

Chronicle of a Coup Foretold

AT THE OUTSET OF the revolution, Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood was caught off guard. They were also afraid. On February 9, 2011, I made my way to Tahrir Square in the early afternoon. By then the square had been transformed into something like a carnival, with food and beverage carts, different corners for speakers, and an array of political displays and demonstrations. While the mood had changed dramatically from just a week before—when regime supporters attacked protesters during the “Battle of the Camel,” leaving at least 11 dead—there was still a profound sense of uncertainty. How would it end? What if Mubarak refused to leave?

From the square, I made my way down the street that housed the American University of Cairo. It looked like a war zone, with barricades and trash strewn on the sidewalks. All the restaurants were boarded up. There was only one coffee shop open. Cilantro—a sort of Egyptian version of Starbucks—had just reopened. It was a good place—really the only place—to meet with activists like Abdel Rahman Ayyash. They would step away from Tahrir Square, walk to Cilantro, and meet with journalists, each other, or researchers such as myself. Ayyash, then a prominent Brotherhood activist and only 20 years old, exuded a kind of nervous excitement. He was confident but worried, particularly when it came to the Brotherhood's role. “If it's ever perceived that this revolution is an Islamic one,” he said, “the U.S. and others will be able to justify a crackdown.”¹

For this reason, the Brotherhood purposely downplayed its participation in the protests. But behind the scenes, it played a pivotal support role in the square, providing food and medical services to protesters, protecting them from regime thugs, and generally keeping order.² Brotherhood officials instructed their followers to avoid using ideological slogans. The group, as always, was cautious, fearing that even a hint of Islamism in the square would undermine opposition unity and provide the regime an opening to discredit the revolution, including in the eyes of the international community.

After decades of U.S.-backed autocracy, the Brotherhood had thoroughly internalized the “American veto.” Just two days before Mubarak fell, the Brotherhood's Abdel Moneim Abul Futouh penned an op-ed in the *Washington Post*. He seemed convinced that U.S. policymakers could be persuaded to support the revolution as well as the Brotherhood's democratic aspirations. Abul Futouh's op-ed—simultaneously overestimating America's influence, decrying it, and believing that, somehow, it could be used for good—was representative of the genre. “We want to set the record straight so that any Middle East policy decisions made in Washington are based on facts,” Abul Futouh wrote. “With a little altruism, the United States should not hesitate to reassess its interests in the region, especially if it genuinely champions democracy.”³

Fearing repression and hoping to neutralize American backing for the old regime, the Brotherhood highlighted the moderate policies it had painstakingly developed the previous two decades. The concern—some would say obsession—with what the United States thought was illustrative. The Brotherhood craved legitimacy not only at home but abroad. The group's leaders had a mantra in those early days of uncertainty—repeated over and over to anyone who would listen: they would not run a presidential candidate. They would contest only one third of the seats in parliament. They would not seek a parliamentary majority. They would work to build consensus among all of Egypt's political forces.

This was not an act, as some would later suggest. This was the moderate, reconstructed Brotherhood, which had spent years smoothing over the hard edges of its political program. Islamists had not moderated because of democracy, but before it. It was the experience of repression that had forced Islamists to moderate. And now that regime repression

was reaching its end, Islamists found themselves in a political environment that they had never, in all of 83 years of existence, encountered before. There was no precedent, memory, or model upon which to draw.

And so the Brotherhood issued a procession of statements in an attempt to reassure their skeptics, of which there were many. "We don't want to leave one dictatorship just to enter another, religious one," the Brotherhood's Hamdi Hassan insisted. "That's why the Brotherhood clearly announced that it won't run for the presidency and won't try to take the majority in parliament."⁴ Khairat al-Shater, the group's brilliant but domineering strategist, was feeling particularly magnanimous: "Egypt will not return to the days of one-party rule. The Brotherhood will help strengthen other parties."⁵

For a time, they actually backed up the rhetoric. The idea, early on, was to create a broad national front, led by the Brotherhood, which would contest the upcoming parliamentary elections. As early as March 2011, just one month after the revolution, the Brotherhood along with several secular parties, including the liberal Wafd party and leftist Karama, "agreed in principle to enter the election with an open, national list."⁶

The Brotherhood wasn't quite acting like a self-interested political party might be expected to. Parties normally seek power, even in delicate transitional situations like Egypt's. But, here, Islamists were offering what seemed like preemptive concessions. They were saying, in effect, that they were too strong and the others too weak, and that they would prop up their competitors to level the playing field. As leading Brotherhood figure Mohamed al-Beltagy explained it, "everyone must act so we can reach the point where we become like the rest of the countries in the world, with three or four strong parties." Not only that, the Brotherhood, just like it had been before, was willing to lose on purpose, at least at first. "We will not forever remain in the position of not seeking power, the majority or the presidency," Beltagy said, "this is a temporary position until the time there are forces that can compete."⁷

Just after Mubarak fell, Brotherhood officials spoke of contesting one third of the parliamentary seats. By April, the numbers were changing: the Brotherhood would now contest up to a half of the seats, but they insisted that was as high as they would go. It was still early days, and the Brotherhood was stuck in old patterns of participation.

They were paranoid about provoking opposition at home and abroad. Was the world ready for Islamists? They weren't so sure. "The people won't accept an Islamist president," Essam al-Erian, deputy leader of the Freedom and Justice Party, told me in May of that year. "They feel that anyone Islamist will provoke antagonism from the U.S. and Europe—and this is sensible."⁸ It made sense, then, to take things one step at a time, an approach well in keeping with the group's traditionally unhurried attitude to political change.

