

Exploring the Rise and Fall of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt

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In July 2013, the Egyptian military under the leadership of Abdel Fattah el Sisi unceremoniously removed the President of Egypt Mohammad Morsi from the office of President. This event marked the end of the Muslim Brotherhood short reign in power from June 2012 to July 2013. Broadly speaking, this paper examines the rise and fall of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, advancing the argument that the very same ideologies, experiences, and decision-making of the Brotherhood that enabled it to gain prominence during the late 20th century set the groundwork for its struggles and ultimate failure under Morsi's rule. In the process of making this argument, I discuss the prevailing themes of the conflict between religiosity and secularity as well as political authoritarianism.

When state institutions fail to meet their citizens' needs, religious institutions step in to provide for these. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood shifted from being a "political missionary society" in the 1920s to being a pragmatic political organization that toppled the regime of Hosni Mubarak in 2012.¹ In the early years of the Muslim Brotherhood, its founder Hasan al-Banna described the members of the coalescing organization as being "monks by the night and knights by the day."² His aim was to create an organization that "combined a pre-modern concern with cultivating pious character and virtue with a modern interest in creating effective organizations and movements, all for the purpose of establishing an Islamic socio-political order."³ When the Muslim Brotherhood, under the leadership of Mohamad Morsi, ruled from June 2012 to July 2013, it was clear that the socio-political doctrine

¹ Sam Houston, "'Monks by Night and Knights by Day': Ḥasan al-Bannā', Tarbiya, and the Embodied Ethics of the Early Muslim Brotherhood," *Religion Compass* 12, no. 7 (2018): 3

² Houston, "Monks by Night and Knights by Day," 3.

³ *Ibid.*, 3.

had evolved and, in many respects, had deviated from Hassan al-Banna's vision of an Islamic order.

This essay will argue that the very same ideologies, experiences, and decision-making processes of the Brotherhood that enabled it to gain prominence during the late 20th century set the groundwork for its struggles and ultimate failure under Morsi. For the purpose of this essay, political legitimacy will be distinguished from social and religious legitimacy, leading to a discussion of the prevailing conflicts and conflicts between religiosity, secularity as well as authoritarianism in Egypt.

The Muslim Brotherhood emerged in 1928, amidst the currents of decolonization movements and the waves of a widespread rejection of secular rule that had come to embody Egypt's ruling elite at the time. The Muslim Brotherhood believed that deeply integrating Islam into Egyptian society was the way to rid Egypt from colonial domination, and during the Brotherhood's early years, it was seen as an effective organization that set itself apart from the political chaos of Egypt.⁴ As author Kristen Stilt mentions, the Brotherhood was initially focused on working for the Muslim community and placed a high emphasis on morality and religiosity.⁵ Within this context, the Brotherhood was seen as "a group of do-gooders or religious teachers" who were not seen as having any political power.⁶ Through the use of Islamic education and effective propaganda in the 1940s and the 1950s, the Brotherhood developed a strong support base among anti-colonial Egyptians.⁷

Throughout the 1950s and until the late stages of the Hosni Mubarak regime, the Brotherhood continued to develop its fight for more political power within Egypt as its leaders came to the realization that political power was a necessity to instil Islam into Egyptian society.⁸ This demand was never satisfied under the regimes of Gamal Abdel

⁴ Cleveland, L William and Martin Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East* (Colorado: Westview Press, 2016), 190.

⁵ Kristen Stilt, "'Islam is the Solution': Constitutional Visions of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood," *Texas International Law Journal*, 46, no. 1 (2010): 77.

⁶ William Polk, *Crusade and Jihad: The Thousand-Year War Between the Muslim World and the Global North* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2018), 365.

⁷ Polk, *Crusade and Jihad*, 365-67.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 369.

