Brothers in Power

The Muslim Brotherhood promises a pragmatic blend of Islam and capitalism for Egypt. Now can the once-banned group deliver?

By Stephen Glain

Deputy Supreme Guide Khairat el-Shater (left) and parliamentary speaker Mohamed Saad Katatni face the daunting responsibility of power after years in the political wilderness

In January the Muslim

Brotherhood emerged from modern Egypt's first free elections in decades with a dominant position in Parliament. The emphatic victory was widely expected because of the group's extensive political and social networks, and strong grassroots appeal. What wasn't clear, however, was the true character and ambitions of Egypt's new governing force.

Once in power, would the Brotherhood's members act like the stealth jihadis some critics portray them to be and impose a hard-line Islamic order on Egyptian society in an attempt to restore the medieval Caliphate across the Arab world? Or would they govern as a Middle Eastern Tammany Hall, a crew of ward heelers winning elections with dollops of jobs, subsidized food and free education? Is the Brotherhood a bunch of inveterate schemers who managed to insinuate their way into Egyptian society after cutting secret deals with dictators and spies, or a group of neoliberals who favor low taxes and free markets?

In fact, although the Ikhwan, as the group is known in Arabic, contains traces of all those tendencies, it is a fiercely pragmatic force attuned to the pious but restrained sensibility of the Egyptian street. The group's mission and culture have changed little since it was formed more than 80 years ago to resist foreign occupation and peacefully Islamize Egyptian society. It has survived as one of the oldest political movements in the Arab world by embracing the center of the political spectrum rather than pushing toward its extremes. A popular Ikhwan motto — *kull khatwa madrusa* ("every step is deliberate") — suggests a cagey instinct for the long game, shaped by decades of persecution. The group's methodical base-building recalls the famous phrase of Democratic machine politics in Chicago: "Don't make no waves, don't back no losers."

"The Muslim Brotherhood is very well organized and centrist," says Elijah Zarwan, an analyst at the Brussels-based International Crisis Group. "In five years' time I expect it to be a well-established, fully functional political party not unlike the ruling party in Turkey."

Not everyone is so positive. The U.S. government, which for decades all but ignored the Ikhwan out of respect for former president Hosni Mubarak's ban on the group, is looking to establish ties but seems reluctant to embrace the Brotherhood. In response to the group's landslide election victory, some members of Congress demanded the suspension of U.S. aid to Egypt. In December, Senator John Kerry met with Brotherhood leaders in what were among the most senior-level talks held between the two sides. The encounter was cordial but had a pointed subtext: Having indulged the ancien régime by keeping the Brotherhood at bay, Washington was starting from scratch with a movement that owed it no favors — particularly none related to Cairo's peace treaty with Israel and its dealings with U.S. adversaries like Iran.

Political banners dominate a central Cairo shopping street (left) during the November parliamentary elections; Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh (right) broke with the Brotherhood to run in this May's presidential election

One of the Ikhwanists who participated in the Kerry meeting was Mohamed Saad Katatni, who in January was elected speaker of the People's Assembly, the lower house of the Egyptian Parliament, making him one of the country's most influential politicians. Katatni knows well the group's journey from the margins of politics to the seat of power. In April 2007 he was one of several parliamentarians invited to meet with a group of visiting U.S. congressional representatives led by then–House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer. A *Newsweek* account of the gathering implied that the Brotherhood was a terrorist organization with ambitions of restoring the caliphate , the Medieval Islamic empire that stretched from the Strait of Gibraltar to the Hindu Kush.

When I asked Katatni last June in Cairo about the conflict between Washington's perception of the Brotherhood and the way it is regarded throughout the Muslim world, he managed a wan smile. "What can we do?" he shrugged. "There's too much to worry about here to even consider what they think about us over there."

Today, suddenly, Washington has a great interest in Egyptian affairs. The Brotherhood has won a resounding mandate. The group's political arm, the Freedom and Justice Party, controls 47 percent of the seats in the Assembly, and its senior members are expected to be offered key cabinet ministries following next month's presidential election. (The Brotherhood itself is not running for the presidency, although one of the leading candidates, Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh, is a former member.) Al-Nour, the party of Egypt's ultraorthodox Salafi movement, garnered a surprising 24 percent share of the seats in Parliament. The balance is held by the Ikhwan's old secular rival, the al-Wafd Party, and a cluster of liberal and leftist groups that coalesced after the revolution.