Brotherhood leaders had good reason to worry about the role the United States would play. The Obama administration would later come under attack from both Republicans and, oddly enough, Egyptian liberals for becoming too cozy with the Brotherhood (or worse). Early on, however, the United States was keeping its distance from Egypt's largest and most powerful opposition group. Erian roundly criticized the American stance. "It was a fatal mistake to be hesitating from the start," he said, "and they are still hesitating now."⁹ Remarkably, the Obama administration had no high-level contacts with the Brotherhood until October 2011, eight months after Mubarak fell. Even then, Anne Patterson, America's ambassador in Cairo, was not quite ready to take the step herself: "I'm not personally comfortable with it enough yet," she said. When a journalist asked her why, she replied awkwardly, "well, I'm just not comfortable."¹⁰

In revolutionary contexts, Islamist groups generally prefer to stay on the sidelines, letting others, usually secular figures and parties, lead the way in order to secure international legitimacy. In Syria, although the Muslim Brotherhood was the single most influential party in the Syrian National Council, the body would be headed first by Paris-based secular academic Burhan Ghalioun and then George Sabra, a Christian. Later, the same could be said of the Syrian Opposition Coalition, formally led by centrist and secular figures like Moaz al-Khatib and Suhair al-Attasi. In both cases, the Brotherhood was accused of playing a shadowy role behind the scenes, but that was how they liked it: the less attention, the better. In Egypt, one can go back before the revolution to find any number of examples. The liberal Nobel laureate Mohamed ElBaradei—later to emerge as one of the Brotherhood's chief antagonists—enjoyed a close, cooperative relationship with the group throughout 2010, during Mubarak's last days. The Brotherhood actively

backed ElBaradei's petition of seven reform demands and mobilized its considerable organizational machine to collect signatures for the initiative. Even after the revolution, the Brotherhood considered the possibility of supporting ElBaradei for president as late as April 2012.

Indeed, for months, Brotherhood leaders affirmed time and time again their decision not to field a presidential candidate from their own ranks. Again, this was in keeping with their pre-revolution mindset of gradualism and deference to the status quo. The watchwords were "consensus," "dialogue," and "unity." For the parliamentary elections, the Brotherhood and its newly formed Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) launched the "Democratic Alliance," the centerpiece of its efforts to essentially allow weaker parties to ride the coattails of its electoral success. At its peak, the alliance claimed as many as 35 political parties. Most of Egypt's major parties from across the political spectrum—leftist, liberal, and Salafi—counted themselves as members. Far from an alliance just on paper, cooperation between the parties was intended be on three levels: the formation of a committee to work on a new election law; another to coordinate a joint electoral list; and the third to draft a common set of principles and objectives for member parties.¹¹

As it turned out, these efforts, as significant as they appeared to be, were not the start of a bold new era of revolutionary cooperation, but rather the last, dying gasps of the spirit of cooperation that had prevailed in Tahrir Square just months before. Repression is what brought Egypt's fractious opposition closer together in the last days of the Mubarak regime. In Tahrir, during those 18 days, repression—and the threat of even greater repression—reached unprecedented levels (I remember the day when a Muslim Brotherhood official called me on the phone and broke down in tears, as he told me that the regime was about to perpetrate a massacre in the dead of night).

Repression, as we saw in previous chapters, has a way of making ideological debates seem irrelevant. In 2010, the Brotherhood and ElBaradei—a classic liberal if there ever was one—joined forces. As one Brotherhood official told me at the time, "every single member—without exception—is working to gather signatures for ElBaradei."¹² At the height of the petition campaign, the head of each *usra*¹³ would ask members daily how many signatures they had collected. This wasn't just the usual, vague talk of working together. By the fall of 2010, ElBaradei's reform

petition had reached one million signatures, a remarkable figure considering that each signatory had to include his Egyptian ID number (a risky move in an autocracy). The Brotherhood's backing was decisive—before it joined the effort, the petition had only around 100,000 signatures.

It is no accident that this degree of cooperation came at the height of regime repression and amidst fears that it would only get worse. The Brotherhood, in particular, feared that those coming after Mubarak—including his son Gamal and the "neo-liberal" clique around him—would be even more authoritarian than the father, threatening the group's existence. ElBaradei, meanwhile, had his own message for anyone who was willing to listen. He forcefully defended the Brotherhood's right to participate in politics, making the case that they had changed and moderated over time. The Muslim Brotherhood could be trusted. In a memorable interview in the early days of the revolution, ElBaradei took to CNN. The host of the program, Fareed Zakaria, asked, "are you confident that a post-Mubarak Egypt will not give rise to some kind of Islamic fundamentalist force?" "I'm quite confident of that, Fareed," ElBaradei replied. "The Muslim Brotherhood has nothing to do with the Iranian model; it has nothing to do with extremism."¹⁴

A Split in the Opposition

If repression brought them together, removing the repression would presumably push them apart. The cracks in the façade became apparent almost immediately. The March 19, 2011 referendum, ratifying a set of amendments to the old constitution, was arguably one of the Egyptian transition's many "original sins," pitting Islamists and non-Islamists against each other for the first time. Liberals and leftists who were at an obvious electoral disadvantage favored postponing elections and focusing instead on drafting a new constitution (by a panel of experts and civil society representatives). This coalesced into what became known as the "Constitution First" movement.

As the Brotherhood and other Islamists threw their weight behind a "yes" vote—citing the need to end military rule and set a clear path to stability—debates that were really about the sequencing of the transition became, at least publicly, about religion. Accusations abounded of

Islamist actors using religious rhetoric to rally support and marginalize their opponents. A vote against the amendments was portrayed by Islamists as endangering the place of sharia in the constitution. Some Salafis went further, telling their supporters that a “yes” vote was a religious duty.¹⁵ As the political divide entrenched itself, it became increasingly difficult to tell the difference between a procedural objection and a substantive one.

The question of holding elections or writing a constitution first became one of the key fault lines of Egyptian politics, and one that would grow more important over the course of a troubled transition. Power and ideology had become fused together. Fearing that they would lose badly in free elections, liberals demanded more time to prepare and organize. Liberals—and non-Islamists more generally—were in a particularly weak position, and this only heightened their sense of siege in the face of ascendant Islamist forces. Almost in parallel, Islamists were shedding their apparent magnanimity. By the summer of 2011, there was a noticeable shift in the Brotherhood’s tone. The paranoia of old, always in the background, was creeping back in. In public statements, the group started to emphasize what they called the subversion of the “popular will.” The shift coincided with the Brotherhood’s souring relationship with the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF).

The problem with regime-managed transitions is that the regime can’t always be trusted to actually give up power. Beginning in June 2011, close to the original deadline for a handover to civilian rule, the military began floating the idea of “supra-constitutional” principles as well as guidelines for selecting members of the constituent assembly. The Brotherhood saw this as an attack on the future jurisdiction of the elected parliament. As they saw it, the country’s elected representatives should have “full freedom in selecting this constituent body for drafting the constitution.”¹⁶ The military had two objectives: first, to protect their own prerogatives—immunity and autonomy—in any future constitution, and, second, to divide the opposition and gain liberal support as a pressure point against the Brotherhood. The supra-constitutional principles would include not only guarantees for the military, but also protections on rights and freedoms that many liberals were demanding.

