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by Ferry de Kerckhove
May, 2012



POLICY UPDATE PAPER

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Prepared for the Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute
1600, 530 – 8th Avenue S.W., Calgary, AB T2P 3S8
www.cdfai.org

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ISBN: 978-0-9737870-2-3



Slogans are easily remembered, and many Muslim Brotherhood (MB) slogans have instilled either fear or bewilderment amongst secular opponents and outside observers. The best known is "Islam is the solution", often recited blindly by the MB flock and applied to any issue, particularly if troublesome. Another one is "Jihad is our way and martyrdom in the way of Allah is our highest aspiration." But there is both much more and maybe much less to the Brotherhood than mere slogans. The Arab Spring compels us to assess where the MB might lead Egypt, and the region's other countries, where they, or fellow travellers, are flexing their new power.

What is the Muslim Brotherhood?

Founded in Egypt in 1928, the Brotherhood started off as a grassroots religious social organization, preaching Islam, teaching the illiterate, setting up hospitals and launching small enterprises for the poor and down-trodden, a religious response to despair. Its underlying objective has always been to infuse the Qu'ran, the Holy Book, and the Sunnah, the life teaching of Prophet Mohamed, as the sole reference points for ordering the life of the Muslim family, individual, community and state, and to base the delivery of justice on Sharia or Islamic Law. The Brotherhood is far from being a marginal group. It has been an influential force in Egyptian society for most of the past century. It spawned Hamas in the Occupied Territories and many followers in neighbouring Arab countries. The MB was outlawed in 1954 after falling afoul of the Egyptian secular military leadership. With many of its members imprisoned, the MB officially renounced the use of violence in the 1980's and began to channel more of its resources towards political involvement. The group made headlines in 2005 when its candidates won 88 parliamentary seats as 'independent' and became the largest opposition bloc in the People's Assembly. However, politics was clearly a red-line for the Mubarak regime, which subsequently targeted the Brotherhood's finances and cycled its membership through prison, restricting the organization's ability to implement its political agenda. Forced onto the defensive by the Mubarak regime, the MB never wavered in its commitment to political engagement.

Tahrir Square and the MB

The political future of the Brotherhood was unclear when crowds gathered in Tahrir Square on January 25, 2011, to mark a national Day of Anger. Habitually reluctant to confront the regime and its security forces, the Brotherhood did not fully join the protests until it became clear that a mass uprising had taken shape. Throughout the uprising the Brotherhood appeared largely content to participate in, rather than lead, the demonstrations, despite being Egypt's best-organized and most high-profile opposition group. The MB suggested that it did not want a misinterpretation of the events as "an Islamic revolution." Yet, its members had a major role in fighting off Mubarak's goons on Tahrir Square on February 2 when the Brothers took to the front lines and suffered the majority of injuries. The MB's involvement in the nationwide protests also had the effect of exposing rank-and-file Brothers to a wider breadth of opinion, while suggesting to secular Egyptians that the Brotherhood was not comprised of religious fanatics. Indeed, the group displayed remarkable pragmatism early on in coordinating with, and reassuring, secular opposition parties by aligning itself initially with former IAEA head, and Nobel Prize winner, Mohamed ElBaradei's National Association for Change to call for political reform.

The rise to power

While being witness to the Tahrir Revolution was mesmerizing, one would soon realize that the revolution was too short, that victory was too fast and did not carry the hinterland. The sufferance brought by over 850 deaths and countless injured was not enough to generate a point



of no return and the energy fizzled. The military smartly refused to shoot on the crowds, got rid of Mubarak who had become a liability, and stayed in power while profiting from a triple deception: the Tahrir demonstrators believed the military would be the conduit to a more democratic regime, the Islamists counted on them to launch elections that would finally get their numbers to be reflected in the political life of the country, and the so called liberal forces of Egypt, which had mostly acquiesced to Mubarak's policy of clamping down on Islamists, counted on the military to counter their power. Several factors, however, favoured the rise in power of the Brotherhood:

- The first was the void created by the ambivalent attitude of the military regarding the exercise of power, their inability, or deliberate inaction, to restore security, and their overbearing control over an ineffective transitional civilian government;
- The second was the initial constitutional amendments put to a referendum by the Supreme Command of the Armed Forces (SCAF) that gave the MB an "innocuous" opportunity to flex their muscle, successfully calling for a "yes" vote as an expression of "religious duty", and to get a clear sense of their budding political power;
- The third was the creation by the MB of the Freedom and Justice Party accompanied by the commitment not to put up a candidate for the Presidency, thus lulling even further both the military and the secular forces into believing that power sharing would be the order of the day;
- The fourth was the courageous but futile continuation of the "revolution", this time against the "military minus Mubarak" by the young, educated revolutionaries who continued to believe that Tahrir Square was the rallying point for the whole country when in fact it had become for many a popular Friday attraction, and for many others somewhere between an eyesore and a hindrance to normal life. Meanwhile, with a focus on the legislative elections, the MB would occupy the political ground across the country, garnering 47% of the votes and facing, to everyone's surprise, the Salafists as the only worthy opponent.

While one hoped that the newly found "faith" of the religious groups in the democratic process and elections would be more than tactical, the lack of societal unity in the country around a common vision of a modern, secular, developed, private sector led nation did not bode well for the future. Furthermore, the government's narrative was – and still seems to be – at its infancy, and thus played little role in the development of a new body politic. Indeed, the Islamist electoral success was soon followed by the MB reneging on two commitments: power sharing on the Constitutional drafting body of 100 and abstaining from presenting a candidate for the President elections at the end of May. More worrisome still is if the MB is really going for a monopoly of political power, if only to thwart the Salafists, it will not only undermine the fragile prospects for democracy in Egypt, but it will also strengthen the military's resolve not to leave quietly. Indeed, the real battle lines are clearly drawn: the Military vs. the Islamists. While the military did not want to be saddled with an ailing economy, they were/are adamant about securing special powers both to preserve their privileged position and economic interests, but even more so to avoid finding themselves, one day, in front of a prosecutor.

So what if and when the MB comes to power?

It is clear that any stable outcome of the ongoing political process in Egypt will have to emerge from an agreement between the military and the Brotherhood on their respective red lines. Meanwhile, the ongoing constitutional process will lead to a reinforcement of the powers of the Parliament, to the detriment of Presidential powers and, most likely, of the Army's interests. It



is noteworthy that at the opening of the Constituent Assembly the representatives of both the highly respected al-Azhar University – the center of moderate Islamic thinking – and of the Coptic Orthodox Church resigned to protest the imbalance between the MB/Salafist members and the more secular sectors of society. Yet, the MB is fully aware that it cannot govern without the support of the more secular parties with greater government experience and economic wherewithal.

But the MB's philosophy, or doctrine, does reflect a fair majority of the public opinion in Egypt. A Gallup poll conducted in June 2008 revealed that 68% of Egyptians believe that Sharia law should be the only source of legislation. A 2005 survey revealed that in Egypt, 87% said religion was the most important aspect of their identity, more than anywhere else in the world. While Saudi inspired Wahhabi Salafism has a lot to do with this, many argue that the Mubarak regime's inability to establish a common cause or identity has facilitated the rise of religion as Egypt's primary characteristic.

For their part, the Christians – i.e. the Copts – are petrified as they fear the looming of Islamist theocratic authoritarianism, and dismiss any reassurances from the MB about article 2 of the Constitution, which states Sharia as the main source of law in Egypt. This being said, at best, the Copts will maintain their fragile status, will face more terrorist acts and will suffer more collateral damage the longer the Army vs. Islamists feud perdures. And there will be more backsliding on women's rights, all the more so that many good initiatives (divorce reforms, fight against Feminine Genital Mutilation, etc.) are associated with the former regime.

But all this does not change a fundamental conclusion: whether “we”, i.e. the West, like it or not the Islamists are here to stay. They have legitimacy and strong popular support; barring a few, their leaders may not be industrialists, but they are not without depth and smarts. Through their recent rhetoric – in deep contrast with their past doctrinal utterances – they have expressed the hope that the international community will take a more balanced view of their movement. Yet, given the MB's past and the groups they have spawned, international concern over the implications of an empowered Brotherhood will not wither away easily. And, as was feared in the Algerian case with the FIS in the 90's, will a first, winning MB electoral participation be the last?