The group's rise to power is an extraordinary tale of political redemption, but its consequences are far from clear. The Ikhwan faces an economic crisis that could fuel a nationwide revolt — one led not by the liberal elites that brought down Mubarak but by a lean and hungry proletariat. Internally, it must reconcile its own rigid, illiberal hierarchy, which demands absolute loyalty from its followers, with the new national spirit of democracy. The early signs aren't encouraging. When a cadre of young members pushed for a greater say within the group last year, it was crushed by an old guard that included Katatni.

Unless the Brotherhood distances itself from politics, it "will bring itself down within the next few years," says Mohammed al-Gebba, a former member of the Ikhwan's Youth Guard. "Politics and religion are not compatible. One compromises the other."

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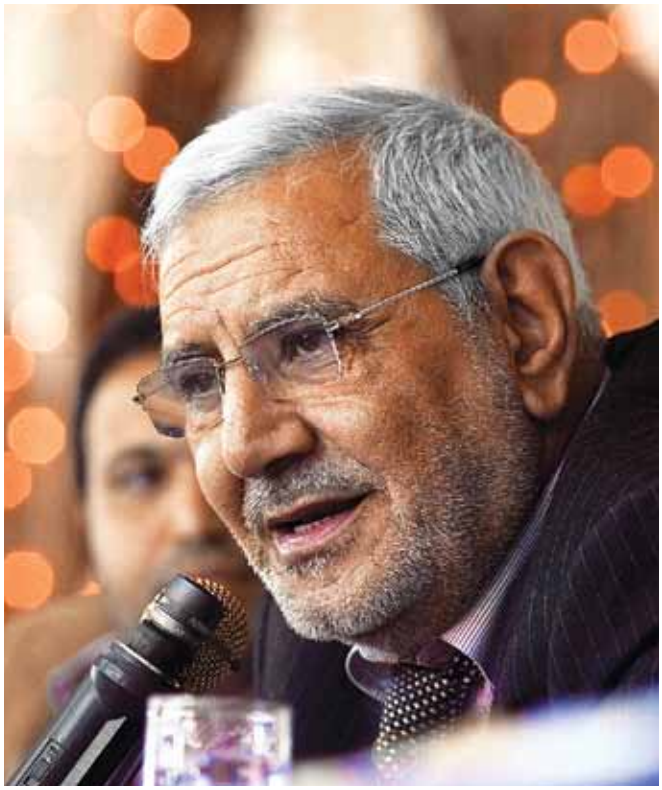
A CREATURE OF THE ARAB WORLD'S CONVULSIVE 20th century, the Muslim Brotherhood is no stranger to violence, intrigue and treachery. Over the years it has hosted a gallery of schismatics who as ex-members have inspired militant organizations like al-Qaeda. In 2007 it issued a decree against women and Coptic Christians holding high office in Egypt but eventually withdrew it



amid a hail of protest. Its leaders have alternatively conspired against and cooperated with the very autocrats and foreign elements they have publicly condemned — most notably the Central Intelligence Agency, according to several historians. For years rumors persisted of an Ikhwan-Mubarak accord under which the group was allowed to operate politically so long as it did not confront the regime directly. Even today the Brotherhood is widely thought to have

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entered into a secret bargain with the provisional military government that is running Egypt: In exchange for an abbreviated election schedule that the Brotherhood, with its superior resources, was certain to win, the suspicion goes, the generals would be protected from prosecution for any past misdeeds.

The Brotherhood denies that it has ever engaged in under-the-table deals, and there is no hard evidence in support of them. Conspiracy theories, however, are the least of the Ikhwan's worries. After the stress of revolution and sustained political uncertainty, the Egyptian economy is stagnating. Economic output is expected to grow by a mere 0.4 percent this year, down from last year's rise of 1.8 percent. Such growth is far too weak to absorb the 420,000 young people who enter the labor market each year, aggravating an unemployment rate that's believed to be in double digits. Political instability has triggered an increase in capital outflows — Egypt's balance of payments slipped from a modest surplus to an $8 billion deficit in the last six months of 2011 — that shows no sign of abating. The authorities have spent more than half the country's reserves of about $40 billion to defend the Egyptian pound, which has fallen 3.6 percent since the start of 2011, to 6.02 to the dollar. Further currency weakness, which many analysts believe is inevitable without a big influx of international aid, could fan the country's 10 percent inflation rate and push up borrowing costs. The property market is moribund, and tourism, a vital source of hard currency, has dried up since last year's uprising.