The gathering controversy over the constitution pushed the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafis to hold their first large-scale protest

since the revolution, on July 29, 2011, a day that would become etched in memory—for liberals at least—as “Kandahar Friday.” The goal of the protest was to “affirm the authority of the people and their right to establish their own constitution without any group trying to impose its own prescription.”¹⁷ But that message got lost in the overt Islamist slogans and symbols, with Salafis demanding the implementation of sharia law. The result was a media fiasco for the Brotherhood, which tried to distance itself from the Salafis.¹⁸ But the polarization, regardless of what the Brotherhood thought or wanted, had become further entrenched.

Brotherhood officials continued to insist that they had no fundamental disagreements with other political parties. Their problem, they said, wasn’t so much the content of the supra-constitutional proposals but rather the principle that something could be imposed through “non-democratic means.”¹⁹ In August, the Brotherhood warned of replicating the Turkish model, where the military “play[s] the role of the protector of the constitution and the guardian of the civil state.”²⁰ In a preview of a debate that would dominate Egyptian politics for the next several years, the Brotherhood’s language sharpened, as it took to accusing the minority (read: liberals) of circumventing the will of the majority.

Meanwhile, the much-touted Democratic Alliance gradually lost most of its members largely due to disagreements over each party’s share of candidates. Some liberal and leftist parties stayed on, but they were small and lacked any real constituency of their own. The alliance, the centerpiece of the Brotherhood’s outreach to non-Islamists, had become a shell of its former self. Meanwhile, a group of liberal parties coalesced in the form of the “Egyptian Bloc,” with the explicit goal of countering Islamist dominance of the political scene.

In September 2011, the military overreached when it clumsily rolled out the infamous “Selmi Document.” The document, ostensibly spearheaded by Deputy Prime Minister Ali al-Selmi, formally outlined supra-constitutional principles that would protect the army’s outsized role in society and politics. This, for the Brotherhood, provided confirmation that a loose alliance of the military, liberals, the judiciary, and other elements of the “deep state” were out to deny the group its rightful role. On November 18, in a show of force, the Brotherhood and the Salafis brought tens of thousands of their supporters to Tahrir Square. Some youth activists and revolutionary groups also

participated, and the crisis started when they stayed on and set up tents later that night after the Brotherhood left. The following morning, with little warning, the army moved to disperse the small group of peaceful protesters still encamped in the square.

The clashes of Mohamed Mahmoud—named after a street leading out of Tahrir Square—had begun. The military's brazen brutality, seemingly unprovoked, swelled the ranks of the protesters. By the time it was over, fierce street battles had claimed the lives of at least 40 Egyptians.

Islamists stayed on the sidelines, fearing that the instability—which they felt the army had intentionally provoked—would be used to delay or cancel parliamentary elections. Many liberals, who disagreed with the very idea of early elections in the first place, supported their postponement. They accused the Brotherhood of being so obsessed with elections that it would turn a blind eye to the killing of protesters. And they were at least partly right. So close to what they felt would be an historic victory, the Brotherhood increasingly feared it would be taken away from them. There were no guarantees, and they had come this close before, including of course in Algeria. Brotherhood leaders, never comfortable with revolutionary action in the first place, argued it was time to shift the battle to the halls of parliament, conveniently the very place they would be strongest.

During the Mohamed Mahmoud clashes, I spoke to Dina Zakaria, a senior official in the Freedom and Justice Party. When we met, she had a pained look on her face, and I could tell she was struggling with the Brotherhood's decision to stay away from the protests. "I thought to myself, how can we abandon the people in the square?" she said. "I can't bear to see people still being killed." She continued: "But at the same time does this movement stay in the street, or should it be expressed through institutions? I think the right choice is through institutions."²¹ Some in the Brotherhood, like Mohamed al-Beltagy, publicly disagreed with the group's stance. He went to the square to express solidarity with the protesters but was soon shouted down by several of them. Fearing a confrontation, his supporters quickly ushered him out. The problem was one of legitimacy. "There are some forces saying Tahrir does not represent the people. And in an official and legal sense, they're right," he told me. "What we need is someone to represent the people in this battle of wills with the army."²²

It was an old debate—revolutionary versus democratic legitimacy—and one that would repeatedly threaten to derail Egypt's transition. For a society that had seemingly become conditioned to mass protests and inflated crowd estimates, would enough Egyptians be content with the boring, slow, and often inconclusive aspects of procedural democracy?

Parliamentary elections did take place on time. They were free, fair, and—to the surprise of many—peaceful. On election day, the clashes of Mohamed Mahmoud seemed distant. The Brotherhood had gotten what they wanted, but the old fears lingered. In the days leading up to the polls, some Brotherhood activists I spoke to worried that they might do *too* well. They were worried about how the military and the international community might respond to an Islamist landslide. After all, just a few months earlier, Saad al-Katatni, the FJP's secretary-general, had sought to reassure the Brotherhood's critics, predicting that parliamentary seats would be evenly split between Islamists and non-Islamists.²³ The Salafis, though, were a bit of a wild card. They were political novices with virtually no experience running election campaigns. But they, like the Brotherhood, had something their opponents did not—grassroots networks and deep support throughout the country, particularly outside the major cities. The "Islamic Alliance," which included the Nour party and two smaller Salafi parties, won around 28 percent of the vote and 25 percent of the seats. Altogether, Islamist parties secured nearly 75 percent of the seats, which exceeded even their wildest expectations. The Brotherhood and the Nour party were triumphant, pointing to a clear popular mandate. The results, however, demoralized the non-Islamist opposition, further entrenching the Islamist-liberal divide in Egyptian society.

For Cairo's secular elite, it was like waking up to a different country. They knew, of course, that the Brotherhood would do well. But the notion of Islamists, including hardline Salafis, winning almost three quarters of the vote was difficult to digest and even more difficult to understand. Liberals were at a profound disadvantage in democratic politics. If there were any doubts about that before, they were now put to rest.

In the new parliament, Salafi representatives were quick to embroil themselves in a number of controversies, one of which went viral. Seemingly out of nowhere, a Salafi member of parliament from the Asala

party interrupted the parliamentary session and started announcing the call to prayer. The Brotherhood's Saad al-Katatni, now speaker of parliament, attempted to shout him down, telling him that there was a mosque not too far away if he couldn't wait.²⁴ But the Salafi representative wouldn't stop, leading to several tense minutes of Katatni trying to defuse the situation. For many liberals watching on television, this was the first time they saw Salafis in action. How could 28 percent of their fellow Egyptians have voted for these extremists, they wondered? Instead of being proud of their country's first democratically elected parliament, they felt embarrassed.

