

**EGYPT'S MUSLIM BROTHERS:
CONFRONTATION OR INTEGRATION?**

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EGYPT'S MUSLIM BROTHERS: CONFRONTATION OR INTEGRATION?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Society of Muslim Brothers' success in the November-December 2005 elections for the People's Assembly sent shockwaves through Egypt's political system. In response, the regime cracked down on the movement, harassed other potential rivals and reversed its fledgling reform process. This is dangerously short-sighted. There is reason to be concerned about the Muslim Brothers' political program, and they owe the people genuine clarifications about several of its aspects. But the ruling National Democratic Party's (NDP) refusal to loosen its grip risks exacerbating tensions at a time of both political uncertainty surrounding the presidential succession and serious socio-economic unrest. Though this likely will be a prolonged, gradual process, the regime should take preliminary steps to normalise the Muslim Brothers' participation in political life.

The Muslim Brothers, whose social activities have long been tolerated but whose role in formal politics is strictly limited, won an unprecedented 20 per cent of parliamentary seats in the 2005 elections. They did so despite competing for only a third of available seats and notwithstanding considerable obstacles, including police repression and electoral fraud. This success confirmed their position as an extremely well-organised and deeply rooted political force. At the same time, it underscored the weaknesses of both the legal opposition and ruling party. The regime might well have wagered that a modest increase in the Muslim Brothers' parliamentary representation could be used to stoke fears of an Islamist takeover and thereby serve as a reason to stall reform. If so, the strategy is at heavy risk of backfiring.

Since the 2005 elections, the regime has deployed a range of legal and security measures to control and constrain the Muslim Brothers. It has restricted their participation in subsequent polls, restricted their ability to function in parliament, arrested thousands of supporters and prosecuted key leaders and financiers in military tribunals. Meanwhile, it amended the constitution to formalise the longstanding ban on the Muslim Brothers' political participation and facilitate the introduction of repressive legislation if and when the Emergency Law finally is repealed. While the approach

hampered the group's further electoral advances, it did nothing to reduce its legitimacy or deal with its longer-term political role. And it has noticeably degraded the quality of parliamentary and political life, entrenching the NDP's virtual monopoly and dealing a severe blow to the legal, non-Islamist opposition.

The Society of Muslim Brothers also has altered its approach. It is using its sizeable parliamentary presence to confront the government and present itself as a major force for political reform. In an unprecedented move, and, despite the crackdown, it is seriously contesting elections for the upper house of parliament, municipalities and labour unions. In 2007, it also for the first time formally expressed its desire to form a legal political party. This last move in particular ought to be seen as an opportunity to separate its religious and political wings and begin the process of peacefully integrating a pivotal political actor.

The current situation in which a banned movement can offer candidates as independents gives a little to everyone. The Brotherhood thrives on its socio-cultural activism and retains manoeuvring space; the regime exercises leverage and constrains its formal participation; and the legal opposition faces less competition. But it also comes at real cost: confusion between the Society's proselytising and political activities – arguably a key to its success; limits on the state's oversight on the group as a political organisation; and overall damage to democratic life. Far better would be for the regime to formally incorporate the Muslim Brothers or an associated party into the political realm and open the political arena to a genuine democratic contest.

The Muslim Brothers also carry their share of responsibility. Although they have made considerable efforts to clarify their vision and can make a credible case that they embrace the rules of democratic politics, including the principles of citizenship, rotation of power and multiparty political life, serious questions linger. Many of their pronouncements are ambiguous; not a few – including in their most recent political program – retain a distinctly non-democratic, illiberal tone. This is particularly true concerning the role of women and the place of religious minorities, neither of whom,

for example, the Muslim Brothers believe should be eligible for the presidency. Clarification is needed. Democratizing the Society's internal practice also would help, particularly if the group's more pragmatic wing is able to make a credible case for a doctrinal revision as the price to pay for political integration.

The path toward integration will not be easy. The very reasons that make it more urgent – a tense socio-economic environment and a looming political transition – also make it more difficult for the regime to contemplate. At the very least, legalisation of a party associated with the Muslim Brothers is highly unlikely to occur under President Hosni Mubarak's stewardship and may have to await the completion of a presidential transition. But this need not and should not mean complete immobility. Both the regime and the Muslim Brothers should initiate a dialogue as well as preliminary steps to pave the way toward eventual normalisation. Ultimately, the Muslim Brothers are too powerful and too representative for there to be either stability or genuine democratisation without finding a way to incorporate them. Their integration should be pursued not just for its own sake, but as an essential step to a genuine opening of the political sphere that would also benefit secular opposition forces.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Government of Egypt:

1. Pave the way for the regularisation of the Muslim Brothers' participation in political life, including by:
 - (a) ceasing arbitrary arrests of Muslim Brothers on the basis of membership in a banned organisation and releasing all Brothers currently detained on those grounds alone;
 - (b) clarifying or revising Article 5 of the constitution, as amended in 2007, to set guidelines for the establishment of a political party with religious reference;
 - (c) revising the laws on political parties and the organs that implement them, such as the Political Parties Committee of the Shura Council, to allow for the creation of new parties, including those with a religious reference, as part of a wider commitment to political pluralism; and

- (d) engaging the Muslim Brothers' leadership in a dialogue on these issues, notably in order to clarify reciprocal steps they need to take for legal integration into the political system.
2. Repeal the Emergency Law and allow full public debate over and parliamentary scrutiny of any proposed anti-terrorism legislation.
3. Frame the regularisation of the Muslim Brothers' participation in political life as part of a wider process of political reform designed to restore confidence in electoral politics and open political participation to all non-violent political actors.

To the Society of Muslim Brothers:

4. Engage in a dialogue with members of the government, opposition and civil society, notably by:
 - (a) approaching officials and reform-minded NDP members to discuss conditions necessary for the Society's peaceful political integration;
 - (b) engaging with secular opposition parties and movements to form a consensus on how the Society can best be integrated as well as wider issues of political reform;
 - (c) engaging with representatives of the Christian community in a frank dialogue on sectarian relations and the Society's stance toward religious minorities;
 - (d) supporting comprehensive political reform clearly, as opposed to a bilateral arrangement between the Society and the regime; and
 - (e) ensuring that consensus positions on these issues are formed within the Society in a democratic manner to avoid contradictory approaches by members.
5. Finalise and amend the Society's political program, in particular by:
 - (a) altering its position on the role of women and non-Muslims in public life;
 - (b) continuing to seek input from a wide range of its members as well as non-members; and
 - (c) clarifying relations between the Society and a future related political party.

Cairo/Brussels, 18 June 2008

EGYPT'S MUSLIM BROTHERS: CONFRONTATION OR INTEGRATION?

I. INTRODUCTION

During the tumultuous political period of 2005, as agitation against the government spread, Crisis Group described the Society of the Muslim Brothers as an “ambiguous presence”.¹ While the Kifaya movement² and various related groups drove much of the opposition’s political agenda, the Society largely remained on the sidelines, cautiously engaging with other opposition forces but refraining from lending its full weight to demonstrations and voicing reservations about Kifaya’s strategy. Secular opposition activists exercised similar caution toward the Brothers, keeping them at arms’ length and criticising their ambivalent stance towards the regime.³ The Brothers’ prudence and restraint had a history: in April/May 2005,

authorities had reacted to its major involvement in street politics with a dissuasive crackdown.

During the September 2005 presidential election campaign – when many other political forces were either staging anti-Mubarak demonstrations or supporting his opponents – the Muslim Brothers by and large were silent, endorsing no one. The Society appeared torn between its customary reservations about street politics (most of its demonstrations in the previous five years had been restricted to foreign issues, such as the second Palestinian intifada and the invasion of Iraq) and rising frustration, particularly among its younger constituency, that the anti-Mubarak, leftist-dominated Kifaya was upstaging it.⁴

In retrospect, the Brothers appear to have purposefully ignored the presidential contest, leaving the field to the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP), the legal opposition and extra-parliamentary groups, and focusing on the more important (because less predictable) November-December 2005 parliamentary elections. As prominent Muslim Brother and former parliamentarian Essam al-Erian remarked on the eve of those elections, “for the first time since 1995 there is not a single Muslim Brother in prison”.⁵

The Society emerged the uncontested strategic victor from the People’s Assembly elections, winning 88 of the 160 seats it contested (out of a total of 444),⁶ over five times the seventeen it had won in 2000. It achieved this despite considerable security interference, fraud in the polls’ second and third rounds, mass arrests of campaign staff as well as the Brothers’ own decision to limit the number of their candidates. The success also was underscored by the ruling

¹ Crisis Group Middle East/North Africa Report N°46, *Reforming Egypt: In Search of a Strategy*, October 2005, which covers the period up to and including the presidential elections of that year.

² Kifaya, headed by the Egyptian Movement for Change, is a coalition of mostly leftist groups and individuals that was formed in late 2004. Its call against the re-election of President Mubarak and the succession to the presidency of his son Gamal drove much of the opposition reform agenda in 2005, but its influence has waned since then. See *ibid.*

³ Senior Brothers claimed that in September and October 2005 high-ranking NDP representatives approached them with an offer to avoid confrontation in certain constituencies, notably those where prominent ruling party figures were running (see interviews with Muhammad Habib, *al-Masri al-Youm*, 16 October 2005; and Mahdi Akef, *al-Ahram*, 18 October 2005). The Brothers asserted they rejected these overtures, although many commentators believe that an arrangement of some sort was the only explanation for what in effect was a truce between the Brothers and the government throughout mid-2005. Muslim Brothers probably were engaged in limited coordination with the ruling party to avoid competition in certain electoral districts, as they occasionally were with independent candidates and those of the legal opposition, for instance the liberal Wafd Party’s Mounir Fakhri Abdel Nour (who served in the previous parliament) and the unrecognised leftist Karama Party’s Hamdeen Sabahi (also an incumbent parliamentarian). Abdel Nour confirmed to Crisis Group that the Brothers had promised not to run a candidate against him. Crisis Group interview, 8 January 2008.

⁴ Crisis Group interviews, leftist activists, young Muslim Brothers and political analysts, Cairo, October 2007-March 2008.

⁵ Crisis Group interview, Essam al-Erian, Cairo, 30 October 2005. In comparison, during the 2000 parliamentary elections several thousand Muslim Brotherhood members and sympathisers were arrested, including 49 of the 161 candidates the Society fielded.

⁶ The president appoints a further ten parliamentarians, bringing the total in the People’s Assembly to 454.

party's setback: its official candidates, even with backing from the state apparatus, won only 145 seats, compared to 171 in 2000. That said, the ruling party faced competition not only from the Muslim Brothers, but also from those of its members who had not been selected as official candidates.

Not unexpectedly, 166 of those elected as independents "rejoined" the NDP, giving it a 311-seat majority.⁷ But even though the NDP maintained parliamentary control, the Muslim Brothers did far better in proportion to the number of candidates fielded. The Society won over half the seats it contested, compared to one third for the NDP. Meanwhile, the legal opposition continued the steady decline that began in 1990 with the switch from a proportional representation system to the current two-member constituency system,⁸ with its representation dropping from sixteen seats in 2000 to nine in the current parliament. Finally, 24 seats were won by non-Islamist independents.⁹

Even if the NDP ultimately retained more than a two-thirds majority, the fact that its candidates had benefited from large-scale police interference and, in some cases, electoral fraud was ominous. It generated pub-

lic sympathy for the Muslim Brothers, who appeared to the general public as the main – albeit far from solitary – victims of electoral tricks and intimidation, even as the government was trumpeting the election as part of its reform process.¹⁰ These tactics earned the condemnation of independent election observers as well as many of the judges and judicial officials tasked under the law with ensuring electoral fairness.¹¹ They also contributed to a continuing decline in voter participation, with less than 25 per cent of eligible voters casting a vote.

Since 2005, the political atmosphere has considerably worsened. Use of electoral fraud to limit the Muslim Brothers' gains and a renewed crackdown (hundreds of arrests and the sentencing of senior Society leaders to long prison terms) signal a return to tactics the regime claimed to have abandoned; more broadly, there is increased anxiety about the country's future. Although its macro-economic performance is impressive – annual GDP growth is 7.5 per cent and investment has reached record figures – poor management of social services, high economic inequality and rising commodity prices have taken a toll. The number of industrial strikes has significantly risen since 2006, as have other forms of social unrest, including riots, in 2007-2008. Even if protest movements such as Kifaya have struggled to remain relevant, there are growing calls for civil disobedience, and anti-regime sentiment

⁷ Although some ruling party members had called for "NDP independents" to be banned from returning to the party, almost all did, providing it with a comfortable 73 per cent majority. Official NDP candidates won not a single seat in three governorates (Suez, Ismailiya and Matrouh) and very few in three other important ones (Sohag, Daqahliya and Qena); few incumbents were re-elected. Overall 77 per cent of successful parliamentary candidates (of all political affiliation) were elected to their first term. See reporting on electoral statistics in *al-Masri al-Youm* and *Nahdet Misr*, 10 December 2005. NDP officials claim that this inter-party competition was in part responsible for the Muslim Brothers' electoral success, since they often benefited from the "NDP vote" being split between two or more candidates. Crisis Group interview, Ahmed Ezz, senior NDP official, March 2007.

⁸ Elections for the People's Assembly have been contested in two-stage majority votes for individual candidates in two-member constituencies since 1990. Each constituency has two seats, one for "professionals" (*fi'at*), the other for "workers" (*'umal*), a legacy of the Gamal Abdel Nasser era that is largely meaningless today, since most "worker" candidates tend to be business people. Efforts to change this system have met with resistance from within the NDP.

