

Calling the Muslim Brotherhood

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I got through to the guys on the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood politburo for a couple of hours before they joined the demonstrations yesterday and then with some of Egypt's top human-rights activists during. Also with some of the kids. No one really is taking the Muslim Brotherhood all that seriously but they are very worried that the US press and the European Union are—and that this fear will be Mubarak's only chance of survival. The MB discredited itself by first saying they would not join in the Jan 25 demonstrations ("Our 9/11 moment," said one activist). Now they are seen as (non-serious) bunglers trying to hijack things. If you look at the history, the MB has been around since 1928 and has failed to come to power, or even close, in eighty-three years. Estimates in Egypt put the number of members of the Muslim Brotherhood at about 100,000 members, and that's out of a total population of 83 million.

Most people on the outside believe the MB spreads its political power through health clinics and other soup-kitchen stuff. But that's nonsense. According to former MB politburo member Dr. *Abdel-Moneim* Abu el-Fotouh there are only six MB clinics in Cairo, a city of 16 million by night and 20 million by day, the rest are Islamic clinics that are Islamic simply because the people are Islamic. All the secular guys I talked to agree. There are lots of religious Muslims in Egypt, few actually back the Brotherhood. The oft-touted figure of 25% popular support is only because the successive authoritarian regimes have stifled all secular opposition. If you have a meeting in a café then the café is shut down, but the authorities could never go into mosques and shutter those, so the MB survived. If a credible secular group emerged people think MB support would dwindle to insignificance.

Most people I talked to think that US policy is simply fickle. First Clinton says Mubarak's regime is stable, then Obama says he has to institute democratic reforms immediately. Now people recognize that Washington is trying to ease Mubarak out—but that the White House fears the Brotherhood. This leaves Egyptians feeling that America is simply out of touch.

Egyptians are a pretty savvy lot. No one I talked to believes you can have a democracy overnight (well, almost no one, 18 year old kids think it's possible, of course). The MB talks of a year or two transition of power, but that's only because members are hoping to expand their support base to a controlling plurality in that time. The more consensual assessment, even among democracy and human-rights advocates, is that the military retains control (Omar Suleiman is acceptable to them provided he gets rid of Mubarak now) and over a ten-year period real democratic reforms

are instituted. What does that mean? As Hisham Kaseem (past publisher of the Cairo Times and human-rights activist) told me:

“Egypt is missing instruments essential to any functioning democracy and these must be established in the transition period: an independent judiciary, a representative parliament, an open press. Egypt currently lacks these entirely. If you try to push democracy tomorrow we’ll end up like Mauritania [which had democratic elections and a military coup a year later] or Sudan [which had free elections in 1983 and then a brutal dictatorship three years later]. ‘Immediate reforms’? Let’s get real.”

The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt is arguably more moderate than the MB in, say, Jordan: they no longer have anything resembling a paramilitary cell structure and now talk about power sharing with secular and nationalist groups. They regularly condemn Al Qaeda (and vice versa) and denounce bombings of Shia mosques and Christian churches (whether in Egypt or Baghdad). Of course, many people believe the Brotherhood was forced to this after they failed to depose King Farouk, and the military rulers who followed -- Nasser, Sadat, Mubarak -- and that they are still only interested in power for themselves. In any event, there is no guarantee its wide range of antagonistic factions won’t tear the MB apart if there really is a political opening for other groups in Egypt. Obviously the MB wants power and its political positions are problematic for American interests (we won’t go to war with Israel but we won’t support a false peace, and will fight if Israel wants to attack us). And the MB will probably have to be present in any truly popular and democratic government. But it’s because democracies tolerate things in their midst they may not like that they generally don’t have civil wars, or wars with other democracies.

No one thinks El Baradei is a significant political player, not the MB, not the rights people, not the newspaper people, not the youth. He’s respected and was briefly considered a pretty picture for the outside world but even the MB are backing off support today (interestingly the MB spokesman, Dr Essam Eryan, who had told Al Jazeera yesterday that the MB supports a transitional government with El Baradei, just told me for the record that the *people* will have to decide if El Baradei is acceptable, not the MB). When Baradei appeared in Tahrir Square few rallied to him. And the MB saw that.

Of course, when I challenged some in the Muslim Brotherhood leadership, arguing they hadn’t supported the January 25 movement in the first place, they proffered the line that: they were gauging then whether the people would go with them but that they didn’t want to be seen trying to take things over and so waited until they saw that they and the people were in tune with one another. Pure malarkey, and most everyone in Egypt knows it.

The Muslim Brotherhood does not have mass support from the people. Egyptians understand democracy cannot sweep the country tomorrow. A military in control of the scene from the background—for a while—is probably the best hope for a peaceful transition. There is nothing for the U.S. to fear, or interfere with, here. Let Egypt go.