The Brotherhood went into parliament with high hopes. The group planned to use its perch in parliament to challenge the ruling military council. In those early, heady days, the Brotherhood, confident and claiming vindication, believed it could transform Egypt into a parliamentary democracy. Those were the days when Brotherhood candidates would cite Israel as a model for a strong parliament and a weak, ceremonial president.²⁵

Brotherhood members had put so much time, energy, and resources into the fight for parliament, thinking it would be a turning point for both themselves and the country. What they hadn't bet on was a military council that had little interest in respecting the Islamist-dominated parliament, which it increasingly saw as a threat to its own interests.

A full month before the third and final round of the parliamentary elections, SCAF member General Mukhtar al-Mulla had given an extended briefing to a group of mostly American journalists. He effectively dismissed the initial election results and made it clear that the military would still be in charge. They would not let the Islamists take control over either the constitution-drafting process or the government, regardless of electoral outcomes. "Whatever the majority in the People's Assembly, they are very welcome," Mulla said, "because they won't have the ability to impose anything that the people don't want."²⁶ Despite the integrity of the election results, he added, they were not necessarily representative of the Egyptian people, and therefore it wouldn't be fair for one current to dominate the country's politics. "Do you think that the Egyptians elected someone to threaten his interest and economy and security and relations with [the] international community?" General Mulla asked. "Of course not."

The military and the Muslim Brotherhood had apparently very different notions of what the elections meant. After the polls had closed, the Brotherhood announced its interest in forming a coalition government headed by one of its own members, with Khairat al-Shater floated as a possibility.²⁷ For the Brotherhood, it was simple: the parliamentary majority should be responsible for forming the next government.

In the weeks following their victory, the Brotherhood talked tough, drawing strength from the "popular will" and claiming democratic mandates they did not necessarily have. The Brotherhood's Essam al-Erian warned the military that times had changed: "No institution or establishment is above the state. Parliament is the supreme authority of the country with control over all others."²⁸ Legally and constitutionally, however, the Brotherhood was on shaky ground. Egypt was not in fact a parliamentary democracy and the army, still the *de facto* executive authority, was not about to let it become one.

Islamists Versus the Army

After the high point of free, competitive elections—Egypt's first since the 1940s—the transition could have perhaps regained its momentum, but instead the seeds were planted for a slow but unmistakable deterioration in the country's political life. The Brotherhood's worst fears were confirmed: the military, along with some in the opposition, would not let them enjoy the fruits of victory. At the start of the new session, on February 1, 2012, protesters gathered outside the parliamentary building, preventing the newly minted representatives from getting inside. The Brotherhood released a strongly worded statement attacking those who "think the legitimacy of the square is greater than that of parliament." "Even if all their demands are met," the statement read, "they will find reasons to bring up problems . . . and block the path of democracy and the revolution, until there is a parliament that they like."²⁹

This was supposed to be the Brotherhood's reward for more than eight decades of patience and resolve in the face of untold persecution. But, as they saw it, a basic problem remained: their opponents—whether liberals, the military, or the old regime—would stop at nothing to block them from exercising power.

In the subsequent months, as the Islamist-led parliament gradually became aware of the very real limits to its authority, it aggressively confronted the army-appointed government of Mubarak-era Prime Minister Kamal al-Ganzouri, hoping to bring it down. But beyond a limited reshuffle, the military refused to give way. In the same vein, the group's attempt to dictate the formation of a constituent assembly also ended in failure—after the judiciary issued a ruling dissolving the body.

Parliament was often frustrated in its attempts to push through reforms. While its members busily drafted legislation on a range of issues, the fact that laws had to be approved by SCAF meant that they often amounted to baby steps, in revolutionary terms. Examples included a new police law that focused more on improving the working conditions of officers than weeding out malpractice, and a law on military trials that removed the president's ability to send civilians to military courts but "maintained the right of the military judiciary to determine its own jurisdiction."³⁰ Perhaps most egregious from the Brotherhood's perspective was the law on exclusion of senior Mubarak-era officials. Despite being passed by parliament and approved by SCAF, the new law met opposition in the courts and was unable to prevent Ahmed Shafiq—Mubarak's last prime minister—from running in presidential elections. "For the first time in Egypt's history a People's Assembly is elected in fair and fraud-free elections. It issues a law which is then trampled all over by an administrative body that doesn't like the law and so gave the law a holiday," railed an exasperated Mohamed al-Beltagy.³¹

Soon enough, the Brotherhood came to a conclusion that would have a number of intended, and unintended, consequences for Egypt's troubled transition: they decided, after considerable debate and internal dissent, to reverse their position on running a candidate for president.

One reason, already discussed above, was the failure of parliament to play the role they hoped it would. Another reason, which cuts to the heart of the kind of organization the Brotherhood is, was the need to maintain internal cohesion. Egypt's revolution was a threat as much as it was an opportunity for an organization that had grown accustomed to the unifying power of repression. Without a clear enemy—the Mubarak regime—the task of ensuring organizational discipline was becoming more difficult, so it had to be enforced. First, the

Brotherhood's leadership forbade its members from joining any other party but its own. Those who joined other parties or started their own were suspended or expelled. For the Brotherhood, it was a simple matter of respecting the institution of which they were a part and to which they had pledged their lives. It was, after all, the group's policymaking body, the Shura Council, that had voted to prohibit members from joining other parties. "All decisions are taken as an organization, with shura [consultation], with democracy," Essam al-Erian told me at the time. "[The youth] are appreciated but they are appreciated in the context of the organization, not outside of it."³² Dissent was allowed before a final decision was made, but not after.

Indeed, from the standpoint of organizational unity, the controversial decision to run a presidential candidate was not so surprising. In the early months of 2012, the group had tried to find a sympathetic consensus candidate whom they could support. They couldn't. In the resulting vacuum, Abdel Moneim Abul Futouh, the prominent Brotherhood figure who was expelled from the group in June 2011, had become an unlikely frontrunner, gaining support from a diverse group of liberals, leftists, Muslim Brotherhood youth, and even Salafis. Despite his origins and long service in the movement—or rather because of them—Abul Futouh emerged as a serious and even existential threat to the Brotherhood's organization, or the *tanzim* as it is known in Arabic.