⁹ The 2005 elections saw some major opposition figures lose their seat, including Wafdist candidate Mounir Fakhri Abdel Nour and independent Mona Makram Ebeid in Cairo (both are Coptic Christians) and veteran Tagammu Party parliamentarian al-Badri Farghali in Port Said. Overall, the centre-right Wafd Party won six seats and the leftist Tagammu and liberal al-Ghad parties one seat each, while the Nasserist Party failed to win any. Non-Muslim Brother independents include members of unrecognised political parties.

¹⁰ The legal opposition also was targeted. This was particularly true for the al-Ghad Party, a newcomer to the political scene, whose leader Ayman Nour, a popular independent parliamentarian, came second in the presidential race. Nour lost his parliamentary seat to NDP candidate Yehia Wadhan, a retired state security officer whose campaign reportedly was managed by Zakariya Azmi, President Mubarak's chief of staff. See "Free Shoes", *Cairo Magazine*, 3 November 2005. In late December 2005 Nour was sentenced to five years in prison on forgery charges widely seen as trumped up. As of June 2008, Nour was still serving the sentence and had exhausted all possibilities of appeal. His lawyer was considering filing for a presidential pardon, which Nour had previously refused to do. "Egypt nixes opposition leader's bid for release from jail", Agence France-Presse, 16 March 2008.

¹¹ In its 24 November 2005 issue, *al-Masri al-Youm* carried a front-page article by Noha al-Zeiny, a legal officer who supervised the elections in Damanhour, a constituency hotly contested between prominent NDP member Mustafa Al Fiqi and well-known Muslim Brother Gamal Heshmat. Al-Zeiny told the story of the many procedural and other violations carried out by the NDP and security forces. The article prompted a statement, signed by 120 judges, attesting that the violations described by Al Zeiny were common in other constituencies and contributed to what would become known in the Egyptian press as the "Judges' Intifada"; over the course of 2006, the Judges' Club, a professional association, reportedly clashed with the government over judicial reform.

appears to be reaching new heights. Compounding the problems, Egypt faces an uncertain transitional period, as President Mubarak, who turned 80 in 2008, is unlikely to run in the presidential elections scheduled for 2011.

So far, the Society of Muslim Brothers has played a relatively limited role in fomenting unrest, and its leaders often warn that the civil disobedience called for by parts of the opposition could trigger chaos. But authorities justify their repressive policies by arguing that its ultimate goal remains to overthrow the regime and impose an Islamist rule that would threaten national unity. The Muslim Brothers' often illiberal views are cause for concern, especially in a country with a large non-Muslim minority. But, amid political uncertainty and fragile socio-economic circumstances, the question is whether the regime's confrontational stance is the best for longer-term stability. The Muslim Brothers' success has come largely out of its ability to occupy the public spaces left vacant by failing state institutions such as schools and hospitals, as well as its members' organisational prowess and willingness to sacrifice. Repression is unlikely to reduce their appeal. On the contrary, continued conflict may only serve to encourage support for the Society, absolving it of the need to carry out much-needed ideological revisions.

II. CONSEQUENCES OF THE MUSLIM BROTHERS' ELECTORAL SUCCESS

A. THE 2005 ELECTIONS' AFTERMATH

The Muslim Brothers greeted their success with a combination of triumphalism and cautious reassurance. They claimed the results proved they represented an important part of the electorate:

We did not want to shock the system and did not field as many candidates as we could have. We had 161 candidates and should have won about 128 seats if it were not for the state's interference. This would have given us a 75 per cent success rate, whereas the ruling party fielded 444 candidates and only won about 33 per cent of the time. This resulted in a sharp polarisation with the NDP on one end and the M[uslim]B[rothers] on the other and caused panic and fear at the heart of the ruling party because the gap was vast, especially considering our limited resources and the methods used. Ever since, their policy towards us has changed: they are trying to restrain us and marginalise our role in political life.¹²

The elections confirmed what had been widely believed, but thus far untested, about the Muslim Brothers' political appeal. Their gains consecrated them not only as the most serious challenger to the ruling party's 30-year hegemony, but also as a credible alternative to it. Even if participation levels – only about 25 per cent of eligible voters cast a ballot – suggested there was a “silent majority”¹³ unenthusiastic about both the NDP and the Muslim Brothers, the elections clearly created a bipolar political map.

The Muslim Brothers saw this as validation of a strategy aimed at rebuilding themselves since near-eradication under President Gamal Abdel Nasser. Having been virtually eliminated from the political scene by the late 1960s, they gradually have become

¹² Crisis Group interview, Deputy General Guide Muhammad Habib, Cairo, March 2008.

¹³ This term is often used by members of the legal opposition to describe the potential reservoirs of support available to other parties if voters were not driven away by violence, police intimidation, fraud and the widespread belief that elections are – in a word used by many who declined to vote – “a farce” (*masraheyya*). Further impediments to greater participation are administrative obstacles to obtaining voters' cards. Crisis Group interviews, voters, NDP and Muslim Brother politicians, Cairo, Bagour, Alexandria and Damanshour, November-December 2005.

the largest opposition group to the inheritors of Nasser's regime. This view was expressed in the group's internal literature, newspaper articles and website debates, with leaders arguing that the elections suggested that a sizeable part of the population was ready to support the Society. In turn, they saw this as resulting from the movement's *daawa* (religious mission) activities, a key component of the strategy of *tamkin* (empowerment).¹⁴

At the same time, the Muslim Brothers were conscious of the impact their gains would have on the local political class, the region and Egypt's Western allies. Immediately after the first round, when it became clear they would make major gains, they launched a public relations offensive to reassure both Egyptians and foreigners that they were a reformist force committed to the democratic process. Leading figures penned op-eds in major local, Arab and Western newspapers stressing political reform as the organisation's central goal and gradualism as its sworn method – a message that the Society's leaders repeated in public interventions and interviews with Crisis Group. In the words of a Muslim Brother leader:

Two decades ago we embraced democracy, partisanship and rotation of power. We consider the people to be the centre of power. We are not vying for power, or trying to become the ruling party. The

power of public opinion is what we strive for, because it is what made the Muslim Brothers rise. Nobody can claim we are against democracy or that we intend to burn the ladder once we've reached the top – otherwise we would be running with more candidates.¹⁵

On the domestic front, the campaign sought to reduce the alarm generated by their success. The state press, which immediately before the elections had dampened its frequently hostile attitude towards the Society,¹⁶ generated more negative coverage, and its most prominent columnists warned of the dangers the group posed. Just as important were new independent publications that had appeared since 2004 and whose coverage, even as it tended to sensationalise electoral developments, expressed consternation that the country's political future seemed reduced to a choice between the ruling NDP and the Muslim Brothers. A prominent commentator bitterly remarked:

The history of these two forces and their political calculations confirm their total lack of interest in reform. After the elections, each side will only be interested in its own assets. We will never forgive those who toyed with the country's fate and who closed all roads that could lead to genuine reform.¹⁷

Alarmed reactions were particularly common among Coptic Christians, who fear the Society's performance was symptomatic of the country's increasingly Islamist orientation. In response, the Society reiterated its commitment to national unity and minority rights,¹⁸ although it did not retreat from some of its more controversial opinions or establish a definitive version of its views on Copts. For instance, while it promised to issue a "white paper" on the issue in January 2006,

¹⁴ Hassan al-Banna, the Muslim Brotherhood's founder, set out the concept of *tamkin* as a prelude to the establishment of an Islamic state. Today, it is frequently referred to in Muslim Brother publications and discussions in making the point that, the Islamisation of society having taken root in the last two decades, the necessary mass support now exists to create a truly Islamic system of governance. This means, in turn, that the Society should focus on the next stage, gaining political power. Dr Rafiq Habib, a Christian activist who is close to the Muslim Brothers' senior leadership, argues the elections prove that educational and proselytising activities were central to the Brothers' success. In his view, therefore, the Society's strategy has worked and should be expanded upon. See "al-Ikhwan wa Murahla al-Tamkin" ["The Brothers and the Stage of Empowerment"], www.ikhwanonline.com, 28 March 2006. Although this type of discourse often is invoked by critics to accuse the Society of harbouring totalitarian intentions, members of the group's political wing say their thinking has considerably evolved since al-Banna's days. They claim to be committed to achieving political power through democratic means, parliamentary institutions and rotation of power. Crisis Group interviews, senior Muslim Brothers and political analysts, December 2007 and January-February 2008. The classic account of the early history and founding ideology of the group is Richard P. Mitchell's 1969 *The Society of Muslim Brothers*, which discusses in depth ideas on governance, the nature of the state, political strategy and other issues.

¹⁵ Crisis Group interview, Deputy General Guide Muhammad Habib, Cairo, March 2008. Similar opinions were voiced by both leading and rank-and-file members of the Society. Critics have noted that democracy only began to prominently feature in the Society's discourse in recent years and that it is at odds with other elements of the group's ideology. See below and Crisis Group Middle East/North Africa Briefing N°13, *Islamism in North Africa II: Egypt's Opportunity*, 20 April 2004.

¹⁶ Youssef Ezzat, the deputy head of *al-Ahram's* political desk, noted that *al-Akhbar* (a state-owned daily newspaper with the second largest circulation in Egypt) was giving positive coverage to the Muslim Brothers and had run a controversial advertisement for the group. Crisis Group interview, Cairo, January 2008.

¹⁷ Editorial by Magdi Gallad, editor-in-chief of *al-Masri al-Youm*, 22 November 2005.

¹⁸ See eg, Essam al-Erian, "The Coptic brothers are part of the nation", *al-Hayat*, 30 November 2005.

this has still to be published, leaving contradictions unresolved between recent statements of various prominent members and past General Guides.¹⁹ To its credit, the Society sought to engage in a dialogue with prominent Copts, and several Muslim Brothers known for their reformist views held regular meetings with Coptic intellectuals and community leaders. However, although the effort was noted, it did not convince those involved. Youssef Sidhoum, a Coptic participant in the talks, said:

The Muslim Brothers approached us saying, “whatever differences we have, we should discuss them amicably”. But in these discussions there are too many taboos, and the Brothers are often unwilling to discuss the most problematic issues frankly.²⁰

The meetings stopped in January 2006, allegedly because of pressure by security services on Coptic participants.²¹

On the international front, the Muslim Brothers sought both to reassure and make the case that they should be taken seriously. While prominent Muslim Brothers – particularly the “middle generation” intellectuals who favour political participation²² – had frequently appeared in the Arabic press before, the effort to reach out to international media marked a new departure. Significantly, an early article was by Muhammad Khairat al-Shater, one of the Society’s two Deputy General Guides and widely considered one of the leadership’s most influential members. Al-Shater presented the Society as the victim of unjust marginalisation:

The first round of parliamentary elections, in which the Muslim Brotherhood won more than 65 per

cent of seats it contested despite large-scale rigging and intimidation, confirm that our movement is seen by the public as a viable political alternative. But in spite of the confidence the Egyptian people have in us, we are not seeking more than a small piece of the parliamentary cake. This decision is dictated by political realities, both locally and internationally: in other words, the possible reaction of a repressive government backed to the hilt by the U.S. and other Western governments.²³

Amid growing arguments about and interest in Islamism generally and the Muslim Brotherhood in particular within the West’s foreign policy community, some Brothers saw an opportunity to escape the ban on contact with foreign officials²⁴ and seek external support for eventual legalisation.²⁵ Although the Society has set itself strict guidelines for encounters with Western officials – it will have them only do so in the presence of foreign ministry officials or through the activities

¹⁹ Essam al-Erian, the head of the Muslim Brothers’ political bureau, said that past and current statements on the issue of Christians suffice, particularly since the Society now explicitly embraces citizenship and equal rights for all. Crisis Group interview, Cairo, October 2007. However, Egyptian commentators point to the Society’s position that non-Muslims should not be eligible for the presidency (see below) and to past statements, such as a famous interview of the late General Guide Mustafa Mashhour in which he opined that Christians could not be trusted to serve in the military and defend the country.

²⁰ Crisis Group interview, Youssef Sidhoum, Cairo, January 2008. Youssef Sidhoum is the editor of *al-Watani*, a weekly newspaper which focuses largely on Coptic Christian issues. He said participants in the informal dialogue included Muslim Brothers Essam al-Erian and Abdel Moneim Abdel Quddous, both known as reformists.

²¹ *Al-Masri al-Youm*, 7 January 2006. Similar initiatives in Assiut and Alexandria were also blocked.

²² See Crisis Group Briefing, *Egypt’s Opportunity*, op. cit.

²³ “No need to be afraid of us”, *The Guardian*, 23 November 2005. Interestingly al-Shater signed the article as “vice-president of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt”, a more modern-sounding title than the usual “Deputy General Guide” and one that the Society never before had used in English or Arabic. According to a young Muslim Brother close to al-Shater, publication of the article caused a strong rebuke from the security services, which did not want the Muslim Brothers to interact with Western media. His January 2007 arrest was seen in part as delayed punishment. Until then al-Shater had been a principal interlocutor between state security and the Muslim Brothers. Crisis Group interview, Cairo, July 2007.

²⁴ The foreign ministry has made its opposition to meetings with Western diplomats and leaders of the Muslim Brothers clear and frequently raises the issue with its interlocutors in the diplomatic community. Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomats, Cairo, January-March 2008. Western diplomats have not met with non-elected Muslim Brothers (as most of the leadership is) since the late 1990s, although most reserve the right to meet with parliamentarians from the Society – this is, for instance, the official U.S. position. Arab dignitaries have more direct contacts with the Muslim Brothers: for instance, Qatari diplomats have met with General Guide Akef in recent years, as have senior Palestinian officials from both Hamas and Fatah. The Egyptian government is unhappy about these meetings but has not officially banned them. Crisis Group interview, senior government official, Cairo, March 2008.