As pressure mounts for the generals to step down ahead of the presidential ballot, the Ikhwan may soon find itself alone at the vanguard of power, with all the burdens such authority confers. (The Brotherhood has appealed to secular legislators to join it in a coalition government, no doubt in an effort to share the blame should the economy worsen. Just as wisely, its quarry has demurred.) That means Ikhwan leaders like Katatni will need all the help they can get from the global community. Khairat el-Shater, the Brotherhood's deputy supreme guide, has requested that the U.S. maintain its aid to Egypt.

"The Muslim Brotherhood is now in power, and they need to deliver," says Hisham Kassem, a veteran journalist and activist in Cairo. "If the people don't feel like they're doing better in a few years' time, they're out."

Given the depths of Egypt's economic malaise, the scariest thing about the country today is not so much that Islamists are in charge but that they might not have the answers either. The economy has endured various setbacks and periods of sclerosis since a wave of nationalizations under former president Gamal Abdel Nasser in the 1950s and '60s. In the late 1990s the Mubarak regime launched a series of neoliberal reforms that delivered impressive levels of growth along with vertiginous levels of corruption and income disparity. Not for nothing was social justice hailed alongside freedom and bread in the revolt that deposed Mubarak.

In January the Ikhwan unveiled a road map for economic renewal that borrowed in equal parts from John Maynard Keynes and David Ricardo — it prescribes both a strong social safety net and public spending cuts. (Like politicians almost everywhere, though, the leaders are loath to discuss what kind of outlays they would actually reduce.) The program also draws on Koranic injunctions that admonish against such anticompetitive practices as monopoly-building and insider trading. In other areas the program called for a constitution that guarantees rule of law and

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for a regulatory code that protects investor rights. The group also proposed a low, graduated income tax rate; an urban redevelopment plan to relocate residents from the densely populated Nile Delta and free up vast swaths of arable farmland; and an ambitious range of infrastructure projects, including the construction of international airports, seaports and a state-of-the-art national railway. Such projects would be underwritten by a mix of private and public investment. The program would employ Islamic banking, which promotes equity stakes as the principal means of finance whenever possible, to limit debt.

The Brotherhood has declared that democratic Egypt will respect its international conventions and treaties, including its peace accord with Israel and related bilateral commercial agreements. In February the country's provisional government, with the Brotherhood very much playing a leading role, opened negotiations with the International Monetary Fund for $3.2 billion in emergency loans. The group has informed tour operators that it will not seek to ban alcohol or punish women who sport revealing swimwear at the nation's beach resorts. In short, the Ikhwan so far has sustained much of the secular status quo that prevailed under the Mubarak regime.

Although it is tempting to see Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party, or AKP, as a model for the Ikhwan, the two organizations have as many differences as similarities. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has successfully reconciled the AKP's Islamist origins with Turkey's secular political traditions, and the Turkish economy hums with free-market dynamism. In Egypt, however, the failure of Nasserism and the Islamic revival that followed leaves little room for a Turkish-style delineation between mosque and state. When Erdoğan visited Cairo last summer, his calls for secularism fell flat among many ordinary Egyptians.

Religiosity is not the same as theocracy, however. If the Muslim Brotherhood is a frequency or two away from Erdoğan's Turkey, it is on an entirely different spectrum from Iran or Saudi Arabia. The Brotherhood's most senior official, its supreme guide, Mohammed Badie, wields nowhere near the authority invested in Iran's grand ayatollahs or the Saudi monarchy. Although Cairo this year allowed an Iranian warship to pass through the Suez Canal, few in Egypt, including Ikhwan leaders, want any part of Tehran's militancy. Most important, while Iran's mullahs and Saudi's royals are estranged from their people, the Brotherhood is tightly mingled with Egypt's lower and middle classes.

"They will adapt themselves with the people," says Osama al-Ghazali Harb, a columnist and political activist in Cairo. "They know they can't solve the problems of the people by banning alcohol. They will be as moderate as the Egyptians."

In a February interview with *Institutional Investor* at the Ikhwan's headquarters, deputy supreme guide Shater displayed a flinty pragmatism. "We are not in a state of aggression with anyone," he said. "We are looking for shared interests wherever they are and no matter who they are with. That is a founding principle of the culture of Islam, and it was adopted by the organization."