To understand the group's overwrought paranoia, we can think of its leaders as institutionalists. Individuals within the Brotherhood derive their influence not primarily from their own political talents but from the fact they are part of a *gama'a*, or group, one that is presumably greater than the sum of its parts. In the past, whenever prominent figures broke off from the organization to start new parties, they failed. Without the Brotherhood's grassroots support and infrastructure, they found themselves relegated to the political margins (see for example al-Wasat, founded in 1996, and the Egyptian Current Party, founded in 2011). This was why Abul Futouh represented such a threat: he was attacking the idea that success can only come through the strict confines of the *tanzim*.

Abul Futouh threatened them from the left, and the Salafis, meanwhile, threatened them from the right. The fiery, charismatic Hazem Salah Abu Ismail, appearing seemingly out of nowhere, rose to the top

tier of presidential contenders.³³ Abu Ismail had also been a Brotherhood member before becoming Egypt's leading purveyor of "revolutionary Salafism."³⁴ What was the point of sitting out the presidential race, Brotherhood officials wondered, if another Islamist—a more radical one—might actually win and challenge the Brotherhood's grip on the Islamic movement? One of the Brotherhood's rationales for sitting out the election was that an Islamist as Egypt's head of state would provoke foreign powers weary of Islamist rule. But that rationale no longer seemed to hold with two other Islamists as frontrunners.

And so the Brotherhood—realizing that parliament, by itself, would not be enough and fearing the rise of their erstwhile compatriot and a Salafi hardliner to boot—entered the race at the last moment. Their first choice, Khairat al-Shater, whom some called Egypt's most powerful man, was disqualified from running due to a legal technicality. This, for them, seemed to confirm—again—that the military and its allies were seeking to block their rise by any means necessary. The Brotherhood had a second, much weaker candidate—Mohamed Morsi—who quickly replaced Shater as the group's standard-bearer.

The Brotherhood insisted they were reluctant contenders. Their reversal was indeed just that, they admitted, but it was the result of shifting circumstances that neither they nor anyone else could have predicted. Though burdened with a weak candidate and with only two months to campaign, the group's members fanned across the country, promoting Morsi's so-called Renaissance Project (which, before it, was Shater's Renaissance Project). In one coordinated show of strength, they held 24 simultaneous mass rallies across the country in a single day.

At one of those rallies, I asked a young Brotherhood activist if he was enthusiastic about Morsi. He smiled and then laughed. Some other Brotherhood youth were supporting Abul Futouh, but he wasn't. "This is about the preservation of the Brotherhood," he told me matter-of-factly.³⁵ The Brotherhood's loyalists were treating it as an existential moment, in part because it was. A Morsi defeat—particularly at the hands of Abul Futouh—might spur a major internal split. Perhaps more than any of the other candidates, Abul Futouh was dangerous. Charismatic and with his own distinct sources of legitimacy, the 62-year-old doctor fell out with the Brotherhood's conservative leadership for a variety of reasons, among them his desire to keep the group out of

partisan politics. As president, he would undermine the group's once-firm grip over Egyptian Islamism. And if Abul Futouh managed to create a movement or party behind his presidency, it would force the Brotherhood into a perpetual state of defense. It didn't help that Abul Futouh was threatening to treat the still-secretive Brotherhood like any other nongovernmental organization, requiring it to disclose its sources of funding.

For the Brotherhood, then, this was not about the candidate, Mohamed Morsi; it was about the future of an organization that had grown accustomed to finding enemies and fearing the worst. In times of repression, a pronounced paranoia may have made sense, but less so during a democratic opening. But, for them, the democratic opening itself was far from certain. Some of their fears were imagined. Some, however, were real and they would accumulate, one after the other, in the subsequent months and years.

Morsi ended up winning by a narrow margin in the presidential runoff with 51.7 percent of the vote. But SCAF held out on announcing the results for several days, stoking speculation that they would rig the vote and hand the election to Ahmed Shafiq. They didn't. But they had seemingly prepared themselves all the same. In early June, SCAF—in a flurry of activity over the course of just one week—reinstated martial law, stripped the presidency of many of its powers, and, most importantly, dissolved the country's democratically elected parliament. Later, in August 2012, the Brotherhood would claim that they had intelligence that the army was planning to stage a coup against the elected president. Fearing that the army might make its move at the end of the month, Morsi launched his own civilian "counter-coup," forcing top military leaders into retirement. On August 11, one day before Morsi acted, the privately owned *al-Dustour* newspaper published an editorial—taking up the entire front page in big bold and red letters—calling for a popular military coup. The words make for an eerie read in light of what would later come to pass: "Saving Egypt from the coming destruction will not occur without the union of the army and the people . . . If this does not happen in the coming days, then Egypt will fall and be destroyed . . . Taking to the streets in peaceful protest is imperative and a national duty until the army responds and announces its support for the people."³⁶

The editorial came in the context of a frightening upsurge in polarization. One extreme example was Tawfik Okasha, the sensationalist owner of the television station Al Fara'een, calling for violence against the Brotherhood and Mohamed Morsi, saying, "I make your blood permissible as well." Meanwhile, a million-man "second revolution" calling for the "dissolution" of the Brotherhood was scheduled to take place on August 24. As Hesham Sallam writes, "these trends, coupled with the developments that followed, signal that some military leaders may have been prodding their allies among opinion shapers and friendly media outlets to promote the image of popular support for a coup d'etat against the Brotherhood."³⁷

For the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist parties across the region, another Algeria was, and is, always around the corner. Winning one election after another is no guarantee of political survival, just like it wasn't in 1991. They believed that the conflict with their opponents was, at its core, about the latter's fear of democratic elections. The Brotherhood was, in a sense, vindicated by the coup that ousted the first freely elected president—and the fact that nearly all prominent liberals backed it. But it was also, in part, a self-fulfilling prophecy: in expecting the worst, you act in ways that make your feared outcome all the more likely. Indeed, Morsi and the Brotherhood's most provocative moves seemed to be animated by an endless reservoir of distrust and dismissiveness toward their opponents.

This became clear during Morsi's next battle, this time with a judicial establishment dominated by Mubarak appointees. On November 22, 2012, Morsi announced a constitutional decree, granting himself expansive powers and immunizing presidential decrees from judicial review, a move that for many liberals constituted a point of no return.

