THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD AND THE FUTURE OF POLITICAL ISLAM IN EGYPT

Part 2 of a series on political Islam in Egypt

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The current turmoil in Egypt—including social strife, polarization, and violence—has cast shadows on the potential for Islamist integration as well as the regime’s ability to achieve political stability. Shifting external and internal dynamics of Islamist organizations indicate five possible scenarios for the future of the Muslim Brotherhood. Its path will have far-reaching implications for political Islam and democratization in Egypt.

Possible Future Scenarios

- The regime remains committed to the goal of eradicating the Brotherhood, even though it lacks the resources to effectively do so. The Brotherhood continues to face a ruthless crackdown by the regime, including arbitrary arrests, frozen assets, and violent confrontations.

- Through ongoing protests that rattle the regime and begin to generate greater popular support, the Brotherhood returns to Egyptian politics in triumph.

- Islamists and the regime negotiate a return to the political formula under former president Hosni Mubarak—limited political inclusion of the Brotherhood within certain regime-determined redlines.

- The Brotherhood splits into two main fragments: moderates who view conventional Brotherhood policy as too confrontational, and hardliners who view current policy as too compromising and also ideologically incorrect.

- The organization recognizes the failures of its current protests and withdraws from political activity, focusing on an internal ideological reinvention.

Implications for Egyptian Society

It is uncertain which of the five scenarios for the Brotherhood’s future will come to pass. The old state and the Brotherhood are currently committed, respectively, to the Brotherhood’s total eradication or its triumphant comeback. The unlikelihood that either of these scenarios will be fulfilled might force the regime and Islamists to be more open to other options, particularly reconciliation. Yet for the near to medium term, reconciliation, fragmentation, and reinvention remain unlikely.

The Brotherhood has proven to be more resilient than initially assumed, leaving political Islam as a force in Egyptian politics for the immediate future. The rise of post-Brotherhood politics would require the end of old-state authoritarian politics, economic development, and religious reform as well as the establishment of participatory democratic movements, none of which is currently foreseeable.

Current dynamics do not bode well for a future democratic Egypt. Any path for democratic political and social change has not been welcomed by the old state or the Islamists, who remain unwilling to engage with other actors or to foster renewed democratic thinking. This leaves political Islam, like the old state in Egypt, part of the ongoing problem rather than the solution.