Nasser, Anwar Sadat, and Mubarak, during which time Egypt was susceptible to major economic struggles with many lower-class and middle-class individuals growing disillusioned with the government's failure to uphold its side of the social contract. The Brotherhood capitalized on these failures of state institutions, stepping in to provide educational and medical services for Egyptians, which contributed to the expansion of their support base.⁹ However, despite making progress, they remained an "unofficial political party" throughout the late 20th and early 21st centuries because of the exclusionary politics of the regimes of Sadat and Mubarak.¹⁰

At the heart of Egyptian national identity, there has been a prevailing conflict between the religious and the secular schools of thought, expressed by Egyptian policy-making since the 1950s. Nasser's confrontations with the United States, Britain, and Israel in the 1950s and 1960s helped conceal and distract religious Egyptians from the fact that Nasser was a staunch secularist, his regime embodying a period in Egyptian history where religious influence was pushed away from political life. Following his death, however, Islamism regained prominence.¹¹ With the decolonization movement in the backdrop, Egypt's shift to Islamism was part of a widespread effort to reject the remnants of imperialism and the recently identified threat of neo-colonialism. In this sense, the socio-economic conditions that facilitated the rise of the Brotherhood in Egypt were not entirely unique to Egypt—the socio-economic conditions of several Middle Eastern countries were deteriorating from the mid-20th to 21st centuries. The Egyptian revolution fits into the wider circumstances of the Arab Spring.

Following Nasser's death in 1970, the statecraft of the Egyptian government continued to turn its back to the sensitivities and the needs of the majority of Egyptians as the socio-economic conditions within the country deteriorated. Under the regimes of Sadat and Mubarak, Egypt's foreign policy became increasingly oriented to the Western powers. Among many Egyptians, Anwar Sadat's decision to sign the Camp

⁹ Khalil al-Anani, "Upended Path: The Rise and Fall of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood," *The Middle East Journal* 69, no. 4 (2015): 529.

¹⁰ Stilt, "Islam is the Solution," 79.

¹¹ Tarek Osman, *Egypt on the Brink: from Nasser to the Muslim Brotherhood* (London; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 94.

David treaty with Israel became known as the deal “that betrayed the millions that died in Sinai.”¹² This kind of foreign policy foreshadowed what was to come during Mubarak’s reign from 1981 to 2011. During the early years of Mubarak’s regime, his policies showed just how secular, neoliberal and Western-oriented the country had become. For instance, he supported the US-led invasion of Iraq in 1991, which the Muslim Brotherhood criticized.¹³ The Brotherhood capitalized on the failings of the state and portrayed the state as being “un-Islamic,” driving the sentiment that the state was unsympathetic to the needs of the population.¹⁴ For instance, following the 1992 earthquake, the Brotherhood led relief efforts, as opposed to the government.¹⁵ Instances of the Brotherhood stepping in to carry out the responsibilities of the government became a commonality, helping to solidify the perception that the Brotherhood was a ‘political missionary society.’ Furthermore, these actions helped to appeal to the Islamic aspects of Egypt’s identity.

Starting in the 1970s, the Muslim Brotherhood made a disconcerted attempt to give legitimacy to its political status by working with the Supreme Constitutional Court (SCC) which was responsible for reviewing and interpreting Egypt’s 1971 constitution.¹⁶ According to Article 174 and Article 177 of the 1971 Constitution, the SCC is independent and “its members shall not be removed from office.”¹⁷ As journalist Sahar Aziz states, all laws had to be approved by the SCC, which made the court a “powerful tool in shaping electoral politics.”¹⁸ Both these factors allude to the fact that the SCC is one of the most powerful institutions within the country, which did not bode well for the Brotherhood as it meant that it would have to work within the powerful judiciary system that was an integral part of the state’s authoritarian political apparatus. Consequently, the Brotherhood had to maintain a pragmatic relationship with the SCC while also not seeming like a

¹² Ibid., 98.

¹³ Stilt, “Islam is the Solution,” 78.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 79.

¹⁷ Constitution of the Arab Republic of Egypt, 1971, Article 174 and Article 177. Accessed with <https://bit.ly/2JNRzbn>.

¹⁸ Sahar Aziz, “Egypt’s War of Attrition,” *Al Jazeera*, April 7, 2013. <https://bit.ly/2YwmEUe>.

puppet of the very state institutions it opposed. As will be discussed later in this essay, maintaining this fragile balance proved to be difficult.