The Brotherhood once again saw existential threats on the horizon—one after another. Looming in the near future were court rulings that would dissolve both the constituent assembly and the upper house of parliament. Brotherhood and FJP officials told me at the time that they knew from sympathetic judges that rulings revoking Morsi's August 12 move against the army and even possibly annulling the presidential election law were in the cards. Another Brotherhood official went so far as to suggest that, if they didn't act preemptively now, the closing of Brotherhood offices could be next in a new campaign of repression, followed by the dissolution of

the organization itself. To be sure, the Brotherhood was well aware of just how bad Morsi's decree looked. As one senior FJP official admitted: "Yes, the decree isn't democratic and it's not what you would expect after a revolution," but he claimed there was simply no other choice.³⁸ The message was clear: the Brotherhood was fighting (again) for its very survival; the normal rules simply didn't apply. One Brotherhood official I spoke to likened Morsi's November 22 decree to "shock therapy that runs the risk of leaving the patient dead."³⁹

Islamists in Opposition; Islamists in Power

An Islamist movement in opposition and an Islamist party in power are two very different things. When Brotherhood officials were promising not to run a presidential candidate in March 2011 (and as late as February 2012), they were still stuck in old patterns of behavior. In authoritarian settings, Islamists learn how to lose, and they get used to it. Because of their long time horizon, this is something they are willing to accept. In the absence of a meaningful political process, Islamist movements can still pursue their original, core functions. They can continue expanding their reach deep into society, preparing themselves for the day that politics will open up, as it inevitably will.

In much of the region, including Egypt, Jordan, Bahrain, Yemen, and Morocco, Islamists in opposition did not face an existential threat. As part of their understandings with ruling regimes, they would have the space to advance their social and educational goals. They would be permitted limited representation in parliament. In return, they would refrain from revolutionary, antisystem activity. Until 2011, the bargain, with all its ebbs and flows, remained in place. Even in Egypt, the most repressive among them, the Brotherhood never once reneged on its side of the bargain.

Opposition is something you can get used to, particularly if the alternative—power and its temptations—threatens to alter the very nature of the movement. Repression, in addition to its moderating effects, also has a unifying effect, both between opposition groups and within them. It is always easier to stay together when you face a common enemy. In repressive contexts, defection makes less sense, since government restrictions make it difficult to establish new political parties.

Even when parties are granted legal status, the challenge of reaching a wider audience, with all the limitations and restrictions of authoritarian regimes, becomes nearly insurmountable. Dissenters, then, have an incentive to stay within the fold, and in part for this reason Islamist movements across the region have succeeded in containing various competing currents within their organizations. However, the temptation to defect grows in democratizing contexts, as Egypt's transition period attested. The freedom that comes with meaningful political openings transforms the role of organizations like the Brotherhood within the broader society.

In autocracies, any kind of activism—political, religious, or otherwise—is fraught with peril. There is the risk of harassment, arrest, and, perhaps more perniciously, the denial of access to government services, college placements, and employment opportunities, particularly in the public sector. For most Egyptians or Jordanians, incarceration is simply something they cannot afford. Who can be counted on to provide food, shelter, and education to their children while they serve a prison term? Islamist movements, with their organizational discipline and intense bonds between members, lower the cost of activism by providing a buffer against repression. When a Brotherhood member is arrested, the organization steps in and ensures the family is taken care of. The organization may also help provide a lawyer and take care of legal fees.

Moreover, in the absence of a spirit of volunteerism—a problem particularly acute in autocracies—Islamist groups offer a number of activities that provide their members with a deeper sense of community and belonging. As previously mentioned, each Brotherhood member is part of an *usra*, or “family,” which meets weekly to study religious texts, where the bonds of friendship and loyalty are strengthened.⁴⁰ In short, the Brotherhood provides a set of institutionalized channels for religious work, educational pursuits, and political action.

However, the freedom that comes with democratic openings makes a group like the Brotherhood both less unique and less essential. There are, for the first time, viable options outside of the movement. The mushrooming of civil society actors, political parties, and religious organizations (including Salafi ones) means each Egyptian can pick and choose instead of relying on one tightly wound network like the Brotherhood for an array of services.

When I met with one dissenting Brotherhood member, who held a leadership position in one of the governorates, he complained that the organization was losing its way. “There’s been about a year where they don’t really do anything but politics,” Mustafa Kamshish told me in May 2012. “All these elections—for the professional syndicates, student unions, and parliament—the rank-and-file are all consumed by this. So the other activities have stalled.”⁴¹

But if this was where the Brotherhood was going, then what was the point? “The biggest thing the Brotherhood had to offer was the social umbrella it provided its members, which no one else could provide,” Kamshish said. Now, however, the Brotherhood seemed at risk of losing the one thing that made it so attractive. If the politics continued to overwhelm the other functions of the organization, then would be members would look for alternatives, and in a more open society those alternatives would proliferate.

Conservative Revolutionaries

Everything about a group like the Muslim Brotherhood was designed for making the most of small (but significant) openings under autocratic regimes. Brotherhood affiliates and Brotherhood-inspired movements across the region believed in change, but not the revolutionary kind. It is difficult to remember it now, but before January 2011 “revolution” was simply not part of the opposition’s vocabulary in most of the Arab world. It was difficult to envision what a mass uprising might look like. Regimes had grown stubborn and more repressive, rather than the opposite. The best-case scenario was a long, arduous Moroccan-style regime-led transition. Islamists wouldn’t have to face the pressures of governing right away. They would learn gradually and on the job, as part of coalition or national unity governments.

And so when the revolution came, Brotherhood leaders in Egypt were far from prepared and, at least initially, they were afraid. If the revolution backfired and the regime managed to hold on to power, it was Islamists who would bear the brunt of the crackdowns that would no doubt follow. They would be blamed by the regime for putting their own organizational interests over Egypt’s stability. And all the

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social and organizational gains they had made over the past few decades would come under threat.

Even if the revolution succeeded, the temptations of power brought other risks. The longtime Islamist ambivalence toward power was about fearing repression, preserving the organization, and avoiding crippling internal divisions. Playing a role in parliament, or even leading it, was one thing, but holding positions in the executive branch—and taking responsibility for compromises and controversies—was another matter. It may have bothered their critics, but the Brotherhood's vagueness on, say, tax policy and subsidy reform was a virtue for a mass organization with different functions and different constituencies.