Before his release last March, Shater was serving a seven-year prison sentence for sedition. He is now routinely cited as a future prime minister. In the interview he outlined a number of goals for the new government, from modernizing Egypt's tourist sector to making the country a manufacturing hub for Africa's vast consumer market. He talked with the conviction of someone who survived prison not through contrition but by planning, as if it were a leadership academy rather than a gulag.

A shrewd businessman with a multimillion-dollar portfolio that includes Istikbal, a Turkish-based luxury-furniture manufacturer, Shater has met with investors from the U.S., Europe and Africa to provide reassurance that an Islamist-controlled Egypt remains open for business. According to a consultant who helped arrange the meetings, one American participant described the 6-foot-4 bearded Islamist as being no more a threat to free enterprise than "a Christian fundamentalist from Texas."

THE MOST STRIKING THING ABOUT the ostensibly secretive Ikhwan is how transparent it is, at least relative to the autocrats who waged war against it. The group is loosely structured on Egypt's national Boy Scout movement, beginning with neighborhood "families" of five members and ascending in scope to local, regional and provincial-level affiliates. The Shura Council, an assembly of 120 elected officials from the provinces, chooses new leaders and votes on policy initiatives. The Guidance Bureau, a Brotherhood planning body, answers directly to the supreme guide, who serves as chairman of the Ikhwan's network of related, if highly autonomous, chapters in more than 70 countries, including the U.S.

For decades the Brotherhood was among the few political movements in the Arab world that held regular, peaceful and democratic leadership successions. It renounced violence as a political tool in the 1970s, and until the revolt that felled Mubarak it opposed revolution as a means of pursuing its goals. (The Brotherhood officially condemned the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on U.S. soil as anti-Islamic within 24 hours of the assault.) Its leaders have openly embraced market economics offset by a strong social safety net. They occasionally express a longing for a new caliphate, though less as a political empire than as a borderless economy.

The Brotherhood vigorously condemns Israel's occupation of the Palestinian ter-

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— **Sheikh Mohammed Farahat**, a leader of the rival Salafi Islamist group

ritories, while stressing the need to preserve Egypt's peace treaty with the Jewish state. In March, Ikhwan leaders were encouraging Hamas, a group that grew out of the Brotherhood and today controls Gaza, to compromise with its secular and Western-backed rival, Fatah, and enter into peace negotiations with Israel.

The Ikhwan's budget, believed to be in the billions of dollars, is financed by tithing and contributions from the Egyptian business community — in particular Shater, whose enterprises are of such importance to the group that Mubarak not only jailed him but froze his assets — in addition to donors in the Gulf. Its finances are managed largely out of Geneva by Youssef Moustafa Nada, a banker and Brotherhood official who has waged a fierce and so far successful campaign against allegations that his office underwrites terrorist groups. (The group is not on the U.S. State Department's list of terrorist organizations.) Less controversial are the Ikhwan's vast network of charitable and patronage systems, and its evangelical outreach programs. Such works are welcomed by Egypt's poor, particularly given the inadequacy of state-run public services. The Brotherhood draws members from across the demographic and economic spectrum, but its leadership is overwhelmingly made up of white-collar professionals and merchants. Though its members dominate the professional industry associations, or syndicates, they are hostile to trade unions, siding with the interim military regime against the proliferation of wildcat strikes that followed Mubarak's departure. Like Turkey's ruling AKP, the Ikhwan draws much of its support from small and midsize businesses.

Before they settled into a rococo office building in suburban Cairo last summer, Brotherhood leaders worked from a shabby downtown apartment block along the Nile River. Journalists visited frequently for interviews with officials from the supreme guide on down. It was there that I first met Katatni, in 2006, when he was a rising star in the Ikhwan's pantheon of young leaders. He was just leaving for his district office in al-Minya, a town about 240 kilometers (150 miles) up the Nile from Cairo, and he invited me to join him there. I arrived a few days later.

Katatni is a native of the Upper Egyptian city of Sohag. He studied botany as an undergraduate student in nearby Assiut, and he later obtained a Ph.D. in microbiology at Minia University, where he also lectured. Like most Ikhwan members of his generation, Katatni studied abroad — in his case, in Germany for several years.

Both as a student and as an academic, he associated closely with Brotherhood members; he joined the group in 1982 at the relatively advanced age of 30. "That was when I came to understand that religion can mobilize and motivate people, politically and economically as well as spiritually," he said.