²⁵ This tentative willingness to gain international recognition was seen in April 2007, when Muhammad Saad Al-Qatani, the leader of the Muslim Brothers’ parliamentary bloc, attended a reception in honour of a Congressional delegation at the residence of U.S. Ambassador to Egypt Francis Ricciardone. This was the first such meeting in over a decade and was organised at the initiative of U.S. officials. Crisis Group interviews, U.S. diplomat, Cairo, March 2008.

of the People's Assembly – it has encouraged members to participate in international conferences and engage in debates with the Western policy community.²⁶

Thanks to their success, the Muslim Brothers regained that prominence as the leading voice of dissent and for political reform many members felt it had conceded to the Kifaya movement and opposition parties such as al-Ghad.²⁷ At a conference presenting its newly elected parliamentary bloc, the Society emphasised political reform and the competence of its 88 parliamentarians, who stood together and chanted “*islah*” (reform) rather than Islamist slogans.²⁸ Perhaps the elections' major consequence, then, was to put an end to the Society's long-ambivalent attitude toward electoral politics, speculation that it seeks a “deal” with the regime or the notion that it might be content with a traditional *daawa* role. Contesting elections is now firmly entrenched in the Brotherhood's strategy to achieve its proclaimed goal of creating a better Muslim society.

B. THE BROTHERS ON THE OFFENSIVE

Since 2005, the Muslim Brothers' political strategy has been aimed at anchoring and building upon electoral success. In the absence of any real impact on the legislative agenda, given the NDP's still-comfortable majority, they seek to use their parliamentary presence to raise awareness of the Society's dedication to political reform. The first evidence of this came in January 2006, when General Guide²⁹ Akef pledged that henceforth the Society would contest every election. Its efforts had largely focused on the People's Assembly, professional syndicates and student union

elections.³⁰ It now claimed it also would participate in elections for municipal councils (which it eventually boycotted only after nearly all of its candidates were barred), the Shura Council (the upper house of parliament), labour unions (where its presence traditionally had been minimal) as well as, occasionally, the board of Cairo's prestigious social clubs.

The apparent goal was to capitalise on its expected success in municipal elections originally scheduled for mid-2006, major labour union elections scheduled for November 2006 and the Shura Council elections scheduled for spring 2007. By making considerable advances in these bodies, it hoped to lay the groundwork for a major expansion of its presence in elected offices at all levels of state and parastatal institutions.³¹

Increased electoral participation also arguably began the process of obtaining sufficient support across both houses of parliament and municipal councils to nominate a candidate in future presidential elections, as per the rules introduced by the May 2005 amendment to Article 76 of the constitution.³² Although it could not hope to achieve that goal immediately, and did not try, the Muslim Brothers fed the perception that they were interested at some point in competing for the presidency, by far the most powerful institution. The Society denied this:

²⁶ See for instance “Islamist Movements And The Democratic Process In The Arab World: Exploring the Gray Zones”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace/Herbert-Quandt-Stiftung, March 2006; also Marc Lynch, “Brothers in Arms”, *Foreign Policy*, October 2007. It should be noted that in recent years most senior members have faced a travel ban.

²⁷ See Crisis Group Report, *Reforming Egypt*, op. cit.

²⁸ “Meet the deputies” conference organised by the Muslim Brothers, attended by Crisis Group, Cairo, December 2005. The conference was used to highlight the achievements of the Muslim Brothers' bloc in the 2000-2005 parliament and present the reform-oriented issues on which they would focus during the new parliamentary session.

²⁹ The title of “General Guide” (*al-murshid al-'amm*) is reserved for the senior position in the Society's formal structure. The General Guide is elected by the Guidance Bureau (*al-maktab al-irshad*), the Society's politburo, and the position is held for life. The first General Guide of the Muslim Brothers was Hassan al-Banna, their founder. General Guide Mahdi Akef is the seventh person to hold the post.

³⁰ See Crisis Group Report, *Reforming Egypt*, op. cit.

³¹ The Muslim Brothers' interest in labour union elections was viewed with cynicism by activists who tend to be possessive about organised labour as one of the last bastions of the left. “The Muslim Brothers have neo-liberal economic views and little record of defending workers' rights. Their presence among the workers is minimal, and they were trying to take advantage of the rise in strikes for their own political goals”. Crisis Group interview, labour activist, Cairo, December 2007. Strikes have occurred increasingly frequently in recent years, with over 400 instances of industrial action between mid-2006 and the end of 2007, according to Egyptian Workers and Trade Union Watch, a labour NGO. See “Workers take to the streets: the strikes of 2007”, *Daily News Egypt*, 30 December 2007.

³² Article 76 of the constitution was amended to introduce direct, multi-candidate presidential elections. It requires all presidential candidate nominations to be supported by at least 250 members of the representative bodies, including 65 members of the People's Assembly, 25 members of the Shura Council and ten members of local councils in fourteen governorates, with the remaining twenty to be drawn from any of the above; it waived this set of conditions for all legal political parties desiring to field candidates in 2005 but maintains them for all independent, non-party candidates. See Crisis Group Report, *Reforming Egypt*, op. cit. Article 76 was amended again in March 2007 to allow existing parties to field candidates in the next presidential election.

The presidential elections are not on our agenda or on our mind. In the Shura Council elections we only fielded twenty candidates, less than the 25 needed to nominate a candidate for the presidential election, precisely to avoid giving the impression that we are aiming for the presidency. The reason we are contesting these elections – and the municipal elections in particular – is to provide a large enough legal umbrella for the Brothers so that they are able to interact with their audience and provide it with the services it needs, instead of only having the role of supervising administrative institutions, which are characterised by corruption. Whoever has influence in parliament can influence the political and economic state of the country, and working on the municipal level allows us to deliver services. The regime wants to divorce the Brothers from the communities that support them, but we have a strong presence on the Egyptian street, and we won't halt our plans for peaceful reform even if this costs us a lot.³³

The Muslim Brothers' hopes to make inroads in municipal councils, where they previously had a negligible presence, were quickly dashed. On 15 February 2006, despite the protests of opposition parliamentarians, the People's Assembly granted President Mubarak's request that these elections be postponed for two years on the grounds that the constitution should be amended first (as Mubarak had promised in his campaign).³⁴ The move was widely seen as indicating the regime's fear that the Muslim Brothers would ride a wave of public support, but also concern that another election – particularly given the NDP's apparent disarray – would produce more fraud at a time when judges were still registering their indignation at police interference and irregularities during the People's Assembly elections.

Another factor appears to have been Hamas's electoral victory in the January 2006 Palestinian parliamentary elections, a development authorities viewed with concern because of the close relationship between the Egyptian Muslim Brothers and their Palestinian offshoot. A European diplomat said at the time, "it's better that the elections were postponed. Too many Islamist victories in a row could have been destabilising".³⁵ When municipal elections were finally held in 2008, Muslim Brothers were not allowed to

register as candidates and the Society decided to boycott the poll after a series of arrests.

For much of 2006, the Muslim Brother parliamentarians made effective use of their seats to advertise their reformist credentials and embarrass the government. They proposed bills on judicial reform and a new political parties law, among others, and campaigned for cancellation of the Emergency Law.³⁶ Observers noted that their performance was forcing the NDP to exercise greater discipline over its parliamentarians, particularly their previously slack attendance.³⁷ Most of all, it gave the Brothers the opportunity to embarrass the regime by relentlessly attacking it over corruption and other scandals and making use of parliamentary interpellations to hold senior officials to account, often in collaboration with independents, with whom the Brothers tried to "harmonise" positions.³⁸ The flip side is that the Brothers' bloc was marginalised by the NDP, which refused to grant it any important committee positions and often ignored its legislative proposals.³⁹

The result was often chaotic interaction between the majority and the bloc, which complained that normal parliamentary procedures were not being followed – for instance that its parliamentarians were not frequently given the floor. The Wafd Party's Mahmoud Abaza, who as head of the largest legal party outside of the NDP is the opposition's official parliamentary leader, assessed that "the Muslim Brothers have been effective at mobilising their bloc, and they have five or six very impressive lawmakers. The rest, however, are noisemakers".⁴⁰ Since the NDP still controlled the majority of votes – even if some of its more disgruntled members occasionally crossed the aisle and voted with the opposition – the Muslim Brothers could point to few successes, and no legislation they introduced was passed.⁴¹ One NDP official claimed that the Mus-

³³ Crisis Group interview, Deputy General Guide Muhammad Habib, Cairo, March 2008.

³⁴ "Egypt Postpones Local Elections Despite Objections", Associated Press, 15 February 2006.

³⁵ Crisis Group interview, European diplomat, Cairo, February 2006.

³⁶ As noted in Crisis Group Report, *Reforming Egypt*, op. cit., this has long been a key demand of the Muslim Brothers, who have been the prime targets of the extraordinary powers it confers on the security services. It also has been a top demand of secular parties and human rights organisations. The stress on judicial independence, also shared by the opposition, aimed at restraining electoral fraud by reinforcing judicial supervision.

³⁷ See Samer Shehata and Joshua Stacher, "The Brotherhood goes to parliament", *Middle East Report* 240, fall 2006.

³⁸ Crisis Group interview, Muhammad Saad Al-Qattni, leader of the Muslim Brothers' parliamentary bloc, Cairo, March 2008.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interview, Wafd Party President Mahmoud Abaza, Cairo, January 2008.

⁴¹ See "Islamists have little effect on lawmaking in Egypt", Knight Ridder Tribune News, 1 April 2006; and "Egypt's

lim Brothers had achieved little from their presence in parliament and eventually would be seen as ineffectual, dampening voter enthusiasm for the group.⁴²

Under the circumstances, making noise may have been the best the Brothers could do. Egypt's media environment has become considerably more hostile to the ruling party and the regime since the 2005 events and often amplifies the Society's message. This has been part and parcel of the Society's strategy:

Even if our proposals are not accepted by parliament, the media reports them and people will know what we are trying to do. We have also had to counter the negative propaganda about us in the state media, as well as the fact that television coverage of parliament has been reduced since we were elected. When we appear on television, they frequently cut our speeches to only leave our polite introductions, making us look as if we agree with the government!⁴³

The Society also raised its profile outside parliament, most significantly during a mid-2006 clash between judges and government. Having refrained from staging major protests since mid-2005, Muslim Brothers took to the streets in defence of Hisham Bastawissi and Mahmoud Mekki, two Court of Cassation vice-presidents who were referred to a disciplinary court because of charges of fraud they levelled during the 2005 elections.⁴⁴ Protests backing the judges and judicial reform more generally drew unprecedented support from the opposition as well as the public, including hundreds of Muslim Brothers. The Society supplemented this activism with a proposed new law on judicial independence. The Muslim Brothers' support for the rebel judges placed them squarely on the side of a cause enjoying wide political and media support.

One of the more lasting positive developments of the limited political opening that took place in 2004 and 2005 is the proliferation of independent publications, most notably the launch of new dailies such as *al-Masri al-Youm* and *Nahdet Misr* that challenged the

state press' monopoly on daily news reporting. Some of the new publications, such as the once-banned *al-Destour*, have tended toward sensationalist political coverage, generally depicting the Muslim Brothers and various elements of the regime as locked in pitched battle. Still, and despite uneven quality, this new press has had an important political impact, if only because it gives greater coverage to opposition news and perspectives and because journalists sympathetic to the Muslim Brothers are much more likely to find employment in these publications than in the state media.

This has been a double-edged sword for the Muslim Brothers: even as the press gives extensive coverage to their exposés of official corruption and efforts to press for political reform, it highlights the bloc's ongoing moral campaigns, in particular its attempts to ban books deemed offensive to Islam and "immoral" events such as beauty contests, and impose ultra-conservative interpretations of Sharia (Islamic law) in the state's handling of women in the legal system. As discussed below, publication of their draft political platform in 2007 – the most detailed outline of the Society's positions to date – highlighted the contradictions between their reformist political discourse and often illiberal moral and religious positions.

C. THE REGIME STRIKES BACK I: THE SECURITY BACKLASH

The regime's strategy towards the Muslim Brothers over the last two decades has combined relative tolerance of (or indifference toward) its religious and social activities with a hostile media discourse and steady stream of security crackdowns against political activists. But the 2005 elections marked a quantitative and qualitative change: the regime dramatically increased the number of arrests of rank-and-file members whenever the Muslim Brothers contested an election or took part in public protests, imposed travel bans on most of their senior leaders⁴⁵ and curtailed their public activities and contacts with other opposition and civil society figures.⁴⁶ The new policy also included long-term detention (without charges under the Emergency Law) of prominent members and tar-

Muslim Brothers get used to legislative dealing", *Arab Reform Bulletin*, April 2006.

⁴² Crisis Group interview, senior NDP official, Cairo, January 2008.

⁴³ Crisis Group interview, Al-Qatani, Cairo, March 2008.

⁴⁴ Bastawissi and Mekki became a *cause célèbre* in Egypt and abroad for their determination to push for greater judicial independence. They penned op-eds in the Egyptian, pan-Arab and international press in what was seen as one of the most significant and credible critiques of the Egyptian regime to come from within government institutions. See for instance "When judges are beaten", *The Guardian*, 10 May 2006.

⁴⁵ See "Egypt bars Muslim Brotherhood members from travel", Reuters, 14 November 2007. In most cases the travel bans were aimed at preventing members from attending international conferences.

