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Egypt's Bumbling Brotherhood

By SCOTT ATRAN

AS Egyptians clash over the future of their government, Americans and Europeans have repeatedly expressed fears of the Muslim Brotherhood. "You don't just have a government and a movement for democracy," Tony Blair, the former British prime minister, [said of Egypt](#) on Monday. "You also have others, notably the Muslim Brotherhood, who would take this in a different direction."

The previous day, the House speaker, John Boehner, expressed hope that Hosni Mubarak would stay on as president of Egypt while instituting reforms to prevent the Muslim Brotherhood and other extremists from grabbing power.

But here's the real deal, at least as many Egyptians see it. Ever since its founding in 1928 as a rival to Western-inspired nationalist movements that had failed to free Egypt from foreign powers, the Muslim Brotherhood has tried to revive Islamic power. Yet in 83 years it has botched every opportunity. In Egypt today, the Brotherhood counts perhaps some 100,000 adherents out of a population of over 80 million. And its failure to support the initial uprising in Cairo on Jan. 25 has made it marginal to the spirit of revolt now spreading through the Arab world.

This error was compounded when the Brotherhood threw in its lot with Mohamed ElBaradei, the former diplomat and Nobel Prize winner. A Brotherhood spokesman, Dr. Essam el-Erian, told Al Jazeera, "Political groups support ElBaradei to negotiate with the regime." But when Mr. ElBaradei strode into Tahrir Square, many ignored him and few rallied to his side despite the enormous publicity he was receiving in the Western press. The Brotherhood realized that in addition to being late, it might be backing the wrong horse. On Tuesday, Dr. Erian told me, "It's too early to even discuss whether ElBaradei should lead a transitional government or whether we will join him." This kind of flip-flopping makes many Egyptians scoff.

When the army allowed hundreds of Mubarak supporters and plainclothes policemen through barricades on Wednesday [to muscle out protesters](#), the Muslim Brotherhood may have gained an opportunity. It might be able to recover lost leverage by showing its organizational tenacity in resisting the attempts to repress the demonstrators.

Nonetheless, the Brotherhood did not arrive at this historical moment with the advantage of wide public favor. Such support as it does have among Egyptians — an often cited figure is 20 percent to 30 percent — is less a matter of true attachment than an accident of circumstance: the many decades of suppression of secular opposition groups that might have countered it. The British, King Farouk, Gamal Abdel Nasser and Anwar el-Sadat all faced the same problem that Hisham Kaseem, a newspaper editor and human rights activist, described playing out under Mr. Mubarak. “If people met in a cafe and talked about things the regime didn’t like, he would just shut down the cafe and arrest us,” Mr. Kaseem said. “But you can’t close mosques, so the Brotherhood survived.”

If Egyptians are given political breathing space, Mr. Kaseem told me, the Brotherhood’s importance will rapidly fade. “In this uprising the Brotherhood is almost invisible,” Mr. Kaseem said, “but not in America and Europe, which fear them as the bogeyman.”

Many people outside Egypt believe that the Brotherhood gains political influence by providing health clinics and charity for the poor. But the very poor in Egypt are not very politically active. And according to Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh, a former member of the Brotherhood’s Guidance Council, the group has only six clinics in Cairo, a city of 18 million. Many of the other clinics are Islamic in orientation simply because most Egyptians are Islamic. The wealthier businessmen who often sponsor them tend to shun the Brotherhood, if only to protect their businesses from government disapproval.

Although originally the Brotherhood was organized into paramilitary cells, today it forswears violence in political struggle. This has made it a target of Al Qaeda’s venom. In January 2006, Ayman al-Zawahri, the former leader of Egypt’s Islamic Jihad and Al Qaeda’s leading strategist, blasted the Brotherhood’s willingness to participate in parliamentary elections and reject nuclear arms. You “falsely affiliated with Islam,” he said in vilifying the group. “You forget about the rule of Shariah, welcome the Crusaders’ bases in your countries and acknowledge the existence of the Jews who are fully armed with nuclear weapons, from which you are banned to possess.”

People in the West frequently conflate the Brotherhood and Al Qaeda. And although their means are very different, even many Egyptians suspect that they share a common end that is alien to democracy. When I asked Dr. Erian about this, he retorted that the United States and Mr. Mubarak had conspired after Sept. 11 to “brainwash” people into thinking of all Muslim activists as terrorists, adding that “the street” knew the truth.

The street, however, manifests little support for the Brotherhood. Only a small minority of the protesters in Tahrir Square joined its members in prayers there (estimates range from 5 percent to 10 percent), and few Islamic slogans or chants were heard.

Obviously the Brotherhood wants power and its positions, notably its stance against Israel, are problematic for American interests. "Israel must know that it is not welcome by the people in this region," Dr. Erian said. Moreover, the Brotherhood will probably have representatives in any freely elected government. But it is because democracies tolerate disparate political groups that they generally don't have civil wars, or wars with other democracies. And because the Brotherhood itself is not monolithic — it has many factions — it could well succumb to internal division if there really were a political opening for other groups in Egypt.

What we are seeing in Egypt is a revolt led by digitally informed young people and joined by families from all rungs of society. Though in one sense it happened overnight, many of its young proponents have long been working behind the scenes, independent of the Brotherhood or any old guard opposition. Egyptians are a pretty savvy lot. Hardly anyone I talked to believes that democracy can be established overnight.

The Brotherhood leadership talks of a year or two of transition, although that may reflect a vain hope of using that time to broaden its popular support enough to reach a controlling plurality. The more common assessment even among democracy advocates is that the military will retain control — Omar Suleiman, the intelligence chief and new vice president, will be acceptable to Egyptians if the army gets rid of Mr. Mubarak now — and over the next decade real democratic reforms will be instituted.

"Egypt is missing instruments essential to any functioning democracy and these must be established in the transition period — an independent judiciary, a representative Parliament, an open press," Mr. Kaseem said. "If you try to push democracy tomorrow we'll end up like Mauritania or Sudan," both of which in recent decades have had coups on the heels of democratic elections.

A military in control behind the scenes — for a while — is probably the best hope for a peaceful transition. "Let the U.S.A. stay away," urged Mr. Kaseem, who insisted that he is pro-American and abhors the Brotherhood. "They are only bungling things with calls for immediate reforms and against the Brotherhood. We are handling this beautifully. Even a military leader with an I.Q. of 30 wouldn't go down the same path as Mubarak because he would understand that the people of Egypt who are out in the streets are no longer apathetic, their interests are mostly secular, they are connected and they will get power in the end."

If America's already teetering standing among Egyptians and across the Arab and Muslim world is not to topple altogether, the United States must now publicly hold Mr. Mubarak responsible for the violence and privately inform the Egyptian Army that it cannot support any institution that is complicit.

But there is little reason for the United States to fear a takeover by the Muslim Brotherhood. If Egypt is allowed to find its own way, as it so promisingly began to do over the past week, the problems of violent extremism and waves of emigration that America and Europe most fear from this unhappy region could well fade as its disaffected youth at last find hope at home.

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