When it comes to movements like the Muslim Brotherhood, members join for a variety of reasons. As one Brotherhood official would often remind me, some members want to “use the group to get into heaven.” Others are more interested in political action and parliamentary work. Some are interested in the group's message of social justice, while some Islamist businessmen saw the organization as a vehicle for neoliberal business ventures. With such disparate elements, and differing conceptions of the role of religion in public life, it was easier to avoid answering the difficult questions. On foreign policy, the tensions were perhaps even more apparent. Some, like Abul Futouh, went on the record as early as 2006 accepting a two-state solution.⁴² Others warned that giving up on the resistance would be tantamount to a betrayal of the Brotherhood's original anticolonialism. In 2006, one Brotherhood official, Ali Abdel Fattah, criticized some of his more pragmatic colleagues and threatened to leave the organization if it ever recognized Israel's right to exist.⁴³

In Jordan, the problem of Israel has been even more complicated. Successive Jordanian prime ministers invited the IAF to join the government in the 1990s (as well as more recently). Yet “hawks” opposed any participation in the executive branch as long as the government maintained the peace treaty with Israel. For the IAF, whose members are mostly of Palestinian origin, Israel is not just a foreign policy issue but a domestic one as well.

In short, taking part in government compels Islamist parties to take definitive positions on controversial issues, which is something they would rather avoid. At best, delving into such issues alienates supporters and, at worst, precipitates internal splits. Until the Arab Spring, and

even after it, there have been few actual experiences of democratically elected Islamist parties in power for a significant period of time. In Jordan in 1991, Turkey in the mid-1990s, and Gaza in the late 2000s, the gap between ideals and practice, between ambition and reality, was large, perhaps too large. Islamist parties were forced to make uncomfortable decisions. Turkey's Welfare party, for example, had consistently denounced Turkey's military alliance with Israel and advocated a more pro-Islamic foreign policy posture. “We shall never become lackeys of the Christians. We shall establish an Islamic union,” declared the party's leader, Necmettin Erbakan, in 1994, while still in opposition.⁴⁴ But during his brief stint as prime minister, with the military's threatening gaze over him, Erbakan was forced to ratify a series of trade and military agreements with Israel. Meanwhile, in Jordan, there were the inevitable examples of overreach. During its brief six-month stint in which it controlled five ministries, the Brotherhood was criticized for what it didn't do and also for what it did, such as efforts to enforce sex segregation in the ministries of social development and education.

For the Jordanian Brotherhood's doves, 1991 remains a symbol of unfulfilled potential, a bitter reminder of more than two decades of exile in the opposition. For the group's hawks, however, the experience of 1991 would be remembered as an unacceptable compromise. There was no point, in their view, to accept token ministries, to have enough power to be criticized but not enough to actually change anything. The organization's most prominent hawk, Mohamed Abu Faris, published a book titled *Participation in the Cabinet under Un-Islamic Regimes*, where he runs through the many reasons for abstaining from government. First, ministers in un-Islamic regimes must be willing to bind themselves to constitutions that are based on un-Islamic sources of law. Second, ministers are responsible for executing existing laws, many of which “make permissible what is forbidden.”⁴⁵ Third, participation in government associates Islamists with unpopular policies. Lastly, participation legitimizes the government and improves its reputation in the eyes of the population.⁴⁶

Abu Faris argues that governments seek Islamist participation not to advance Islamic goals, but rather the opposite: to either neutralize Islamists or embarrass them.⁴⁷ In addition, bringing Islamists into government is a way to sow division within their ranks, something the very

existence of Abu Faris's book appears to affirm. Abu Faris's objections would foreshadow many of the challenges that Islamists would face in the wake of the Arab uprisings. As Abu Faris saw it, Islamists should avoid the temptations of power until they are truly prepared—and until society is truly prepared to accept them. The Islamic project needed to be anchored by a clear theological understanding of the Islamic state, and that, in turn, would require a public that was both ready and willing for what was to come. Until then, preaching, religious education, and keeping the regime honest were the Islamic movement's appropriate roles.

Even in opposition, elaborating on policy specifics can be a risky proposition. As we saw earlier, the Brotherhood in Egypt, hoping to deflect criticisms of vague sloganeering, released a succession of increasingly detailed programs. This got them into some trouble in 2007 when they released their political party platform, their longest and most detailed yet. The document, running at around 120 pages, came under attack for showing the Brotherhood's "true colors." Two issues in particular courted controversy: a stipulation that neither women nor Christians could hold the position of head of state and a proposal for a religious advisory council to review legislation. The former was not a reversal at all and was actually the group's longstanding position, as expressed in the 1994 statement on women. But since then, the group hadn't, for whatever reason, thought to include it in their electoral programs.

The clauses distracted from the rest of the program, which was very much in keeping with the pro-democracy focus of the 2004 reform initiative and 2005 electoral platform. As Mustafa al-Naggar reasoned in 2008 (before he left the Brotherhood): "If you took out those few lines, it would be an amazing program; it would be like any program of a liberal party."⁴⁸ But that, for some, was a big if.

A Fear of Being Destroyed

Islamist movements have had different ways of interpreting Algeria. One interpretation—the one that counseled caution and patience—reigned supreme for Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood before the 2011 revolution and in the early months after Mubarak's fall. The fear of provoking

the military, the old regime, and the international community led the group to tread carefully and make a series of pledges that they would later renege on and regret. It was odd for a party to make so many preemptive concessions so early on in a transition. Then again, Islamist parties were a unique proposition; their rise would almost inevitably arouse opposition, some of it based on what they did and some of it based simply on who they were. The Brotherhood was still acting as if it was an opposition party facing off against a potentially repressive regime. The Democratic Alliance, today a relic of a distant past, was central to the Brotherhood's efforts to portray itself as a magnanimous actor intent on sharing power.

But the political dynamics shifted more quickly than they—and almost everyone else—expected. First, there was the increasingly obvious weakness of liberal parties. Brotherhood leaders had always been dismissive of what they called "cardboard parties." However, they, and many others, assumed that a real political opening would allow liberals and leftists to gain ground. Yet non-Islamist parties, as fractious as ever, struggled to gain traction. So-called liberal parties had trouble defining what liberalism meant in the Egyptian context and even avoided using the word. Instead, they defined themselves in opposition to Islamists, playing to the Brotherhood's strengths. Perhaps most problematically, liberal and leftist parties struggled to mount effective campaigns, particularly in far-flung rural areas where they had little organizational presence. Even in Cairo, they seemed unprepared. As one Brotherhood figure told me on the eve of the 2011 parliamentary elections, "I'm disappointed. No one seems to be campaigning. There's no one in the street but the Brotherhood."⁴⁹

Still, even if they remained weak, Egyptians who were uncomfortable with the Brotherhood would have no choice but to consider non-Islamist alternatives—or so the thinking went. But such hopes were thwarted by the dramatic rise of Salafis, who despite their longtime opposition to democracy, quickly joined the democratic process and soon secured a stunning second-place finish in the elections.