⁴⁶ In 2007, for the first time since the Muslim Brothers were allowed to resume their activities in the 1970s, the regime prevented them from holding their annual Ramadan *iftar* dinner, which had previously been used as an occasion for the group to engage with politicians and civil society activists.

getting the Society's key financiers and most influential leaders. Muslim Brothers and external observers describe the crackdown as the most widespread campaign against the group since the 1960s, even if the level of brutality is far less and its aim is to control and contain rather than eradicate the group.⁴⁷

Signs of this new strategy began to emerge early in 2006 and initially were interpreted as retaliation for the Society's aggressive contestation of the regime in parliament.⁴⁸ But as the Muslim Brothers took up the popular cause of judges put on trial for their role in reporting electoral fraud,⁴⁹ a new campaign of arrests began. The pattern appeared to be that the security services would crack down every time the Muslim Brothers took to the streets (whatever the reason) or

⁴⁷ This was a consensus opinion in Crisis Group interviews with Muslim Brothers and political analysts, October 2007-March 2008. During the 1960s, the crackdown was aimed at destroying the Society and involved the use of severe torture and execution of high-ranking members; while the present crackdown involves a good deal of police brutality, it pales in comparison. See also Samer Shehata and Joshua Stacher, "Boxing in the Brothers", *Middle East Report Online*, 8 August 2007.

⁴⁸ The arrest of Cairo University Professor Rashad al-Bayoumi, a member of the Society's Guidance Council, its top executive body, was interpreted in this fashion. "Egypt police detain leading Brotherhood member", Reuters, 3 March 2006.

⁴⁹ The judges who monitored the 2005 People's Assembly elections reported large-scale incidents of fraud and voter intimidation, giving credibility to opposition and civil society reports (notably from the Muslim Brotherhood) of massive security interference starting from the second round. By April 2006, the confrontation between the judges and the government led the press to refer to a "judges' intifada". Two senior judges, Hisham Bastawissi and Ahmed Mekki, were stripped of their judicial immunity by the Supreme Judicial Council, an executive-controlled institution, in mid-February 2006 and referred to a disciplinary tribunal on charges of "insulting and defaming" the state. The judges' social status and reputation for integrity made them the unwitting poster children of opposition movements, and the Muslim Brothers embraced them. Street demonstrations in favour of the judges attracted hundreds, with the normally cautious Muslim Brothers participating in large numbers and security services intervening to violently repress them. See "Egypt judges demand independent judiciary", Associated Press, 26 May 2006; and commentary by Rami Khouri, "Are the judges the true hope of Egyptian reform", *Daily Star*, 10 May 2006. Reformist judges subsequently faced administrative reprisals by the government, especially after President Mubarak appointed a new justice minister in June 2006. In March 2007, the role of judges in election supervision was sharply reduced by an amendment to Article 88 of the constitution substituting an electoral commission (some of whose members would be drawn from the judiciary) for judicial supervision.

contested an election. While arrests have taken place continually between the second round of the 2005 parliamentary elections and mid-2008, the following were the most notable:

- Between March and June 2006, the period during which demonstrations were taking place in support of the judges, over 850 Muslim Brothers were detained.⁵⁰
- Security forces barred opposition students (mostly from the Muslim Brothers) from participating in university elections across the country in October 2006, prompting them to ally with the radical left and declare an unrecognised "Free Union" independent of university administration.⁵¹ The clashes over the elections, and notably the use of riot police and hired thugs to repress Islamist students, led to ongoing tensions that contributed to the "al-Azhar militia" incident of December 2006 (see below). The same practices were applied on campus at the beginning of the 2007 academic year.
- Similar intervention by security forces barred Muslim Brothers and other opposition candidates from registering for labour union elections in November 2006, which the Society seriously contested for the first time.⁵²
- In December early 2006, Islamist students at Cairo's al-Azhar University staged a martial arts demonstration wearing black hoods, allegedly in order to send a message to security services that they were prepared to defend themselves against riot police and hired thugs often used to repress student protests. The students were arrested. Although it was an amateurish production and only about 30 students took part, the incident triggered a media maelstrom, with figures from across the political spectrum expressing serious concern that the Muslim Brothers were nurturing their own paramilitary militia.⁵³ The state press published pictures of the

⁵⁰ "Egypt arrests 220 members of the banned Muslim Brotherhood", Associated Press, 13 June 2006.

⁵¹ See "Islamist groups clash with government forces on Egyptian campuses", McClatchy Newspapers, 5 November 2006. According to Islamist and leftist student activists, it was agreed that the "Free Union" would represent both Islamist and non-Islamist forces, although the latter are a minority. Crisis Group interviews, Cairo and Ain Shams University students, Cairo, October 2007.

⁵² *Nahdet Misr*, 1 November 2006.

⁵³ This concern was also fuelled by a statement made by General Guide of the Muslim Brothers Mohammed Mahdi Akef during the 2006 war between Israel and Lebanon that the Brothers were prepared to send 10,000 militants to fight alongside Hizbollah. This was most probably a badly

event juxtaposed with pictures of Hamas and Hizbollah rallies, accusing the Muslim Brothers of emulating them and threatening Egypt with the kind of crisis facing the Palestinian and Lebanese governments.⁵⁴ Overall, the incident and the way in which it was discussed in the mass media amounted to a public relations disaster for the Muslim Brothers, undoing much of the goodwill it had built up in the previous year.

- Several hundred Muslim Brothers were arrested before and during the Shura Council elections of June 2007, in which the Muslim Brothers failed to win a single seat due partly to police repression.⁵⁵
- In reaction to the al-Azhar incident, over 140 Muslim Brothers were arrested in mid-December 2006. Among the detainees were businessmen who are

thought-out attempt to embarrass the regime, which had been very critical of Hizbollah at the beginning of the war, rather than a serious threat, especially since Akef added that “you would need Arab regimes to authorise their deployment or at least turn a blind eye on their departure”. See “Egypt Islamist leader says ready to send fighters to Lebanon”, Agence France-Presse, 3 August 2006. Nonetheless, some commentators believe the Muslim Brothers may have gradually reactivated a paramilitary wing in the guise of youth vacation camps that are periodically raided by the government and in which young members allegedly undergo strenuous physical training. Some analysts hostile to the Muslim Brothers have long said that they seek to recreate the *tanzim khass* (special organisation), the paramilitary unit disbanded in the Nasser era. See Ali Ashmawy, “al-Tarikh al-Sirri li-Jamaa al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin” [“The Secret History of the The Society of the Muslim Brothers”], Ibn Khaldun Centre for Development Studies, Cairo, 2006. Even if the Society’s youth culture emphasises physical strength and martial arts, most analysts interviewed by Crisis Group discount this theory. Islamist and other student activists claim that there was little novel in the al-Azhar demonstration, and similar incidents had taken place before. Crisis Group interviews, Cairo, October 2007.

⁵⁴ The virulently anti-Islamist newspaper *Rose al-Youssef* featured such pictures under the headline “The Brothers’ Army”, 13 December 2006, and continued to bring attention to the event for several weeks. The newspaper’s editor, Abdallah Kamal, accused senior Muslim Brothers of lying when they said they did not know about the event and condemned it, accusing them of *takfiri* thought: “The Brothers have a terrorist mentality, a mentality that declares all of society apostate”. *Takfir* is the Islamic legal concept of declaring non-Muslim a person or group previously considered Muslim; modern interpretations by radical scholars such as Sayyid Qutb extended the concept to declaring entire societies non-Muslim, thus justifying the use of violence. Even sympathetic commentators expressed grave concern at the demonstration’s military ethos. See *al-Ahram*, 12 December 2006.

⁵⁵ See “Egypt arrests over 100 Muslim Brotherhood members as elections approach”, Associated Press, 6 June 2007.

major financiers of the group and some of its key political leaders, including Deputy General Guide Khairat al-Shater. The government also froze over 70 of their companies and other assets. Forty detainees were referred to a military tribunal to face charges of belonging to and funding an illegal organisation, money laundering and financing terrorism (the terrorism charges were later dropped). Two court decisions calling their trial in a military tribunal illegal since they are civilians were ignored. The military tribunal’s verdict was delivered on 15 April 2008: two leaders – al-Shater and prominent businessman Hassan Malek – received unexpectedly harsh sentences of seven years each, sixteen others received sentences of between eighteen months and five years, and seven tried in absentia were given ten-year sentences. The remaining fifteen were acquitted.

- In the run-up to the April 2008 municipal elections, over 830 potential candidates and their supporters were arrested and only 498 out of 5,754 Muslim Brother candidates were able to register due to administrative and police obstruction.⁵⁶ On the eve of the elections, the Society announced its boycott in protest at the arrests.

These security crackdowns have intensified tensions between the Muslim Brothers and the regime, leading some to worry that the former could turn violent, particularly its younger members. Mohammad Saad Al-Qatani, the head of the Muslim Brothers’ parliamentary bloc, said the government wanted “to provoke the Brothers so that they abandon their peaceful methods”,⁵⁷ although he and other Muslim Brothers are also quick to add that the Society inculcates its members with the belief that violence can never be an option.⁵⁸ Even so, considering the history of Egypt’s militant Islamist movements – some of which were formed by dissident Muslim Brothers who rejected the leader-

⁵⁶ See www.ikhwanweb.com, 12 March 2007. Deputy General Guide Muhammad Habib said that of the 498 who managed to register their papers, only about ten were eventually accepted, with the rest being denied on the grounds that their paperwork was incomplete. Crisis Group interview, Cairo, March 2008.

⁵⁷ “Muslim Brotherhood says Egypt aims to provoke violence”, Agence France-Presse, 10 February 2007.

⁵⁸ Crisis Group interviews, young and senior Muslim Brothers, Cairo, October 2007-March 2008. See also commentary by Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh, “Crackdown by a clique”, *The Guardian*, 16 March 2007.

ship's official renunciation of violence in the 1970s⁵⁹ – the fear ought not be dismissed outright.⁶⁰

The military trial arguably was the most damaging for the Society, depriving it of both necessary funding⁶¹ and the leadership of some of its most important cadres. Deputy General Guide Khairat al-Shater is said to have played a critical role in bringing in resources and also to have acted as an intermediary between the older, traditional leadership and reformist cadres.⁶² His absence, along with that of others representing the emerging pragmatic trend, most of whom are in their fifties and sixties, risks leaving a vacuum which could be filled either with less experienced members or by the old guard of septuagenarian and octogenarian leaders. Some Brothers fear this will lead to ideological stagnation at an important time, while preventing resolution of longstanding internal debates.⁶³

⁵⁹ See Crisis Group Briefing, *Egypt's Opportunity*, op. cit.

⁶⁰ The environment that led to the radicalisation of some Muslim Brothers in the 1960s and 1970s is vastly different from that which exists today. The Muslim Brothers have been criticised by al-Qaeda ideologue Ayman al-Zawahri, a former leader of Egyptian Islamic Jihad, for their embrace of electoral politics. In response, leading Muslim Brothers issued their own critique of al-Qaeda's brand of violent jihad. Since the other two main Egyptian Islamist movements – Islamic Jihad and Gamaa Islamiya – also renounced violence, the main threat of Islamist violence today comes from individuals inspired by al-Qaeda's notion of global jihad.

⁶¹ A former member of the Muslim Brothers said "al-Shater controls a lot of strings in the Society through the jobs and money he brings". Crisis Group interview, Cairo, February 2008. Al-Shater is a computer engineer who made his fortune in the Gulf and owns several companies. As suggested by the extensive mobilisation that surrounded his arrest and subsequent trial, he appears to have a large following among younger Muslim Brothers. Some suggest he is the single most important person in the organisation. Crisis Group interview, young Muslim Brother close to Shater, Cairo, May 2007. Amr al-Chobaki, a political analyst, estimated that the arrest of al-Shater and his 39 co-defendants dried up about one third of the Society's funding streams, forcing it to rely on the two other main streams, membership dues and revenue from small businesses it operates. Crisis Group interview, Cairo, February 2008.

⁶² Crisis Group interview, senior Muslim Brother, Cairo, March 2008. This was reminiscent of the last time Muslim Brothers were tried in a military court. In November 1995, 54 Muslim Brothers were sentenced to up to five years in prison, including "middle generation" leaders Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh, Essam al-Erian, Muhammad Habib, Khairat al-Shater and Ibrahim al-Zaafarani.

⁶³ Ibid. For Deputy General Guide Muhammad Habib, the question was not so much one of leadership, since others can take the place of those serving prison terms, but rather of losing the collective experience of mature members such as al-

In conducting its crackdown, the regime appears to be aiming to slow down or even reverse political progress made by the Muslim Brothers since 2005. In so doing, it took advantage of the group's own missteps. Saad Eddin Ibrahim, a long-time observer of Islamist groups, remarked:

The current crackdown was helped by the fact that the Muslim Brotherhood set itself up with the al-Azhar militia and Farouq Hosni scandals.⁶⁴ They are paying for it. The payment is the crackdown and the loss of sympathy that they once enjoyed from people looking for a serious alternative. There is a lot of clumsiness in the way they do things. The regime is hoping to crack down so hard that the Muslim Brothers will be forced to accept a deal. But the present situation could trigger violence, especially with Muslim Brothers who feel they have nothing to lose.⁶⁵

Tensions notwithstanding, for now both sides appear to be abiding by unwritten rules of the game and avoiding crossing any critical redlines. Unlike other opposition groups, leading Muslim Brothers have shied from directly criticising President Mubarak and refrained from taking a clear position on the question of inheritance of power (*tawreeth*) by Gamal Mubarak. Likewise, even as it describes the group as illegal, the government has not stopped the Society from operating its multiple offices in Cairo and has never arrested a General Guide.

Muslim Brothers regard the large number of arrests – most of which are temporary – with stoicism, seeing them as the price to pay for continued political participation. While an internal debate rages over whether increased political participation (especially through elections) is worth the cost of repression, most members feel "no change can happen by doing nothing".⁶⁶

Shater and thus the opportunity to transmit it to younger generations. Crisis Group interview, Cairo, March 2008. For many others, the loss of al-Shater was of considerable importance because of his prestige and charisma. Crisis Group interviews, young Muslim Brothers, Cairo, October 2007-February 2008.