West policy or lack thereof?

There are some in the West who call for trying to prevent Islamist parties' accession to power – assuming it was even possible to achieve this (Libya was not a case in point). Yet, there is no alternative to recognizing the legitimacy of these movements as evidenced by their results at the polls. One cannot delegitimize Islamist parties because they have espoused an Islamic interpretation of politics; neither can one forget how much they suffered under the military's yoke. The West's overarching emphasis on democratic transformation, or even regime change, in Arab countries as opposed to a commitment to enhanced economic cooperation has provoked negative, even paranoiac, reactions as evidenced by the way NGO's have been treated in Egypt.

In fact, the West should take solace from the way countries like Morocco and Tunisia have adjusted to the coming to power of moderate Islamists and should commit much more systematically to engage with these new regimes. Egypt's transition will be slower, but it is the most important and the most sensitive for the future of the region. The fundamental tenet of our engagement should be an understanding that there will never be, in these countries, a Western style full separation between the state and religion – assuming that it is such in our own



countries. Indeed, Islam will permeate far more than heretofore the political and social fabric of the countries of the Arab World and beyond, unfortunately some far less moderately than others.

Thus, Egypt today is far away from what the revolutionaries hoped would emerge, failing to understand that it takes generations for a society to change. The long term outcome is uncertain and could vary between some façade of democracy under military rule and a full takeover by extremist Islamists, with, in between, a hoped for moderate transition. The key question of course is whether the MB can deliver the latter.

► About the Author

Mr. de Kerckhove was born in Belgium in 1947. After attending secondary school Graduate I in France, he did his military service in 1965-66 (2nd Lieutenant Tanks). He has a B.Soc. Sc. Honours in Economics, an M.A. in Political Science from the University of Ottawa and pursued Ph.D. Studies at Laval University in Québec City. Mr. de Kerckhove has published several papers on international relations as well as on the relationship between the Muslim world and the West in specialized journals.

After working as an intern at the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Mr. de Kerckhove became a Researcher at the Québec Centre for International Relations and then later headed up the International Security Section at the Canadian Institute for International Affairs (Québec section).

In September 1973, Mr. de Kerckhove entered the Canadian Foreign Service. After a stint in European Affairs, he was posted as Third Secretary to the Canadian Embassy in Tehran. When Mr. de Kerckhove returned to Canada in 1976, he became Assistant Secretary, Inter-Departmental Committee on External Relations then moved to East European Affairs (Yugoslavia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria and Albania). From 1978 to 1981, he was responsible for Canada-France relations. From 1981 to 1985, he was Economic Counsellor at the Canadian Delegation to NATO.

Back in Canada, Mr. de Kerckhove became Deputy Director of the Political and Strategic Analysis Division, then Director of the Economic and Trade Analysis Division in the Policy Planning Bureau. In 1989, he became Director, Economic Relations with Developing Countries Division. In September 1992, he was posted to Moscow as Minister and Deputy Head of Mission.

Mr. de Kerckhove returned to Ottawa in September 1995 to become Associate Chief Air Negotiator. In January 1996, he became Deputy Head of the Policy Branch and Director-General, Federal-Provincial Relations in Foreign Affairs and International Trade. He remained in this position until being named Canada's High Commissioner to the Islamic Republic of Pakistan in August 1998. He spent three years in Islamabad. On September 13, 2001, Mr. de Kerckhove presented his credentials as Ambassador to the Republic of Indonesia. He was also accredited to Timor Leste.

Mr. de Kerckhove returned to Ottawa in September 2003 and joined the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Ottawa as a Canadian Center for Management Development Diplomat in Residence.

On August 9th, 2004, he returned to the Department of Foreign Affairs and became Director General, International Organizations. In July 2006, he added to his responsibilities the function of Personal representative of the Prime Minister for Francophonie.

From September 10th 2008 to September 10 2011, Mr. de Kerckhove was in Cairo as ambassador to the Arab Republic of Egypt.

He retired from the Foreign Service on September 23d, 2011.

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