The 1971 Constitution expressed the conflict between religious and secular schools of thoughts. Article 2 of the Constitution stated, “Principles of Islamic law are the principal source of legislation,” seeming to imply support for Hassan al-Banna’s view on the indoctrination of Islamic principles to Egyptian society.¹⁹ This statement, however, appears to be in contradiction with the secular policymaking of the Egyptian government in the late 20th century. The nature of the SCC’s role meant that it had the power to decide as to what degree Islamic law should be integrated into the Egyptian constitution.²⁰ The 1971 Constitution expresses strong Islamic undertones while also emphasizing inherently secular sets of ideals. In addition to the aforementioned commitment to Islamic principles in legislation, the constitution uses strongly religious proclamations such as “swear by Almighty Allah” to emphasize loyalty to the constitution.²¹ Furthermore, Article 40 and 47 implies a strong commitment to religious tolerance and pledge to political plurality.²² However, this pledge to tolerance is vague and the constitution does not define the concept of political plurality in this context. In what appears to be a contradiction to Article 44, Article 5 states “no party shall be organized on religious referential authority.”²³ Since the Brotherhood is an organization that aims to build Egyptian society along Islamic values, this article could be interpreted as one that bars them from political leadership. These articles illustrate how Egypt’s 1971 Constitution was problematic for the Brotherhood as it posed an existential question to its legitimacy as a political player. As mentioned earlier, the Brotherhood was aware of the importance of securing political legitimacy in order to make a disconcerted attempt to restructure Egypt along Islamic principles.

One of the most significant steps in this process of gaining political legitimacy occurred in 2007 when the Brotherhood released its first party platform.²⁴ This platform had several severe weaknesses

¹⁹ Constitution of the Arab Republic of Egypt, Article 2.

²⁰ Stilt, “Islam is the Solution,” 83.

²¹ Constitution of the Arab Republic of Egypt, Article 155.

²² *Ibid.*, Article 9, 3.

²³ *Ibid.*, Article 5, 3.

²⁴ Stilt, “Islam is the Solution,” 84.

which, as will be discussed later, continued to plague the Brotherhood deep into its time in power. First, because there were no lawyers involved in the drafting committee, the platform was vague, meaning that it was difficult to implement certain elements of the platform.²⁵ Second, the openness of the platform was seen as a desperate attempt by the Brotherhood to overemphasize its reformist aspects in order to expand its support base.²⁶ One of the Brotherhood's main fears was that its vision of instilling Islamic principles into Egyptian politics would be interpreted as wanting to establish a theocracy, such as in the case of Iran, which was not what the Brotherhood wanted.²⁷ Most importantly, this platform accepted the Egyptian constitution's interpretation of Islam and the platform saw no reason to amend it or introduce a new one.²⁸ This was fundamentally problematic because the SCC's interpretation of Islam within a legal context differed from the Brotherhood's interpretation of Islam within a legal context.²⁹

The Brotherhood had struggled to appeal to secular factions in Egypt throughout its existence. This struggle again alludes to the tensions between the religious and secular aspects of Egypt's identity. On the religious front, the Brotherhood had to please its grass-root support and the Salafists.³⁰ For clarification, the Salafists were a group Islamists who pushed for a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam and they were gaining popularity among disenfranchised Muslims throughout the Arab Spring.³¹ On the secular front, the Brotherhood had to calm the anxieties of those who believed it would implement Sharia Law and take away their political rights.³² They needed the support of both these very distinct groups. Once again, the challenge of appealing to both the religious and secular factions proved to be a challenging theme in the broader Middle East. Implementing a religious order in a country that had been under secular authoritarian regimes from the time

²⁵ Ibid., 80-86.

²⁶ Ibid., 86.

²⁷ Ibid., 90.

²⁸ Ibid., 87.

²⁹ Ibid., 85-89.