⁶⁴ The al-Azhar scandal referred to is that of the "martial arts demonstration"; the Farouq Hosni scandal refers to the public outrage caused by a disparaging statement on the Islamic veil by Minister of Culture Farouq Hosni in mid-November 2007 that was seized upon by the Muslim Brothers as an opportunity to embarrass the government.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interview, Saad Eddin Ibrahim, professor of sociology at the American University, Cairo, February 2007.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interview, senior Muslim Brother, Cairo, March 2008.

D. THE REGIME STRIKES BACK II: NEW LEGAL CONSTRAINTS

In November 2006, President Mubarak asked the People's Assembly to make 34 amendments to the constitution, in keeping with his 2005 electoral platform.⁶⁷ Details of the amendments – which were drafted by a restricted committee including senior NDP members and representatives from the office of the presidency and the security services – were gradually presented to parliament between December 2006 and February 2007. Like the rest of the opposition, the Muslim Brothers favoured amending the constitution but were wary about what the government would propose. The Muslim Brothers' own demands for constitutional amendments were largely shared by the opposition as a whole. Common goals included:

- ❑ changing Article 77 to introduce term limits for the presidency, with the next elected president to serve no more than two consecutive terms;⁶⁸
- ❑ guaranteeing and strengthening the role of the judiciary in supervising elections, as provided in Article 88;
- ❑ cancelling the Emergency Law in place since 1981; and
- ❑ removing barriers to the creation of new political parties by cancelling the Political Parties Committee of the Shura Council and introducing new legislation to regulate political life.

In addition, the Muslim Brothers advocated that the high threshold for independent presidential candidates imposed in 2005 be removed and replaced by a simple requirement of a minimum number of signatures from across the country.

Instead, the proposed amendments contained provisions apparently designed to further contain the Muslim Brothers. First and foremost, the amendment to Article 5 formalised the ban on “religious parties”, a designation used almost exclusively in reference to the Society.⁶⁹ According to the new text, “no political

activity shall be exercised or political parties shall be established on the basis of religion or on discrimination due to gender or race”. In the Muslim Brothers' view, this contradicted Article 2 of the constitution, which states that Sharia is the main source of legislation.

Even as it condemned the other amendments, the legal opposition sided with the NDP on Article 5, a stance stemming from long-held political conviction, distrust of the Muslim Brothers and political calculation: like the NDP, legal opposition parties stand to gain from any measure that reduces the Brothers' electoral chances.⁷⁰ Although the amendment signalled that the Muslim Brothers' legalisation was not on the horizon, it left room for interpretation as to whether a political party whose members belong to the Society but whose platform meets the appropriate standard might one day become acceptable.

Society parliamentarians also challenged the amendment to Article 1, which defines Egypt as a “democratic state based on citizenship” rather than a “democratic socialist state based on the alliance of the working forces of the people”. Claiming the reference to citizenship clashed with the reference to Sharia in Article 2, the Muslim Brothers staged a walkout during its discussion. Their parliamentary bloc leader, Mohammed Saad Al-Qatani, rejected citizenship as “a foreign principle imported from the West that aims at establishing the separation of religion and state”⁷¹ –

been occupied by professionals rather than religious scholars), nor bar non-Muslims from membership. Furthermore, an alternative could be to pass a law banning any incitement based on religious intolerance. The regime's argument that it opposes the exploitation of religion for political purposes does not fully hold either, since the NDP has frequently used its dominant position to pressure the state's religious institutions into making politically beneficial statements.

⁷⁰ A heated debate took place in the People's Assembly after rumours surfaced that the NDP was considering amending Article 2. Many Muslim secularists and Christians (including Pope Shenouda III) wanted to return to a previous wording, amended in 1980 by President Anwar al-Sadat, which stated that Sharia was *a* source of legislation, not *the* source. See *Nahdet Misr*, 14 January 2007. A minority of secular Muslim voices advocated the removal of the reference to Sharia completely, as did some Christians, although no political party adopted this position. It was quickly decided that Article 2 would not be amended (and the government denied ever intending to as many NDP parliamentarians were offended by the idea). However, one NDP official involved in the drafting of the amendment confirmed that the matter had been discussed but a decision taken not to amend Article 2 for fear of the public's reaction. Crisis Group interview, Cairo, March 2007.

⁷¹ *Al-Masri al-Youm*, 1 March 2007. However, al-Qatani asserted that the Muslim Brothers' bloc had not walked out

⁶⁷ See Crisis Group Report, *Reforming Egypt*, op. cit.

⁶⁸ In 1980 President Anwar al-Sadat amended the constitution to remove the two-term limit. The Muslim Brothers advocated limiting the duration of the terms to four years rather than the current six years, a view not shared by the rest of the opposition.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group noted in the report *Reforming Egypt*, op. cit., that the term “religious parties” is problematic, since the Muslim Brothers neither advocate a party led by religious leaders (the position of General Guide, after all, has mostly

a line at odds with that advocated by most of the Society's reformist members and inconsistent with what the movement would later claim to be at the centre of its political program.

A secular opposition parliamentarian noted: "The Muslim Brothers boycotted this debate because they could neither accept nor refuse the amendment. Accepting it would be giving their endorsement to the principle of citizenship, and refusing it would confirm the public's fears about their intention to implement Sharia".⁷² The incident further fed the notion that the Muslim Brothers, despite their espousal of reformist democratic language, remain committed to a fundamentalist vision of the state,⁷³ ie, that "the Muslim Brothers are not just interested in gaining power or forming a government, but in changing the very nature of the state itself".⁷⁴

Also potentially harmful to the Brothers' long-term integration were changes designed to avoid a repeat of their 2005 electoral success. The amendment to Article 62 paved the way for the replacement of the current electoral system with one based either on proportional representation, in which case only legal parties could present candidates, or on a mixed system in which some seats would be assigned to party lists and others to individual candidates.⁷⁵ Under either scenario, the number of Muslim Brothers in the People's Assembly likely would decrease since they do not

over this specific issue, but rather over the way it was discussed and the NDP's refusal to hear its counter-proposals. Crisis Group interview, Cairo, March 2008.

⁷² Crisis Group interview, Mahmoud Abaza, Cairo, January 2008. The incident was also brought up by senior NDP member Ali Eddin Hilal, Crisis Group interview, Cairo, March 2008.

⁷³ Crisis Group interviews, Khalil al-Anani, political analyst, Cairo, November 2007; Dia Rashwan, political analyst, Cairo, November 2007; Sameh Fawzy, Coptic Christian activist and analyst, Cairo, February 2008; and Ali Eddin Hilal, senior NDP official, Cairo, March 2008.

⁷⁴ Crisis Group interview, Muhammad Abdel Salam, political analyst and member of the NDP's Policies Committee, Cairo, January 2007.

⁷⁵ Egypt adopted proportional representation in the 1984 and 1987 parliamentary elections, when Muslim Brother candidates were on the lists of legal parties (the Wafd Party and Labour Party respectively). The Supreme Constitutional Court twice ruled the party list system unconstitutional, arguing that it clashed with Article 62 of the constitution, which stipulated that citizens have the right to directly elect their representatives – a right that would be denied by a party list system. As amended in 2008, Article 62 no longer includes this right. For details on Egypt's electoral history since the 1980s, see Eberhard Kienle, *A Grand Delusion: Democracy and Political Reform in Egypt* (London, 2001).

possess a legal party. The Muslim Brothers could enter into alliances with the legal opposition and run on their lists, as they did in the 1980s, but judging from the regime's efforts to thwart their participation in the 2007 Shura Council elections and 2008 municipal council elections, legal opposition parties might hesitate before joining forces with the Brothers. That said, the switch to a new system probably will not occur for several years if at all, chiefly due to opposition from NDP members.⁷⁶

The Brothers and others reacted strongly to Article 179, which refers to anti-terror legislation that eventually will replace the Emergency Law, ostensibly answering a key opposition demand and one particularly dear to the Muslim Brothers, who have been among the law's chief victims. As amended, however, Article 179 creates loopholes that will allow new legislation to perpetuate key aspects of the Emergency Law, such as granting police the right to conduct warrantless searches and wiretaps as well as to detain suspects for extended periods of time without charging them. While cancellation of the Emergency Law was one of President Mubarak's 2005 campaign pledges, many fear that the anti-terror law that will replace it – which the NDP says will be modelled on the U.S. Patriot Act and Britain's counter-terrorism laws – will retain many of its provisions.⁷⁷ The amended text, not divulged to parliament until late in the debate, allows for the future anti-terror law to contravene Articles 41, 44 and 45 of the constitution, which provide protection against, respectively, arbitrary arrest, searches without warrants and violation of privacy.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Ali Eddin Hilal, a member of the NDP's Executive Committee, said that the biggest obstacle to switching to a proportional representation system was not the Muslim Brothers but NDP parliamentarians who were not the party's official candidates in 2005 but were elected as independents and subsequently rejoined the party. Hilal argued that changing the electoral system was not a priority and that a mixed system, like Germany's, was the most likely to be adopted. Crisis Group interview, Cairo, March 2008.

⁷⁷ Nasser Amin, a judicial independence activist, noted: "We, civil society in Egypt, have become afraid of asking the government to change anything in the constitution or in the law, because usually, when we request a change, the government changes it for the worst. For twenty years we've been working to cancel the Emergency Law, against military courts, against detention without charges. Now the government wants the Emergency Law inside the constitution. The danger is that we'll now have the Emergency Law forever". Crisis Group interview, Cairo, February 2007.

⁷⁸ In effect the Emergency Law provides the authorities with the same power to disregard constitutional protections.

A leaked draft of the anti-terror law obtained by the press in February 2008 suggests that the new legislation may contain provisions targeting the Muslim Brothers, including a ban on “the formation of any organisation, group, association or body whose purpose is to call through any means for the obstruction of constitutional rulings, the law, or any state body or public authorities from carrying out its duties”.⁷⁹ Such wording could be invoked to label the Society a terrorist group, legitimising continuation of practices currently solely authorised by exceptional legislation. Although the government had promised to introduce the new law by 31 May 2008, when the Emergency Law was set to expire, it was announced in that month that it would be extended for another year, because the new legislation had not yet been finalised.⁸⁰

The constitutional amendments – which the opposition was powerless to influence – caused an uproar in parliament, and the Muslim Brothers joined virtually all political and civil society voices in denouncing the government and calling for the amendments’ rejection in the 26 March 2007 popular referendum.⁸¹ The pessimism that had descended over much of the political class since mid-2005 worsened, leading an influential, Islamist-leaning columnist to write:

One can only feel frightened and humiliated by the contents of the constitutional amendments. One must be afraid in particular of the persons who would draft such amendments. Egypt will never again know honest elections, because of the creation of a special commission to supervise elections. The purpose of this commission is to sideline judges. I am afraid that the Muslim Brothers will be forced to resort to clandestine action, since their existence is legally forbidden....Political parties in Egypt are dead. The People’s Assembly is composed of bit actors who await instructions, rather than propositions, from the head of state.⁸²

⁷⁹ *Al-Masri al-Youm*, 23 February 2008.

⁸⁰ See “Where’s the flagship”, *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 1 May 2008, for discussion as to why the Anti-Terrorism Law was not introduced.

⁸¹ According to official figures, 72 per cent of voters approved the constitutional amendments with a 27 per cent turnout. The opposition, civil society observers and judges tasked with monitoring the election said the vote was marred by irregularities. See “Egypt: Constitutional Amendments Pass”, Associated Press, 27 March 2007.

⁸² Column by Islamist-leaning columnist Fahmy Howeidy, *Al-Masri al-Youm*, 25 March 2007. The column was initially written for *al-Ahram*, but the leading state newspaper refused to run it.

For many Egyptians, the constitutional amendments were intrinsically linked to the presidential succession.⁸³ “The regime is cracking down because the issue of the Muslim Brothers has become part of the future succession process”, asserted an expert on the movement.⁸⁴

For their part, government officials characterised calls to replace the current constitution as confirmation that the Muslim Brothers wish to fundamentally overhaul the political system:

They say, we don’t accept the constitution or laws issued by a parliament that was elected through forgery. They say they want a new constitution, created by a constituent assembly. But when have constituent assemblies been used historically? In cases of independence or revolution – you don’t have a continuous system doing that. If you do that you are denying your parliamentary institutions all legitimacy.⁸⁵

The constitutional amendments call into question the Muslim Brothers’ capacity to operate as a political group (and, eventually, a legal political party). So far, the regime has both insisted that there can be no political party based on religion and allowed the Muslim Brothers to contest elections as independents. Changes in the constitutional and legal framework suggest decreased tolerance for the Society’s political participation, as does the arrest campaign, but there is no indication the authorities intend to wholly bar it from the political arena. At the same time, tentative signs exist

⁸³ The issue of who will succeed President Mubarak, who turns 80 in 2008, remains unsolved. Mubarak has refused to appoint a vice president since he became president in 1981, and while speculation favours his son Gamal, a rising NDP star, both father and son have denied any such plans. The other main alternative is a candidate recruited from the senior ranks of the armed forces, continuing a tradition begun since the 1952 Free Officers’ coup.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group interview, Khalil al-Anani, political analyst, Cairo, November 2007. Al-Anani is deputy managing editor of *al-Siyasa al-Dowliya*, an international affairs magazine and author of a book about the Muslim Brothers’ internal generational disputes, *al-Ikhwān al-Muslimīn: Shikhukha Tussara’ al-Zaman? [The Muslim Brothers: Old Age Racing Against Time?]* (Cairo, 2007). Saad Eddin Ibrahim – one of the first activists to raise the issue of succession – elaborated: “The amendments are about succession – by amending Article 76 and opening the stage to candidates from other political parties, they give the exercise pseudo-legitimacy. The only potential challenge would have been the Muslim Brothers”. Crisis Group interview, Cairo, February 2007.