Soon after joining the movement, Katatni was appointed chairman of the group's al-Minya office. In 2005 he was elected the city's parliamentarian in a national ballot Mubarak consented to as a sop to the Bush administration, which was promoting democratic reform in the region following its invasion of Iraq. When the Ikhwan won a fifth of Parliament's seats, however, the White House backed down and Mubarak returned to his brutal ways. The Brotherhood selected Katatni to lead its delegation in Parliament, and when I caught up with him in al-Minya, he was campaigning for constitutional reform in alliance with other minority blocs. "We accept the game of democracy, and we seek to cooperate with others in peace," he said at the time. "We are moderates who want civic government. We are not extremists."

Katatni reaffirmed the Brotherhood's commitment to free-market reform, but he condemned the corruption associated with the government's privatization program, in which divested assets were too often scooped up by regime cronies at bargain prices. He implied that it would be reckless for Egypt to abrogate its peace treaty with Israel, particularly given the large volume of trade between the two countries.

It was late at night, and dozens of Katatni's constituents had gathered to petition for his assistance. One of them, a Coptic Christian named Faruk Nassef Harun, wanted Katatni's help in securing a job for his daughter at the Egyptian tax agency, where his wife worked and where entry-level jobs were set aside for employees' children. Harun introduced himself to me after discovering that I was a reporter, because he wanted me to appreciate the importance of the Brotherhood's work. "They serve Christians and Muslims equally," he said. "They even have an office for ecumenical affairs."

IT TOOK A REVOLUTION, BUT MOST analysts and even some Ikhwan skeptics now agree that the Brotherhood's policy agenda reflects bourgeois values rather than Koranic scripture. As Nathan Brown, a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, put it in a recent paper, the group is anxious to show it can govern. "It seeks for now to offer competence, technocratic administration, and probity rather than an end of moral laxity," he wrote.

"Our vision was heard but ignored. The leadership is undemocratic, and it will not allow us to reach out to other groups, period."
— Islam Lotfy, former Brotherhood member and leader of Egyptian Trends party

But suspicion of the Brotherhood seems to have grown in proportion to the group's political fortunes. In addition to controlling Parliament and the professional syndicates, it is reported to be negotiating with the generals for key cabinet posts. (The army, it is widely presumed, will control ministries relating to security and foreign affairs.) Some Egyptians worry that, however fairly won, such a preponderance of power will become a monopoly not unlike the one enjoyed by Mubarak's National Democratic Party and that it will be tainted by the same corruption and coercion. Some minority parliamentarians are already complaining that Katatni, though an eloquent Assembly speaker, favors Freedom and Justice members at the expense of liberal lawmakers — a style redolent of his Mubarak-installed predecessors. Katatni "gets nervous whenever a non-Islamist MP takes the floor," Ziad el-Oleimi, a Social Democratic parliamentarian, told the publication Ahram Online in February.

Brotherhood critics also cite a January 30 rally in Tahrir Square, the epicenter of last year's revolt, at which members reportedly muted secularists' antigovernment chants by turning up the volume on their speaker system and blocked the demonstrators' procession through the square. When the liberals removed their shoes and thrust them at the Brotherhood members — a gesture of contempt in the Arab world — the Ikhwanists responded by holding up copies of the Koran. Most recently, Ikhwan parliamentarians angered secular Egyptians by stacking a committee tasked with writing the country's new constitution with Islamist delegates.

Particularly critical of the group are Egypt's Salafis. "The Ikhwan tends to maneuver politically, while we follow scripture literally," says Sheikh Mohammed Farahat, a prominent Salafi leader. "They are very Machiavellian."

The Salafis, it is worth noting, inspire even less confidence among Egyptian secularists than the Ikhwan does. The group, which believes Muslims should live and worship as the Prophet Muhammad and his followers did 1,300 years ago, has become increasingly aggressive since its al-Nour Party came in a strong second in the parliamentary elections. In January an al-Nour lawyer and lawmaker filed suit against Naguib Sawiris, a leading business executive who founded one of the country's largest secular parties, after the Christian billionaire tweeted renderings of Mickey and Minnie Mouse in Islamic garb.

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— Hisham Kassem, journalist and activist

Notwithstanding the criticisms, the Brotherhood still enjoys unrivaled legitimacy in the new Egypt. Among those who have done time in the country's gulags, none has suffered longer or harder than members of the Ikhwan. Even secularists say the Brotherhood, as an authentic political force in a country that has known nothing but self-imposed strongmen, deserves its chance to succeed or fail in power. "The Muslim Brotherhood did not come from nowhere," says Amr Hussein Elalfy, an analyst at CI Capital Holding, a Cairo-based investment bank. "It is deeply ingrained in society. They want things to move ahead, and this is their first and best chance."