³⁰ Alison Pargeter, *The Muslim Brotherhood: From Opposition to Power*, New Ed (London: Saqi Books, 2013), 253

³¹ Pargeter, *The Muslim Brotherhood: From Opposition to Power*, 254

³² Ibid., 252.

of its independence was in itself, a very difficult task. Therefore, these early contradictions and ambiguities in its 2007 platform set the foundation for the bigger constitutional problems that arose when Morsi became the first civilian President of Egypt in 2012.

While the Muslim Brotherhood was fighting for its political rights, throughout the later part of the 20th century and the early part of the 21st century, the Mubarak regime's policies became increasingly authoritarian. This was a distinct shift in the relationship among factions of the Muslim Brotherhood and factions of the Mubarak regime in the 1980s, during which time, the Mubarak regime thought the best way to give itself legitimacy was to accommodate opposing parties.³³ However, this transformed into a policy of repression as a result of the increasing prominence of the Brotherhood and Islamic extremists in the 1990s.³⁴ This need for legitimacy on the part of the regime alludes to an interesting point regarding the relationship between legitimacy and authoritarianism. There is a common misconception that authoritarian regimes do not feel the need to give their rule legitimacy, as their rule can be maintained through direct or indirect coercion. However, Mubarak's actions illustrated that authoritarian regimes *do* feel the need to maintain some level of popular legitimacy.

In addition to political repression during the Mubarak regime, Egypt's worsening socio-economic situation was a major contributing factor to the failure of the regime and its social institutions, and the rise of the Brotherhood. Mubarak's attempt at mass privatization under the neoliberal politics of the 1990s meant that the wealth gap between the rich and the poor grew wider.³⁵ In the 1990s, Mubarak hoped that his promises of economic reform "could redress the grievances generated by the regime's worn out social contract."³⁶ Developmental plans such as the Cairo 2030 initiative, aimed at attracting local and foreign elite to downtown Cairo, alienated the middle and lower-class Egyptians.³⁷ As Al-Awadi illustrates, mass privatization did not help to improve the dire

³³ Hesham Al-Awadi, *In Pursuit of Legitimacy: The Muslim Brothers and Mubarak, 1982-2000*, Vol. 46 (London and New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 2004), 190-193.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 189.

³⁵ Jack Shenker, *The Egyptians: A Radical Story* (London: Allen Lane, 2016), 40-42.

³⁶ Al-Awadi, *In Pursuit of Legitimacy*, 190.

³⁷ Shenker, *The Egyptians*, 42.

socio-economic state of most Egyptians.³⁸ This alienation led to an increased willingness to “resist the spread of any free market doctrine that denied them social and economic rights.”³⁹ Religion became an avenue to vent these socio-political frustrations in the sense that religious organizations such as a Brotherhood, became a vehicle to express these frustrations.⁴⁰

When Morsi rose to power in 2012, it was clear to observers that the Brotherhood had undergone considerable transformations since the 1920s. Since its inception, the Brotherhood has faced challenges from all sides of the political spectrum; yet, it was often the underestimated commitment to reliance and change that had kept it alive. Over the Brotherhood’s lifetime, its political ideology has been readapted to fit changing political climates. As Noha Mellor argues, the Brotherhood kept moving between being “anti-West and pro-West, between promoting isolationism and promoting international dialogue” depending on the socio-economic conditions and the political landscape.⁴¹ This was by no means a static organization that was unwilling to change to fit the needs of the population. Moreover, this willingness to change was not unique to the Brotherhood in Egypt—the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria also attempted to portray itself as an inclusive organization that advocated for political pluralism.⁴² In an attempt to seem progressive, the leader of the Syrian Brotherhood stated in 2010 that he would have “no objections to a Christian or a woman becoming President, so long as they were the people’s choice.”⁴³ From an ideological point of view, this is highly progressive and it illustrates just how much the organization has changed since its early years.

By 2012, it became clear that the Brotherhood was no longer a “political missionary society,” it was a fully-fledged political party with more power and influence than ever before. Mohamed Morsi’s inauguration speech appealed to a strong commitment to economic development centered along reviving the tourist industry; however,

³⁸ Al-Awadi, *In Pursuit of Legitimacy*, 190.