⁸⁵ Crisis Group interview, Ali Eddin Hilal, senior NDP official, Cairo, March 2008.

that some elements of the ruling elite are ready to contemplate the eventual legalisation of an Islamist party. Fathi Surour, the speaker of the People's Assembly speaker, suggested as much, arguing that the Muslim Brothers' political influence meant some kind of accommodation would have to be found.⁸⁶

III. THE MUSLIM BROTHERS' POLITICAL DISCOURSE(S)

The Society of the Muslim Brothers' declaration in early 2007 that it intends to create a political party and the publication later that year of a draft political program are important landmarks in its history. Over the past two decades, hints of such a shift have been dropped by the "middle generation" of Muslim Brothers engaged in professional syndicate and parliamentary politics; for them, the idea of a competitive democratic arena and political pluralism was borne out of practical experience in such processes (however flawed) and recognition that the earlier approach to politics was no longer internationally acceptable or practically viable.⁸⁷ But the mid-January official announcement marked a twofold break: from previous ambiguity on these matters and from the political thought of the Society's founder, Hassan al-Banna, who viewed political parties and parliamentarianism (at least as they existed under the monarchy) as foreign imports.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ This is the consensus position given by reform-minded Muslim Brothers such as member of the Guidance Council Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh. See Crisis Group Briefing, *Egypt's Opportunity*, op. cit., p. 12. The ideological evolution of this wing of the Society was also detailed by Mona el-Ghobashy in "The Metamorphosis of the Muslim Brothers", *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* vol. 37 (2005). El-Ghobashy claimed: "The first glimmers of the Ikhwan's ideological revisions emerged in 1994 and grew out of the younger generation's networking and response to their interlocutors' demands to clarify their positions on foundational issues", and argued that the experience of political participation in professional syndicates and in legislative bodies was a key impetus to the ongoing ideological revisionism.

⁸⁸ Al-Banna and other early theoreticians of the movement denounced *hizbiyya* (partisanship) as an imported and divisive practice and advocated either the absence of political parties or the creation of a single party around an Islamic consensus. In his public statements, General Guide Mahdi Akef has tended to embrace and defend the thought of both al-Banna and Qutb, arguing that changes in the Muslim Brothers' interpretation of these thinkers were sufficient proof of the Society's moderation and that the full repudiation demanded by some critics was thus unnecessary. Both al-Banna and Qutb authored important works of mainstream Islamic scholarship, even if they are best known for their more polemical works. A more in-depth discussion of the Society's attitude towards its ideological heritage, particularly among its reformist members, can be found in Crisis Group Briefing, *Egypt's Opportunity*, op. cit.

⁸⁶ Surour made the remarks in an interview with *al-Masri al-Youm*, 26 March 2008. He reportedly is the first senior ruling party official to voice this opinion.

The announcement apparently was precipitated by two developments viewed as perilous by the Society. The December 2006 “al-Azhar militia” affair generated a deluge of negative press coverage, led to the arrests of cadres and raised new questions about the non-violent credentials the Society had strived to establish. At the same time, the government was unveiling its constitutional amendments, notably the amendment to Article 5 formalising the longstanding de facto ban on religious political parties. Both apparently encouraged the Society to take a more explicit stance on its political aspirations. In a statement released to the press, General Guide Akef laid out the outlines for an eventual political party:⁸⁹

- The party would be secular but would advocate “the values and morals of Egyptian society and have an Islamic reference” (“*marja’iyya Islamiyya*”).⁹⁰
- It would be separate from the Society, whose activities would be confined to *daawa* and social work.
- Membership in the party would be open to anyone who agreed with its conservative values, including non-Muslims.
- The party would be modelled on Jordan’s Islamic Action Front or Yemen’s Islamic Reform Grouping.⁹¹
- There would be no attempt to register the new formation with the Political Parties Committee of the Shura Council, as the Muslim Brothers consider that institution unconstitutional.⁹²
- The Society’s legal committee would begin work on drafting a program for the new party, which would be released shortly.

It was not until late August 2007 that the Muslim Brothers would publish the first draft of their pro-

gram.⁹³ The 128-page document was initially distributed to select journalists, analysts and intellectuals and eventually made available on Islamist websites. It contained a broad description of what a political party would look like as well as the Brotherhood’s social vision. The draft described Sharia and religious values as being central in defining virtually every aspect of policy, but also advocated a greater state role in securing social justice and held the concept of citizenship to be at the centre of political life (even though the Society had previously expressed fears that the concept of citizenship threatened supremacy of Sharia). Its economic policy reflected a mix of interventionism and liberalism. Indeed, as many commentators noted, aside from its religious content the program differed little from the ruling party’s own.⁹⁴

The political class reacted with dismay at the program’s religious aspects, focusing on three controversial positions:

- the creation of a council of *ulama* (religious scholars) tasked with guaranteeing that legislation adopted by the president and parliament conform with Sharia and supposedly in accordance with Article 2 of the constitution stating that Sharia is “the main of source legislation”;
- the view only Muslims should be eligible for the presidency on the grounds that the president has powers of oversight on Islamic issues, notably the implementation of Sharia, and that it would therefore be “unjust” for a non-Muslim to hold the post;⁹⁵ and

⁸⁹ *Al-Masri al-Youm*, 13 January 2007.

⁹⁰ This is the term used by Islamist parties elsewhere, such as Morocco’s Justice and Development Party (PJD), and what had been articulated previously by some “middle generation” Muslim Brothers. See Crisis Group Briefing, *Islamism in North Africa II: Egypt’s Opportunity*, op. cit., p. 17.

⁹¹ These are the political wings of the Muslim Brothers in those countries; they are more conservative than other Islamist parties that could have been chosen, such as Turkey’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) or Morocco’s PJD.

⁹² The Political Parties Committee is tasked with regulating partisan life. It is dominated by NDP members drawn from the Shura Council, the upper house of parliament, and has long been criticised for refusing to legalise several apparently viable political organisations, such as the al-Wasat Party that broke away from the Muslim Brothers in the mid-1990s and which has been denied a party license three times. See Crisis Group Report, *Reforming Egypt*, op. cit., pp. 13-14.

⁹³ “Barnamaj Hizb al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin, al-Asdar al-Awal” [“Program of the Party of the Muslim Brothers, First Release”].

⁹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, political analysts Khalil al-Anani and Amr Chobaki, Cairo, November 2007 and February 2008. With regard to economic policy, both the NDP and the Muslim Brothers have called for a balance between economic liberalism and protecting the poor. In the wake of the socio-economic crisis experienced in 2007 and 2008, Muslim Brother parliamentarians began accusing the government of promoting the rich at the expense of the poor. Muslim Brothers also regularly advocate the need to expand access to Islamic financial products (such as mutual funds that respect Islam’s ban on usury), which are poorly developed in Egypt compared to other Muslim-majority countries.

⁹⁵ Crisis Group interview, Deputy General Guide Muhammad Habib, Cairo, March 2008.

- the view that women should not be eligible for the presidency, in accordance with “well-established principles of Sharia”.⁹⁶

Many commentators, even some sympathetic to the Muslim Brothers, strongly denounced these positions. An *ulama* council was seen as dangerously reminiscent of Iran's Guardians Council. The Brothers later sought to dispel the notion, arguing that such a council would have a consultative, not legislative role:

It is a consultative committee that could be part of al-Azhar⁹⁷ and that parliament could use as consultants. But of course parliament would have the final decision, and the Supreme Constitutional Court could also be appealed to should parliament pass legislation thought incompatible with the freedoms guaranteed by the constitution.⁹⁸

But the original text – which some Muslim Brothers, after witnessing the negative reaction, conceded had been poorly worded⁹⁹ – said something quite different.

The position on non-Muslims and women also called into serious question the Brothers' commitment to equality among all citizens. It did not help that General Guide Akef had issued provocative statements the previous years, notably telling a journalist that in his opinion it would be preferable for a Malaysian Muslim than a Christian Egyptian to be president.¹⁰⁰

On other issues, too, the draft program reflected, at best, vague positions, at worst a retreat from stances previously espoused by the movement's pragmatic elements. For instance it advocated that tourists observe Islamic dress code and an “Islamic” banking system, without defining what this meant. For critics, this only confirmed their view that the Society remains stuck in the past.¹⁰¹

While observers outside the Society expressed disappointment and scorn, a fierce debate raged inside. More pragmatic members – some of whom appeared to be caught by surprise by the program's content – accused the leadership of having monopolised the drafting process, thereby failing to respect the Islamic tradition of *shura* (consultation). They also lamented the policy regression reflected in the program, as did many lower-ranking members who form part of the growing community of Muslim Brother bloggers.¹⁰² This highly unusual self-criticism quickly was muted, as the leadership sought to quell the debate.¹⁰³ But it spoke volumes about the deep differences of opinion between traditionalists and reformists and the difficult decisions the Society faces if it wants to continue exploring the possibility of creating a political party.

A reformist senior Muslim Brother who preferred to remain anonymous described the program as a “total fiasco”:

It's a ridiculous program that does not take into account all the things that have happened in the last 30 years. The program was drafted in a very hasty way and without enough consultation. It's a rushed job and the Society should apologise for it, because now we're stuck with the image of a very

⁹⁶ The specific source for this position is a *hadith* (an oral tradition relating to the words and deeds of Prophet Muhammad) by al-Bukhari according to which Prophet Muhammad had said, “no community will thrive under the leadership of a woman”, *ibid*.

⁹⁷ Al-Azhar University in Cairo is Sunni Islam's oldest and most revered theological institution. The jurisprudential views of its members set the mainstream of religious opinion for much of Egypt and the Sunni Muslim world, although they are increasingly being contested by both more liberal and more radical voices and are often seen as compromised by the university's relationship with the regime, most notably the president's power to appoint the Sheikh of Al-Azhar.

⁹⁸ Crisis Group interview, Deputy General Guide Muhammad Habib, Cairo, March 2008.

⁹⁹ Crisis Group interview, reformist Muslim Brother Essam al-Erian, Cairo, October 2007.

¹⁰⁰ Akef interview, *Rose al-Youssef*, 9 April 2006. The interview became famous in Egypt as the “*tuz* interview” because Akef is provoked by the interviewer into exclaiming “*tuz fi Misr*” (“To hell with Egypt”), implying that the *umma* (nation of Muslims) is more important than the nation of Egypt, a classic Islamist position. Several Muslim Brothers interviewed by Crisis Group expressed deep embarrassment over the incident, as did Muslim Brother bloggers on their sites and various other forums. See, eg, the blog “Ana Ikhwan”

[“I am Brotherhood”] by young Muslim Brother and journalist Abdel Moneim Mahmoud, ana-ikhwan.blogspot.com.

¹⁰¹ The Wafd's Mahmoud Abaza derided the platform: “This is a document from 2007, not 1928. It speaks for itself”. Crisis Group interview, Abaza, Cairo, January 2008.

¹⁰² See Marc Lynch, “Young Brothers in Cyberspace”, *Middle East Report* 245, winter 2007; and Khalil al-Anani, “Brotherhood Bloggers: A New Generation Voices Dissent”, www.arabinsight.org. For a wider look at some of the debate over the program, see Nathan J. Brown and Amr Hamzawy, “The Draft Party Platform of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood: Foray into Political Integration or Retreat into Old Positions”, Middle East Series no. 89, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 2008.

¹⁰³ Essam al-Erian, a more pragmatic Muslim Brother, was unwilling to discuss the program in detail, stating that differences existed on the issue, which was normal in any political organisation, and that the initial draft should not be considered the Society's final position. Crisis Group interview, Cairo, October 2007.

negative program. There have been other programs that have been more coherent than this in the last 50 years, but there was no introspection, no look at past attempts. It fails to tackle the issue of how to exist as a group in Egypt. If we are to be a major presence, then we must make some major decisions.¹⁰⁴

In January 2008, Akef announced that the Society was suspending work on the program to concentrate on the military trial, a move widely interpreted as indefinite deferral of its next iteration.¹⁰⁵ At the same time, the Brothers sought to dampen internal dissent. A consensus position was reached by the leadership in late 2007 and for now is accepted by all, dissenters included, as the Society's official stance pending publication of a final draft. So far, the movement basically has stayed with its approach on the three most controversial issues. It has confirmed the non-eligibility of women and non-Muslims to the presidency, while clarifying that the *ulama* council would be a purely advisory body. By and large, those prominent Brothers who differed with the leadership agreed to close ranks and defend the official line, even if privately they remained opposed to it. The focus has now shifted towards refining the party platform – a process that leaves the door open to future alterations.

We decided the program should be briefer and much more cohesive. There will be addenda dealing with separate issues, with each item under the responsibility of a different committee. But for now, we decided to resolve the debate by means of democracy. We voted and now every member has agreed to adhere to the decision.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group interview, senior Muslim Brother, Cairo, March 2008. Other Muslim Brothers, particularly outside the political leadership and administrative cadres, have voiced similarly strong public sentiments. The program has been described by one Muslim Brother as showing that the “ideological stagnation of the Muslim Brothers is part of Egypt's political crisis” and denoting “the absence of a mentality of political renewal” and “the hegemony of *fiqh* [legalistic] mentality, formal legalism and a division between thinkers and political practitioners”. He also criticised omissions in the program, such as the absence of any discussion of the “security and military nature of the state”. See Hamid Abdel Maged Quweissy, “al-Dalalat al-Siyasiya lil-Azma Barnamaj Hizb al-Ikhwan” [“The Political Implications of the Crisis of the Program of the Brothers' Party”], www.islamonline.net, 22 November 2007.