Certainly, no other political movement has done more to define modern Egypt. Formed in 1928 by Hassan al-Banna, the son of an imam in the Nile Delta town of Mahmudiyah, the group evolved rapidly during a time of wrenching change throughout the Arab world. Its appeals for a revival of Islamic glory, mores and tradition, coming as they did amid the imperial powers' partition of the Middle East at the end of World War I and a mandate for a Jewish state in Muslim-controlled Palestine, resonated among ordinary Egyptians bridling under British occupation.

The Brotherhood's prewar ascent coincided with a secular renaissance. Cairo and Alexandria were cosmopolitan, religiously tolerant and ethnically diverse, with huge, prosperous communities of Europeans living alongside Egyptian and non-Egyptian Arabs. Egypt's political landscape was rich and chaotic. Competing revolutionary movements and political parties — communists, liberals, Islamists, monarchists — all had their own militias, which would march openly along city thoroughfares on election days. The Brotherhood had an armed wing called the Tanzim Khass.

Fearing the Ikhwan was becoming a state within a state, the government banned it in 1948. A year later Banna was gunned down outside the Cairo headquarters of the Young Men's Muslim Association. In a tactical maneuver, the Brotherhood allied itself with Nasser after the charismatic army colonel seized power from the British-supported monarchy in a bloodless coup in 1952. When the Brotherhood demanded that Nasser make way for national elections, however, the two sides split in a violent struggle. In 1954 a dissident Ikhwanist attempted to kill Nasser while he delivered a speech in Alexandria. The attack failed, and Nasser responded by crushing the Tanzim Khass. A decade later he survived a failed coup led by militant Islamist writer and Ikhwan propagandist Sayyad Qutb, whose hatred for the West in general and the U.S. in particular has inspired al-Qaeda jihadis and other radical Islamist cells worldwide.

The counterattack that followed was so fierce that it drove Brotherhood leaders into exile; ironically, this helped internationalize the group. Only after Nasser's death in 1970 and the arrival of his successor Anwar Sadat, who needed allies to consolidate his power, was the Ikhwan allowed to rebuild itself. That entente ended in 1979, when Sadat made peace with Israel. He was assassinated two years later by a cabal of mutinous army officers and religious militants, including a host of ex-Ikhwanists, while watching a military parade in Cairo. The assault killed 11 bystanders and wounded 28, including Sadat's vice president, Mubarak.

For the next 30 years, Mubarak and the Brotherhood would engage each other in a hostile embrace that would end in a nonviolent revolution for which neither side was prepared.

BY CULTURE AND INCLINATION, the Muslim Brotherhood is a statist player. Its general charter, drawn up in the 1930s, calls on members to Islamize Egypt quietly from within, not change it radically from without. To the Ikhwan leadership, for whom the memories of 1954 are still potent, the concept of revolution is both exotic and forbidding. "Revolution is not part of Muslim Brotherhood methodology," Mohammed Habib, a former deputy supreme guide, who lost a power struggle for the top spot in 2010, told me last summer. "Even Hassan al-Banna never spoke of it. Revolution is something outside the context of the Ikhwan."

Such restraint has served the group well and belies its caricature as a bunch of radicals spring-loaded for a power grab. The Brotherhood was slow to join demonstrations in 2006 on behalf of besieged reformist judges, just as it was reluctant to join street protests in support of Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shiite militant group, in its war with Israel later that year. In January 2011, when dissident liberals began crowding Tahrir Square, the

Brotherhood was conspicuously absent save for members of its youth cadre, who not only joined the protests but fought alongside their secular brethren to keep regime thugs from clearing the square. Only when Mubarak's fate was all but sealed, Ikhwan critics say, did senior leaders join forces with their young counterparts.

In many ways, this generational divide poses a greater threat to Brotherhood solidarity than anything it endured under Mubarak's rule. Tensions within the group began to percolate years ago, when younger members called openly for greater representation on its executive councils. In April 2008 junior Ikhwanists defied their elders by participating in a seminal day of protest in solidarity with striking workers that inspired the denouement at Tahrir Square three years later. What was revolutionary and dangerous to the Ikhwan's old guard was for its restless youth both righteous and long overdue.