³⁹ Shenker, *The Egyptians*, 46.

⁴⁰ Cleveland and Bunton, *The Making of the Modern Middle East*, 544.

⁴¹ Noha Mellor, *Voice of the Muslim Brotherhood, Da’wa, Discourse, and Political Communication* (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), 210

⁴² Pargeter, *The Muslim Brotherhood: From Opposition to Power*, 101

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 101.

these plans for economic development did not seem so different from the plans established by the Mubarak regime.⁴⁴ Additionally, excluding the occasional Islamic proclamations, there is no indication in the speech that suggests anything about the role of Islam in public life.⁴⁵ This was likely done in an attempt to widen the support base with general appeals to the broader Egyptian electorate. This transition into the leading political party meant that the Brotherhood would assume the task of solving the problems created by Mubarak's regime.

When the Muslim Brotherhood rose to power in 2012, it faced a multitude of challenges that posed existential threats to its political legitimacy. They faced the daunting task of revitalizing a weak economy, addressing the high unemployment rate, and calming the fears of a population that demanded inclusive governance.⁴⁶ Additionally, they faced the scrutiny of Egypt's powerful Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) and the Supreme Constitutional Court (SCC), two of the most important institutional pillars of the previous regime under Mubarak. As a result of the power they held, the SCC and the SCAF were arguably Morsi's most important allies, but also, his most dangerous critics. As a result of its popularity, the Brotherhood underestimated the potency of these threats and felt a false sense of invincibility.⁴⁷ To the dismay of Egyptians, the Brotherhood failed to effectively address the aforementioned issues. As one Egyptian stated, "the parliament was all Muslim Brotherhood, everything in the country was Muslim Brotherhood."⁴⁸ This belief resonated with the majority of Egyptians who felt isolated by the Brotherhood's policy-making. While the Brotherhood proved to be very effective at mass mobilization in the decades leading up to the revolution, it proved to be highly

⁴⁴ "President Mohamed Morsi's Speech at Cairo University, Saturday, June 30, after Taking Oath of Office," Transcript, From *Ikhwan Web* (accessed December 5, 2018). <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=30156>

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Cleveland and Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 545-546.

⁴⁷ Patrick Kingsley, "How Mohamed Morsi, Egypt's first elected president, ended up on death row." *Guardian*. 1 June 2015.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/01/mohamed-morsi-execution-death-sentence-egypt>

⁴⁸ Kira D. Jumet, *Contesting the Repressive State: Why Ordinary Egyptians Protested during the Arab Spring* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 53.

inexperienced in the field of politics.⁴⁹ The reasons for its political inexperience laid in the fact that pre-Morsi government structure of Mubarak allowed very little room for political plurality. The Brotherhood's political inexperience proved to be fatal for the regime's longevity as it meant that Morsi was more concerned with "monopolizing power and marginalizing others than about building alliances or protecting the independence of national institutions such as the judiciary or the media."⁵⁰ The fact that Morsi was seen as a middle man between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Mubarak regime did not bode well with popular opinion.⁵¹ This perception isolated the Brotherhood and was highly self-destructive as it stemmed from a failure to recognize the fact that the 2011 revolution was driven by a diverse group of people that had different political views but were willing to compromise.⁵² By this point, it was clear that the Brotherhood had turned its back on the secular factions of the country.

By isolating itself from the people of Egypt, the Brotherhood essentially cut off one of its most important sources of potential support. The Brotherhood's relative unpopularity gave the powerful SCAF a justifiable reason to act against the elected party. The other important player in this power struggle, the SCC, also turned its back to the Brotherhood. The SCC's task of being an impartial actor within Egypt came under scrutiny and two of these instances are presented here. First, just before Morsi came to office, the Supreme Court dissolved the lower house of parliament which was led by the Brotherhood.⁵³ Second, SCC was further criticized by the Brotherhood when it struck down a new law that had given the Brotherhood a significant advantage within the people's assembly.⁵⁴ Both these decisions significantly weakened the political power of the Brotherhood. In response, Morsi implemented the

⁴⁹ Cleveland and Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 546.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 546.