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group interview, analyst Khalil al-Anani, Cairo, January 2008.

¹⁰⁶ Crisis Group interview, Deputy General Guide Muhammad Habib, Cairo, March 2008.

The controversy shed light on another problematic aspect, namely the Muslim Brotherhood's commitment to internal democracy.

Formally, the Society has semi-democratic institutions and processes to consult its members on doctrinal issues. In practice, however, decision-making has centred around a few senior leaders. Its principal democratic organ, the 75-member *majlis al-shura* (consultative council), whose members are elected by provincial councils, has not met since 1995.¹⁰⁷ Most key decisions, therefore, are made by the office of the General Guide, the administrative body that runs day-to-day affairs and the 15-member *majlis al-irshad* (guidance council), a type of politburo whose members are selected from the *majlis al-shura* and oversee major decisions in informal consultation with governorate-level leadership. There are reasons for this, chiefly security constraints and the fact that, especially in the past few years, many leaders have spent time in prison. Still, the Society's autocratic leadership style, reliance on secrecy, and strong deference to members of the older generation (often the most ideologically inflexible) are noteworthy. A senior Muslim Brother said:

The current leadership consists of people who have experienced only torture and prison, and they have become so paranoid they have a single view on everything. The leadership needs to be younger, with a more representative experience. At the moment most of the leadership is too conservative, focused on protecting itself rather than the future of the Society.¹⁰⁸

Asked if the leadership's views were dominant in the Society, he replied: “This closed-minded group is not dominant. It is in power”.¹⁰⁹ This current often is described as the “Group of 1965”,¹¹⁰ a reference to members who experienced Nasser's brutal crackdown and carried out the Society's first major ideological revision by publishing the late General Guide Hassan Hodeibi's repudiation of Sayyid Qutb's more radical

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Crisis Group interview, senior Muslim Brother, Cairo, March 2008.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ This group, which includes General Guide Muhammad Mahdi Akef, Secretary-General Mahmoud Ezzat and member of the Guidance Council Mahmoud Ghozlan – all in their seventies – is typically described as the Society's most powerful. Crisis Group interview, former Muslim Brother, Cairo, February 2008.

thinking.¹¹¹ For the last two decades, members of this generation have provided every General Guide and held the reins of its most important institutions, such as the general secretariat. Some critical analysts have suggested they should step aside to allow younger members who might be better able to resolve differences of opinion on the political program as well as the wider question of the Society's political role.¹¹²

The divide between this elderly leadership and the middle generation that emerged in the 1970s is the most public, but not the only one. Other rivalries involve a third generation (currently in its late 30s and 40s) that holds middle management positions in the Society's hierarchy and a fourth generation (in its 20s and early 30s) that emerged in the last decade.¹¹³ Divisions do not always reflect strict ideological lines: although older leaders generally tend to adopt conservative views, some within the youngest generation have been deeply influenced by the rise of contemporary Salafism; other younger members came of age amid the political upheaval of 2005 and are, therefore, more inclined to engage in political activism and cooperate with other, non-Islamist opposition forces. This latter group has built ties with human rights activists and, through the Society's websites, helped reframe the question of its political integration as one of civil and human rights as opposed to religion.¹¹⁴

Internal divisions also involve other fault lines. For the most part, the Society remains under the control of so-called administrative members who run its institutions and finances at the national and provincial levels. "Technical" members who engage in political work in parliament and professional syndicates, in contrast, may be prominent public voices but carry less weight in internal decision-making.¹¹⁵ In particu-

lar, the Muslim Brothers' parliamentary bloc tends to defer to the Society's leadership. Muhammad Saad al-Qatatni, the head of the parliamentary bloc, explained:

There is a strong relationship between the members of parliament and the Guide's office. I personally defer to it on a lot of major issues, and while I disagreed with some elements of the program, once we completed our discussions I had to abide by the decision. I see the debate as positive.¹¹⁶

It remains unclear, in this context, how a future political party might operate and relate to the Society's leadership. The head of the parliamentary bloc said:

It's too early to deal with the question of the relationship between the proselytising side and the political side – nothing has yet been decided. But in my opinion, there has to be a complete separation, both financially and administratively, because the party has to be able to incorporate non-Muslims and this would clash with the proselytising side. I would also like to resign my membership of the Society in order to join the party. The party would then make its own platform. The current platform can eventually change – nothing in politics is fixed.¹¹⁷

The Muslim Brothers clearly have evolved over time. Since Akef became General Guide in 2004 and the Society issued its "General Principles for Reform", they have espoused principles such as rotation of power, rule of law and democratic governance. The group's parliamentarians subsequently argued for these principles in the People's Assembly. The challenge now is for the Society to clarify its positions and resolve remaining internal differences over such issues as the role of Sharia in public life¹¹⁸ and organisational democracy.¹¹⁹

¹¹¹ See Crisis Group Briefing, *Egypt's Opportunity*, op. cit. Sayyid Qutb was a leading member and ideologue of the Muslim Brothers in the 1950s and 1960s. His book *Milestones*, written in prison shortly before his execution, is a main inspiration of jihadist ideology.

¹¹² This opinion is expressed by Khalil al-Anani in "Modernising Brotherhood Mind", *Daily News Egypt*, 21 May 2008.

¹¹³ Crisis Group interview, Khalil al-Anani, political analyst, Cairo, October 2007.

¹¹⁴ The youngest generation also has been behind the effort to present the arrest and trial of 40 Society leaders as part of the regime's assault on political reformists and to elicit sympathy for the Muslim Brothers as a "moderate Islamist" group. See www.ikhwanonline.com and www.ikhwanweb.com.

¹¹⁵ Crisis Group interview, Khalil al-Anani, op. cit. The description of Muslim Brothers as holding "administrative" and "technical" positions has emerged in recent years in new, critical scholarship on the Society. See Hossam Tammam's *Tahawalat al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin [The Transformations of the*

Muslim Brothers] (Cairo, 2006); and Khalil al-Anani, *al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin: Shikhukha Tussara' al-Zaman? [The Muslim Brothers: Old Age Racing Against Time?]* (Cairo, 2007).

¹¹⁶ Crisis Group interview, Muhammad Saad al-Qatatni, head of the Muslim Brothers' parliamentary bloc, Cairo, March 2008.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Contrast, for instance, the more pragmatic Muslim Brothers' insistence on the principle of citizenship and equal rights for non-Muslims with influential senior member and religious leader Sheikh Abdullah Khatib's advocacy of a ban on the construction of churches. See *Nahdet Misr*, 18 February 2007.

¹¹⁹ In January 2006, as the Muslim Brothers were touting their reformist credentials, Akef said that the Society would revise its internal constitution by introducing a term limit for the post of General Guide. In so doing, it would break with

Ambiguity exists on other important matters: the question of presidential succession, where the Society has alternately supported and opposed Gamal Mubarak's candidacy;¹²⁰ economic policies, where vocal criticism of the government's neo-liberal approach goes hand in hand with a strikingly similar economic program;¹²¹ and relations with Israel, about which the assertion of more pragmatic leaders that they would maintain the Camp David treaty¹²² was rebuffed by General Guide Akef (who asserted "the word 'Israel' is not in our vocabulary")¹²³ and further nuanced by the official position that the question of the treaty should be put to a national referendum.¹²⁴ There is reason for the lack of clarity, as the Society seeks to balance its ideologi-

cal preference, the wishes of most supporters and the leadership's desire to avoid harsher regime repression. But without a minimum of clarity, it will be difficult to assuage local and international fears or to develop sound relations with other Egyptian political actors.¹²⁵

the tradition according to which General Guides for all practical purposes were elected for life. A senior Muslim Brother noted: "It would be nice to see *former* General Guides" – that is, to see the Society, which has pushed for presidential term limits, lead by example. Crisis Group interview, Cairo, March 2008. In response, the political leadership argues that internal reform and elections are difficult to carry out in the face of a crackdown. See interview with Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh, www.ikhwanweb.com, 16 April 2006.

¹²⁰ In 2005 and 2006, senior Muslim Brothers generally said they did not oppose Gamal Mubarak as a successor, if he is legitimately elected. The latest public position of the General Guide, however, is that the Society is against "inheritance of power", on the grounds that the constitutional amendments appear tailor-made for a Gamal Mubarak candidacy. Interview with General Guide Mahdi Akef, www.elaph.com (a prominent Saudi-funded news website), 23 May 2008. This apparent change came soon after the harsh verdict in the trial of leading Society members.

¹²¹ The Society's ambivalence regarding the recent rise in labour activism – one of the most significant socio-political changes in decades – partly is explained by the fact that much of the leadership belongs to the professional middle class, and some key leaders are wealthy factory owners, even as its supporters tend to be poor. Illustratively, while the industrial town of Mahalla al-Kubra was due to stage a major strike at its public-sector textile factory on 6 April 2008, Saad Husseini, a Muslim Brother parliamentarian for the city and local factory owner, did not support it. Crisis Group interviews, factory workers and local residents, Mahalla al-Kubra, April 2008.

¹²² In an interview with the Islamist website www.islamonline.net, Essam al-Erian, a reformist Muslim Brother, suggested that a political party issued from the Society would respect previous agreements even if the Society itself would not. Rejection of the Camp David treaty as illegitimate is a view shared by a sizeable portion of the opposition, whether secular or Islamist, either on the grounds that Israel has not lived up to its commitment to pursue peace with Palestinians or that the manner in which President Anwar al-Sadat pursued the agreement was illegitimate.

¹²³ *Al-Hayat*, 10 November 2007.

¹²⁴ Crisis Group interview, Deputy General Guide Muhammad Habib, Cairo, March 2008.

¹²⁵ As Crisis Group has pointed out, for example, there is lingering suspicion among opposition forces that, insofar as the Society makes its mission to "Islamise" society its first priority, it would be willing to compromise on demands for political reform in exchange for government support of its social policies. See Crisis Group Report, *Reforming Egypt*, op. cit. The Society's political ascent in the 1980s and 1990s and accompanying growing religiosity of many citizens – "Islamisation from below" – to some extent has been met by more conservative government policies – "Islamisation from above". Essam al-Erian, a prominent Muslim Brother, said, "Sometimes the regime is more Islamist than we are". Crisis Group interview, Cairo, October 2007.

IV. TOWARD INTEGRATION?

If the NDP's reformist discourse throughout 2005 offered some hope that the regime would liberalise its rule, the conduct of parliamentary (and other) elections, renewed crackdowns on dissent and opposition leaders and the content of the 2007 constitutional amendments sent a different message. In particular, they left little doubt that the regime would not, for the time being at least, allow the Muslim Brothers to compete freely.¹²⁶ Most observers and political actors, including Muslim Brothers, believe that little is possible until the presidential succession is resolved.¹²⁷

Yet this does not mean that there is no opportunity for action. Now that the April 2008 municipal elections have passed, no other poll will serve as a flashpoint between the Society and regime until parliamentary elections scheduled for late 2010. Both the Muslim Brothers and reformist elements within the regime should use this opportunity to pave the way for the Society's eventual political integration, even if it remains a distant prospect. This requires in particular clarifying issues that block the Society's full integration into the political sphere.

Insofar as the Muslim Brothers insist they want to contest elections and form a political party, they should address the chief criticisms that the regime and large swaths of the political opposition and civil society levy against them: that their reliance on religious discourse represents a danger to national unity and alienates Christian Egyptians; that they remain committed to the creation of an Islamic state; and that, even if they came to power democratically, they would not exercise it that way.¹²⁸

Officials emphasise this fear of sectarianism:

This country is based on a concept of citizenship. We cannot mix religion and politics. We have a

Christian minority, and we have always prided ourselves on our national unity. Look around us, in Lebanon, in Iraq, we are in the middle of confessionalism. Sectarianism is on the rise around the region. We want to protect our country. As long as you have a political group selling itself using religion, there cannot be any reconciliation.¹²⁹

So far, the Society's counter-arguments – that the amended constitution's Article 5 banning religious parties is illegal because Article 2 refers to Sharia – have fallen flat. They ignore the fact that Sharia allows room for interpretation and that Egypt's own history in the past century shows that religion's role in public life can wax and wane. The Society's position also implies that its own conservative views are the only valid ones, thus ignoring vibrant debates across the Muslim world about how Sharia should be implemented and the experience of other Islamist movements that have successfully separated their proselytising activities from more flexible and pragmatic political parties.

One important step would be for the Muslim Brothers to engage more openly and consistently with other political formations and civil society, particularly on controversial issues. A good place to start would be on the rights of non-Muslims, an issue that causes great anxiety among both Christians and Muslims, particularly given increased sectarian violence over the past decade. A Coptic Christian participant in the religious dialogue between Copts and Muslim Brothers noted:

The problem is that there is a vast area of mistrust. Sometimes we feel – not only Christians but also secular Muslims – that they are wolves in sheep's clothing. Historically their message is a double one. There will always be a worry that once in power they will say they want an Islamic state like Iran. A religious party is unacceptable to us, Copts, and to the Egyptian system. They need to be explicit in accepting Copts as full citizens, not *dhimmis*.¹³⁰ But it's a mistake for the regime to arrest the Muslim Brothers. A better approach would be to encourage

¹²⁶ Arguably the regime has also demonstrated it will not tolerate any real competition, not just the Muslim Brothers', judging from its handling of the secular opposition.

¹²⁷ "Chances of reconciliation between the regime and the Muslim Brothers before the succession takes place are none, absolutely, 100 per cent none". Crisis Group interview, Amr Chobaki, analyst at the al-Ahram Centre for Strategic and Political Studies, Cairo, March 2008.