In addition to the weakness of liberal parties, there was an impressively robust rearguard effort from old regime elements. Nathan Brown captured it well in an article suggestively titled "Just Because Mohamed Morsi is Paranoid Doesn't Mean He Doesn't Have Enemies."⁵⁰ In the

tense months of late 2012, it was difficult to know which of the Brotherhood's fears were real and which were imaginary, products of a hard-to-dislodge persecution complex. But *some* were real. The two main parties in question were the military and the judiciary, effectively the most resilient pillars of the old regime (along with a bloated security sector). Morsi was able to temporarily sideline the military on August 12, 2012 with a decree that was welcomed by most of Egypt's revolutionaries. Few could deny that SCAF, whether through malevolence or sheer incompetence, had mismanaged the transition beyond recognition, poisoning the country's politics in the process. The judiciary, purported protector of the rule of law, was a different matter. With its share of Mubarak loyalists, the judicial establishment was clearly politicized, but it had also developed a reputation for occasional bouts of independence. After the revolution, the Supreme Constitutional Court took it upon itself to check the Brotherhood's ambitions, which it saw as a threat to its own prerogatives. Leading figures on the bench, such as the Islamists' *bête noire* Tahani al-Gebali, worked closely with the military to help them dissolve the elected parliament and reassert control of the constitution-drafting process. Gebali was forthcoming about her motives. "I knew the elections would bring a majority from the movements of political Islam," she told the *New York Times*.⁵¹

Meanwhile, Ahmed al-Zend, head of the country's leading judicial association, accused the Brotherhood of "[carrying out] a systematic plan meticulously designed to destroy [the] country."⁵² He went so far as to suggest that the association's members would have done more to block Islamists' rise to power if they had known the Brotherhood and Salafis would do so well in the elections. During a televised address in June 2012, he expressed his reluctance to supervise the presidential runoff, pitting Ahmed Shafiq and Mohamed Morsi, fearing that the latter might win. He also openly declared the judiciary's politicization: "We won't leave matters for those who can't manage them, with the excuse that we're not people of politics. No, we are people of politics."⁵³

In many respects, the judiciary proved the more formidable adversary. The judges represented rule of law and separation of powers, important components of any successful democracy. After the military was seemingly sidelined in August 2012, they stood as the primary check on the Brotherhood's power. What the judiciary did, however undemocratic,

was "legal." When the opposition called on the Brotherhood to respect the rule of law, they may have had a point. But the Brotherhood also had a point when they accused the judiciary of bringing Egypt closer to the brink.

The anti-Islamist hysteria intensified that summer, capped by the rise of Mohamed Morsi as Egypt's first democratically elected president. It was odd to see liberals gathering to protest Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's July 2012 visit to Cairo. They felt that the United States was interfering in Egypt's domestic affairs, but for unusual reasons. Former presidential candidate Abul-Ezz al-Hariri claimed that the Obama administration was backing the Brotherhood so it could use the establishment of Egyptian theocracy as a pretext for an Iraq-style invasion. Emad Gad of the Social Democratic Party asserted that the United States was "working with purpose and diligence in order to enable the forces of political Islam to control the institutions of the Egyptian state."⁵⁴

These accusations formed a narrative that became increasingly commonplace during the presidential runoffs—that the United States was actively backing the Muslim Brotherhood's candidate, Mohamed Morsi. Before the final election results were announced on June 24, a coalition of leading liberal parties held a press conference condemning the Obama administration for its interference in the elections. "We refuse that the reason someone wins is because he is backed by the Americans," said Osama Ghazali Harb of the Democratic Front Party. As Egyptian politics descended into acrimony and polarization, a growing number of liberal politicians and parties celebrated the dissolution of parliament, backed Mubarak ally Ahmed Shafiq for the presidency, and supported an interventionist role for the SCAF in Egyptian politics. Fear and panic over the Brotherhood's seemingly unstoppable rise seemed to overwhelm nearly everything else.

This, of course, did not mean that *everyone* was out to get the Brotherhood, but that was increasingly how the Brotherhood and its allies acted, to their and the country's detriment. The November 22nd decree was perhaps Morsi and the Brotherhood's most damaging move, if not in intent then in effect. There was, however, little to suggest that the decision—which gave Morsi unprecedented, if temporary, powers—was part of some furtively held plan to seize the state and impose Islamic

autocracy. Rather, the same sense of destiny that led them toward caution before the revolution, as well as just after it, was now leading them in the opposite direction. What united them in both cases was a fear of being destroyed. They had come close before only to see their gains snatched away. They wouldn't let it happen again. And so they made the particularly fateful decision to contest the presidency. With what seemed like a great victory in hand, they decided to move against the military. But then the judiciary struck, threatening to undo their electoral victories. It had already dissolved Egypt's first democratically elected parliament and now threatened to dissolve the constituent assembly. So Morsi and the Brotherhood moved there too. Throughout it all, they insisted that each move was both temporary and necessary. Because they faced an existential threat, the normal rules of politics would have to be suspended. But for how long and at what cost? And when they had time to think about it, there was a lingering question: to what end?

7

Illiberal Democrats

THE TRANSITION SIMPLY DIDN'T go as planned. A series of unexpected events forced Egypt's Islamists to alter their approach. The environment was changing—more quickly than they could have ever imagined—and so too were they. The advent of electoral democracy introduced a new set of pressures into an unstable political arena.

As we saw in previous chapters, the repressive constraints of the old regime had kept Islamists in check. There was only so far they could go and so much they could do. They limited their ambitions accordingly. Regime repression had distorted the original mission of the Brotherhood, pushing the group to be not just more moderate but also more cautious than it would have otherwise been.

The normative, philosophical matters of the nature of the nation-state were beside the point when there was simply no chance of holding power, certainly not anytime soon and perhaps not for decades. Ideas traditionally associated with political Islam—such as banning alcohol or usury—seemed irrelevant and even petty.

Political realities reinforced the Brotherhood's tendency to play the long game and think of politics as consisting of stages (*siyasit al-marabil*). Something in one stage might not be appropriate for another. In the stage of opposition, they could afford to postpone the contentious ideological debates that they, in any case, had little interest in engaging in for fear of provoking internal dissent.

But when regime change finally came and they graduated to the next stage—one that entailed thinking seriously about power and