By mid-2011, with Mubarak gone and Egyptian politics galvanized by the prospect of the country's first free elections in more than six decades, the Brotherhood appeared to be fracturing. Aboul Fotouh, one of the group's most respected elders, declared that he would run for president despite an Ikhwan prohibition against its members vying for the job, a gesture meant to underscore the limits of its ambitions. For his impudence, Aboul Fotouh was expelled from the group — the first such cashiering of a high-level member since 1954. A day later Katatni told me in an interview that the rogue member had defied a Brotherhood maxim that its members be "preachers, not judges."

A physician and head of Egypt's largest medical syndicate, Aboul Fotouh had spoken forcefully of the need for a freely elected government, an unfettered press, an independent judiciary and a thoroughly democratized Ikhwan. He had mentored many among the Brotherhood's rebellious youth, and his defiance emboldened them to launch their own party, Egyptian Trends, which counts non-Islamists as members. The new party is led by Islam Lotfy, a 33-year-old lawyer who describes it as "not secular but civil; pragmatic, not ideological." When we met in June, he told me that the decision to split from the Brotherhood was taken only after efforts at negotiation had failed. "Our vision was heard but ignored," he said. "The leadership is undemocratic, and it will not allow us to reach out to other groups, period."

A few days later the Ikhwan cast out Lotfy and his allies. The leader of the counterrevolution, he told me, was deputy supreme guide Shater. When I asked Shater in February about the summer dismissals, he discounted them as "not significant enough to be a problem." The question of whether Brotherhood members could contest elections independently was debated openly among the leadership, including the Shura Council. "A majority agreed on how to reconcile this question," Shater said. "A few did not. The political scene is now open to them."

Clearly, the first round of the contest to rule post-Mubarak Egypt has gone not just to the Muslim Brotherhood but to its senior leaders, Katatni and Shater, and their inner circle. They played their cards with great cunning, deftly filling a power vacuum created by a revolt they joined belatedly. Once in power, they bought time and credibility with international investors by emphasizing competence and stability over religious orthodoxy. Faced with a minor coup in their ranks, they removed it with clinical resolve in the name of the status quo. On several occasions they have joined the generals in condemning opponents of military rule as subversives led by foreign elements. For now at least, Egypt is theirs to lose.

Lotfy, whose party failed to win a seat in Parliament, is crisscrossing the country to rally its liberal remnants. In a January interview he predicted that the Ikhwan's political fortunes would decay by the next national ballot, tentatively scheduled for 2016. By pandering to uneducated Egyptians' fears and prejudices — at least a third of the population is thought to be illiterate — the Brotherhood will find itself in a destructive race to the bottom with its Salafi rivals. "They appeal to the people who can only watch TV, the ones who vote on emotion," Lotfy said. "But in four years' time, Egyptians will hold their political elites to account for what has happened since the revolution."

In a 2008 interview, as frustrations with Mubarak's imperiousness and corruption were beginning to mount, Aboul Fotouh told me that the situation had become unsustainable. Absent genuine political reform, he warned, there would be "an explosion." In a free and fair election, he said, the Brotherhood would receive overwhelming support, "but as democracy evolves and there is an independent judiciary, freedom of expression and woman's emancipation, its share of power would moderate. Independent groups will participate in the process. Egyptians want a coalition, and that would be good for the Ikhwan."

On March 10 the authorities formally announced that the presidential election will be held on May 23 and 24. By then Aboul Fotouh had emerged as a crossover candidate of sorts, popular among secularists and moderate Islamists across the demographic spectrum. Among secular candidates his only serious rival is Amr Moussa, a former Egyptian foreign minister and head of the Arab League. The Brotherhood and the generals, meanwhile, reportedly had already chosen a candidate friendly to their interests: Muhammad Selim al-Awa, a moderate Islamist intellectual, is said to be acceptable to both sides.

In contrast with the quixotic Nasser and the despotic Mubarak, who by the end of their careers were long on tactics and short on strategy, the Brotherhood has kept true to its vision of an Islamic society in peaceful coexistence with the modern world. After 80 years of talk, however, it is time to deliver.

Regardless of who is elected president, the Ikhwan will dominate the government. Success would be a triumph for a once-shadowy political movement that has moved decisively into the daylight. Failure would cast the group into oblivion alongside the monarchists, socialists and dictators that have let Egypt down for decades. ●●

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