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Egypt: The Regime, the Brotherhood, and Labor Pains of the Fourth Republic

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The “Al Azhar Militias” incident, in which some Muslim Brotherhood students staged a martial arts display in early December 2006, constitutes a turning point in the Brotherhood's relationship with the Egyptian regime. It triggered a regime crackdown—not the first during the presidency of Hosni Mubarak but the harshest and potentially the most important—with President Mubarak calling the Brotherhood “a threat to Egypt's security” and the Brotherhood announcing its determination to form a political party.

There is a long history of clashes between the Egyptian regime and the Brotherhood, but during the first part of Mubarak's presidency (in the 1980s) the organization was allowed to participate in politics via alliances with legal parties. In the 1990s, however, as terrorist attacks by Islamic extremists escalated, the regime began to crack down on the Brotherhood, which it considered the incubator for extremism. Legal action against the Brotherhood began in 1992, with junior and senior leaders occasionally put to trial in military courts. In addition, dozens or even hundreds of political candidates and campaign workers from the Brotherhood have typically been arrested in the months leading up to parliamentary elections, to be released weeks or months later.

The current clash is more intense by several measures. First, the charges raised against nearly forty Brotherhood leaders transferred to a military tribunal (among them Deputy Supreme Guide Khayrat Al Shatir and Guidance Bureau Member Muhammad Ali Bishr) go beyond the standard accusation of membership in a banned organization. There are also accusations of involvement in terrorism, money laundering, and forming paramilitary militias along the lines of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, Hizbollah, and Hamas. Such charges are also being leveled at members living outside Egypt, including the millionaire Youssef Nada, who resides in Switzerland, and the Syrian Ghaleb Himmat. Second, the organization's financial base has been hit with the arrest of businessmen and financiers whose combined investments are estimated to be worth \$4 billion. Furthermore, the Egyptian attorney general has frozen the assets, estimates of which range from \$200,000 to \$8 million, of twenty-nine Brotherhood leaders.

In addition to using legal and financial means, the regime is also using its constitutional reform program to undercut future political activity by the Brotherhood. Recent press reports on draft constitutional amendments under consideration by the Parliament suggest that Article 5 will ban the formation of any party not only “based on religion,” but even “with a religious reference point” (marja’iya), a formulation often used by Muslim democrat parties such as the Party of Justice and Development in Morocco. In addition, constitutional Articles 62 and 94 might be amended to reduce the ability of Brotherhood candidates to enter legislative elections as independents.

For its part, the Brotherhood has been flat-footed in its handling of the Al Azhar incident and its reaction to the regime's escalation campaign. It failed to mollify fears, especially amongst the elite, of its masked students, who brought to mind the Brotherhood's violent history during the 1940s.

The Brotherhood's announcement that it will establish a party with an Islamic reference point seems to be an attempt to move the battle with the regime to the political level. Although the move represents a potentially constructive step towards transforming the Brotherhood into an openly political organization, it is also fraught with problems. The announcement came in reaction to the regime's crackdown and not as a result of thorough consultations within the organization. It is unclear what a party's relationship would be to the Brotherhood itself should the latter not be dissolved, what its religious authority would be, and the extent of its conformity to the rules of the democratic game. Thus this might be just the latest in a series of half-baked efforts by Brotherhood members to form parties, following in the footsteps of the abortive Consultative Party (1986), Reform Party (1990), Hope Party (1995), and Wasat Party (1996; still trying for licensing).

There are several ways of understanding the regime's current attack on the Brotherhood. First, the regime wishes to deflate the Brotherhood's expectations after the past two years of emboldening political victories, which perhaps led to the miscalculation evident in the “Al Azhar Militias” incident. Second, Mubarak's regime has relentlessly eliminated any potential alternative to itself for the past quarter century, which explains much of how it deals with any group possessing social legitimacy. Third, the regime is determined to guarantee a quiet presidential succession, whether after the end of Mubarak's term in 2011 or in the event of any alternative scenario. The current crisis seems to be the labor pains accompanying the birth of the Fourth Republic (since the 1952 coup), which means that Egypt is entering a critical stage of political suffering as its rulers put their house in order.

Khalil Al Anani is an Egyptian scholar. His forthcoming book is entitled Al Su'uud al siyaasi li al Ikhwaan al Muslimiin: dalaalat wa maalat (The Political Rise of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood: Connotations and Consequences). This article was translated from Arabic by Paul Wulfsberg.