is gaining momentum and getting endorsements of numerous prominent figures such as Kamal Helbawy, who has just resigned from the MB. He stated that MB is "hungry for power and their will to dominate were no different from that of the Mubarak Regime".

The MB's spiritual leader Yusuf Al Qaradawi has endorsed Abul Futooh, as has the MB's rival the Salafi Al Nour, who hold 25 percent of the seats in parliament. Egyptian commentators say that the Salafi support for Abul Futooh has dealt a blow to MB which recently sought to convince all Islamist factions to throw their backing behind Morsi. In the assessment of Tariq Ramadan, grandson of MB's founder, Hasan Al Banna, MB currently "lacks political substance".

The MB has great capabilities that the country can benefit from in the process of rebuilding itself. However, experts say the MB needs to reconsider its backing for Morsi and unify the Islamists votes behind Abul Futooh. Journalist Stephen Glain commented that MB should not "act as if the entire system is in its grip" when clearly much influence is slipping from its hands. Egyptian activists assert that the coming presidential elections, the drafting of the constitution and the retirement of the SCAF are crucial steps that need to be addressed seriously. The MB which currently dominate parliament has to think beyond party politics to ensure the revolution does not go to waste.

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