⁵¹ Sarah Childress, "Khaled Fahmy: Sisi Is 'Much More Dangerous'," *Frontline*, 17 September 2013. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/khaled-fahmy-sisi-is-much-more-dangerous/>.

⁵² *The Square*, Directed by Jehane Noujaim. Washington: GathrFilms Participant Media, 2013. Netflix.

⁵³ Patrick Kingsley, "How Mohammad Morsi, Egypt's First Elected President, Ended Up on the Death Row."

⁵⁴ Aziz, "Egypt's War of Attrition."

Emergency Law in 2013.⁵⁵ The introduction of this law was highly unpopular among the public as it gave Morsi dictatorial powers, which led to him being called the “new pharaoh.”⁵⁶ This law was implemented partly to bring in a new constitution as the Brotherhood felt the 1971 constitution did not suit their political agenda.⁵⁷ This decision shows how the Brotherhood miscalculated when in the 2007 platform, they saw no need to bring in a new constitution. This is again, one link that shows that the past decisions of the Brotherhood affected its ability to govern in 2012. As one revolutionary expressed, Egypt had effectively gone from being a military dictatorship to a religious dictatorship.⁵⁸ Morsi’s decision to cooperate with the Police and SCAF instead of cooperating with the revolution proved to further isolate the Brotherhood.⁵⁹ These incidents only exacerbated the growing concern that Egypt was heading for an ‘Iranian styled theocracy.’⁶⁰ While a theocratic system was likely not what the Brotherhood envisioned, the *perceived* sense of a theocracy undoubtedly made the Muslim Brotherhood extremely unpopular with the secular factions of Egyptian society.

In June 2013, the Head of the Egyptian Armed Forces, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, stated in a speech that Morsi had threatened the very institutions of freedom within the country and threatened the use of unjust violence and therefore the SCAF, as advanced by el-Sisi, was left with no choice other than to overthrow the sitting president, speaking to the power dynamics at play.⁶¹ The state apparatus of the Mubarak regime was still very powerful in spite of the revolution as the ‘deep state’ was largely unchanged by the revolution of 2011, which meant that Brotherhood was not as powerful as it seemed.⁶²

In conclusion, this essay explored the conflict between religious and secular schools of thought within authoritarian socio-political discourse in Egypt and considered how this conflict influenced the

⁵⁵ *The Square*, Netflix.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Childress, “Khaled Fahmy: Sisi Is ‘Much More Dangerous’.”

⁶⁰ *The Square*, Netflix.

⁶¹ Abdel Fattah Khalil al-Sisi, “Transcript: Egypt’s army statement,” *Al Jazeera*, (3 July 2013), <https://bit.ly/2JWRiD8>.

⁶² Childress, “Khaled Fahmy: Sisi Is ‘Much More Dangerous’.”

Brotherhood's rise and fall. It is clear that the Brotherhood's socio-political ideology became increasingly malleable to fit the demands and expectations of the population. This resulted in a deviation from Hasan al-Banna's founding doctrines, leading to a sharp divide between the ideals and realities of the Brotherhood's policies and practices, evidenced during Morsi's short reign. The Brotherhood's false sense of invincibility, following its rise to power, swiftly gave the ability for the remnants of the Mubarak-era state apparatus to regroup.

On the other hand, the level of resilience displayed by the Brotherhood in the late-20th and early-21st centuries made them an effective source of opposition to exclusionary state politics. Yet, when Brotherhood rose to power in 2012, it was unable to adjust to this exclusionary system of politics. Morsi's secretive decision-making isolated the Brotherhood from the Egyptian people and gave the SCAF the legitimacy it required to overthrow Morsi. In an interview, professor Khaled Fahmy, who is a professor at the American University of Cairo, describes colonial Egypt as a place with a "flawed constitution and a paralyzed political system."⁶³ Unfortunately, these same observations can be applied to describe the state of the country through the 1970s to the current state of affairs. The deeply complex and repressive nature of Egypt's present political apparatus is both a cause and a consequence of the constitutional and political flaws.

⁶³ Ibid..

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