

THE EGYPTIAN MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD'S FAILURES

Part 1 of a series on political Islam in Egypt

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To understand Egypt's current political situation, it is crucial to examine how and why the Muslim Brotherhood—a leading political actor just over a year ago—met its demise so suddenly and forcefully. Though it had to operate in a hostile political environment, the Brotherhood ultimately fell because of its own political, ideological, and organizational failures.

Key Themes

- The organization's inclusion in the political system did not lead to its democratization and moderation, as some observers had predicted it would. Instead, the lack of political consensus in Egyptian society combined with the Brotherhood's unwillingness to undergo a process of ideological and organizational transformation undermined the group's democratic potential.
- The Brotherhood's leadership was made untenable by its inability to placate the powerful old state or win over crucial elites and other political actors.
- Ideological hollowness and opportunism undercut the Brotherhood's claims to a legitimate "Islamic democratic project," and the organization's structural deficits led it to be widely distrusted.
- The Brotherhood's failure to transform electoral victories into sustainable political control effectively eliminated the possibility of Islamist domination. While its fall did not signify the end of political Islam in Egypt, it did mark the end of the utopian idea held by some that "Islam is the solution."

Three Primary Faults

Politically, the Brotherhood misread the situation. It moved toward political domination too quickly, making a series of tactical mistakes in the process. It failed to either appease or successfully confront institutional power bases, and, believing its electoral victory to be an irreversible popular mandate, it was reluctant to make the concessions necessary to avoid alienating crucial secular elites. The Brotherhood waged an unwinnable battle, driven more by ideological zeal and delusions of grandeur than by a realistic assessment of the political environment.

Ideologically, the Brotherhood was shallow and opportunistic. It proved too willing to sacrifice elements of its ideology for short-term political victories. Furthermore, fundamentally antidemocratic components of Brotherhood dogma and the disconnect between the group's professed ideology and the policy positions it assumed highlighted its incompatibility with modern democratic politics.

Organizationally, the Brotherhood was incapable of adaptation. Its rigid, hierarchical structure prevented it from successfully reacting to rapid societal changes. The Brotherhood's attempts to promote organizational unity, while successful at muting the impact of intragroup differences, contributed to the exodus of fresh talent and ideas. Its organizational introversion and conspiratorial mind-set also undermined its ability to build a broad network of support.

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