¹²⁸ Muslim Brothers countered that hostility to their group reflected in much of the press and among the political elite (whether pro-government or not) is not representative of popular views and pointed to election results as proof. Crisis Group interviews, Muslim Brothers, Cairo, October 2007-March 2008.

¹²⁹ Crisis Group interview, Ali Eddin Hilal, senior National Democracy Party official, Cairo, March 2008.

¹³⁰ *Dhimmi* is the traditional Islamic term used to describe Christians and Jews living in Muslim lands. The *dhimmi* would typically be exempt from military service and *zakat* (the religious tax that is one of the five pillars of Islam) but would have to pay a separate tax, the *dhimma*, and accept a second-class status in society. Until recently certain Muslim Brothers advocated the use of the *dhimmi* systems for Christian and Jewish Egyptians.

them to integrate by giving up the religious flavour of their program, notably dropping their slogan "Islam is the solution" and their call for the establishment of an Islamic state.¹³¹

The use of the slogan – which the government has used to justify its crackdown on the Society's candidates during the elections – in fact has been debated among Muslim Brothers. Although there is an unquestionable attachment to what has become the group's calling card, there also are signs of willingness to abandon it.

The regime also should clarify its position. While Article 5 bans religious parties, it remains ambiguous as to whether an Islamist group such as the Muslim Brotherhood could form a separate party and what it needs to do to demonstrate it is not religious. Although officials say the Muslim Brothers' slogan is illegal, they have not made it clear what precisely is meant by using religion in politics, particularly since candidates of all political stripes employ religious language.¹³² The government also could insist that the party platform eschew any discrimination on the basis of religion (a test the Society has not met by proposing to bar non-Muslims from the presidency). The present situation, in which a banned movement runs candidates as independents, may provide the regime with the opportunity to limit Islamists' formal participation, but it does so at a real cost: confusion between the Society's proselytising and political activities – arguably a key to its success – and limits on the state's oversight role on the group as a political organisation.

To encourage the Society's gradual evolution, the regime should provide it with the requisite space. Notably it should cease invoking the charge of "membership in a banned organisation" to imprison members if they have committed no other crime. Continued confrontation certainly complicates ideological reform and risks radicalising some young Muslim Brothers

and, perhaps, pushing them toward violence. Khalil Al-Anani, an expert on Islamist groups, remarked:

I'm afraid that the confrontation with the regime will lead to Salafisation, which means people abandoning politics and withdrawing from society. Many Islamists feel that they have not gained any influence by playing politics and this gives conservatives the opportunity to lead these movements. The policy of repression will make Islamists cautious about politics. The new wave is moving toward Salafist preachers and the spiritual side of the Islamist discourse. Organisations like the *Gamaa Shari'a* are gaining ground, and religiously they are more influential than the Muslim Brothers.¹³³ Some groups like *al-Rissala* and *Misr bi Kheir*¹³⁴ are now competing with the Muslim Brothers on social services. This may lead to another round of violence – not religious violence, but social violence.¹³⁵

Opening the political arena more generally would carry other benefits.¹³⁶ A more diverse political system would force not only the regime, but also the Muslim Brothers, to compete, as they likely would face rivals among long-denied parties-in-waiting such as *al-Wasat* (founded by former Muslim Brothers) or *al-Karama* (a leftist offshoot of the Nasserist Party). Under certain circumstances, these could prove attractive to reform-minded Muslim Brothers in the event the Society proves unable or unwilling to shed its archaic ideological baggage. An Egyptian analyst said:

I don't think that the moderates really represent more than 15 per cent of the Society, but if conditions existed for establishment of a political party with a religious reference, they likely would simply leave and enter into politics with fewer ideological restrictions. But they won't do it if they don't feel they have something to gain. The separation of proselytisation and politics has a price, because it is precisely this mix that has made the Muslim Brothers more effective than any other political force in Egypt.¹³⁷

In short, the issue of integrating the Muslim Brothers into the political fold is not simply a matter of modernising the Society's ideology or relaxing the re-

¹³¹ Crisis Group interview, Youssef Sidhoum, Cairo, January 2008.

¹³² In the run-up to the April 2008 municipal elections, some candidates used the slogan "Reform is the solution" – a nod to the original slogan since the Arabic word for reform, "*islah*" sounds similar to "*Islam*". There appear to be nuances within the organisation. "Islam is the solution" is not a creed we go by, it's just a slogan. We are flexible on this issue". Crisis Group interview, head of the Muslim Brothers' parliamentary bloc Muhammad Saad al-Qatatni, March 2008. Deputy General Guide Habib was more reluctant, arguing "the issue is not the slogan or our values, but the simple question that the regime does not want any competition". Crisis Group interview, Cairo, March 2008.

¹³³ *Gamaa Sha'riyya* and *Da'wa wa Tabligh* are conservative, Salafist-proselytising organisations seen as a rising cultural influence among Egyptian Muslims.

¹³⁴ *Al-Rissala* and *Misr bi-Kheir* are conservative religious charities.

¹³⁵ Crisis Group interview, al-Anani, Cairo, January 2008.

¹³⁶ See Crisis Group Report, *Reforming Egypt*, op. cit.

¹³⁷ Crisis Group interview, Amr Chobaki, Cairo, March 2008.

gime's approach toward it. It concerns, rather, the degree to which the broader political context can be liberalised and the de facto duopoly between regime and Brotherhood ended. This can only be done by opening up the political system and offering the electorate genuine alternatives.

V. CONCLUSION

For now, the regime is likely to handle the question of the Muslim Brothers' integration as an exclusively security as opposed to political question. In this, the Islamists' situation differs little from that of other, secular groups: only relatively tame opposition parties have been tolerated and any politician or group that is well-organised and has potential national appeal faces heavy constraints. In this sense, the past two years – with crackdowns against the Muslim Brothers, Kifaya activists and opposition politicians such as Ayman Nour – represent a return to past practices after the limited and short-lived 2005 opening.

There is little time to waste. Much of the political intelligentsia and increasing segments of popular opinion have lost faith in the governance system, as attested in part by shrinking electoral participation rates.¹³⁸ Uncertainty surrounding Mubarak's successor and lack of transparency over the decision-making process have only added to the sense of crisis, which coincides with one of the most severe socio-economic situations in years. Despite a GDP growth rate of over 7 per cent, economic conditions have worsened for most Egyptians since 2008.

Basic commodity prices have skyrocketed, fuelling a nationwide series of strikes and protests. In March 2008, shortages in subsidised bread production caused by mismanagement and high international cereal costs prompted President Mubarak to order the army to handle bread production and distribution; many commentators drew parallels to the historic January 1977 bread riots, the largest instance of social upheaval in Egypt's modern history. A few weeks later, on 6 April 2008, after labour and leftwing activists called for a national strike to protest high prices and low pay, riots in the industrial city of Mahalla al-Kubra caused two deaths, hundreds of wounded and another sharp deterioration in the political atmosphere.

The Muslim Brotherhood had little to do with any of this. Embroiled in an electoral face-off with the regime, it thus far has played only a minor and limited

¹³⁸ In interviews with Crisis Group, numerous independent political analysts expressed concern that political dispiritedness and socio-economic tensions could lead to social violence, which would be likely to manifest itself across sectarian and class lines. The "Failed State Index", a June 2007 publication of the Fund for Peace and *Foreign Policy* magazine, gave Egypt a worse score than both Afghanistan and the Democratic Republic of Congo in its "delegitimisation of the state" indicator.

role in anti-regime demonstrations. In particular, while it has lent moral support to calls for civil disobedience, it has refrained from throwing its full weight behind the movement or engaging in major protests save those in solidarity with Palestinians. But that offers little reason for complacency. The combination of rising social tensions, a succession predicament and a sclerotic political system in which a vast constituency feels disenfranchised is not a recipe for longer-term stability.

The regime, which contained the Brothers in the past, allowed them unusual freedom in the run-up to the 2005 parliamentary elections and then followed this up with a massive and ongoing crackdown against all forms of opposition. It has made good use of the Muslim Brothers to frighten both domestic and foreign audiences into accepting the political status quo.¹³⁹ But that is a short-term investment with very uncertain longer-term returns. Denied effective political representation, Egyptians have resorted to protests and civil disobedience to express their dissatisfaction, and sometimes anger, at their system of governance.

The controversy over the Muslim Brothers' role in political life is a longstanding one that predates the current republican regime. Little surprise then that the authorities should resist any dramatic shift and cling to their half-century stance toward the Society, which has principally served to reinforce it at the expense of other political currents. In reality, however, the Muslim Brothers' present strength should be viewed as exhibit number one in the case for a different approach. By restricting the political field, the regime wittingly or unwittingly has provided an assist to a hybrid organisation that is uniquely positioned to evade restrictions on recognised political parties and work outside a strict legal framework.

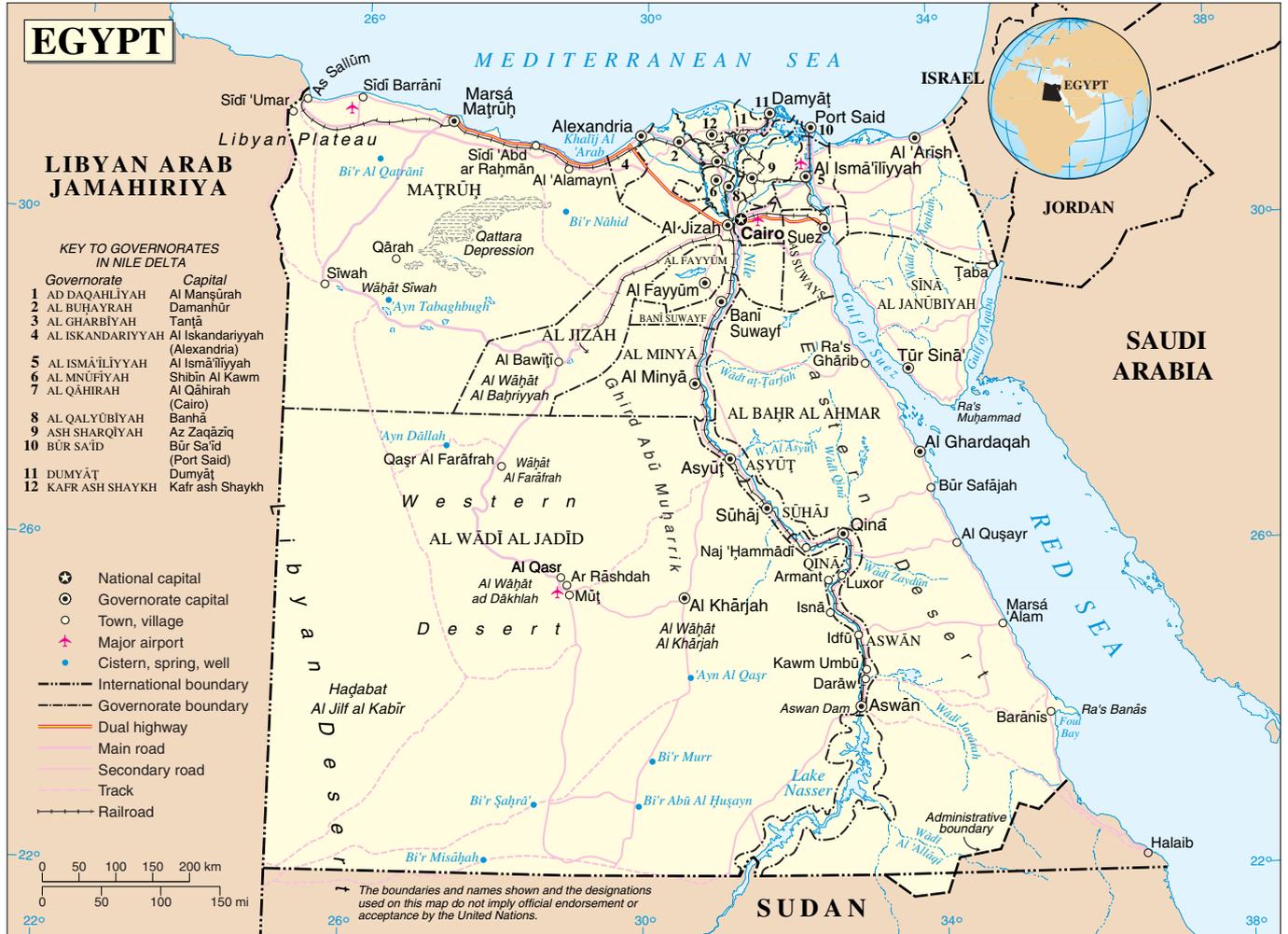
What is needed now is genuine liberalisation of the political sphere and a clear definition of the limits within which an Islamist-oriented party can operate. This in turn could force the Society to separate its political from its religious work and clarify its position on the most sensitive political and social issues of the day. This might well come at the expense of the NDP's quasi-monopoly on political power. But it would also bring to an end the unhealthy *tête-à-tête* between Muslim Brotherhood and NDP that, if conditions continue to worsen, at some point could turn to the former's advantage.

Cairo/Brussels, 18 June 2008

¹³⁹ Western diplomats who raise issues such as official discrimination against minority groups are frequently told by their Egyptian counterparts that the government cannot act because of the possible backlash from the Muslim Brothers. Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomats, Cairo, January-March 2008.

APPENDIX A

MAP OF EGYPT



APPENDIX B

KEY FIGURES IN THE SOCIETY OF MUSLIM BROTHERS

Muhammad Mahdi AKEF, General Guide

Appointed as the Society's seventh General Guide by a 9-6 vote of the *majlis al-irshad* (guidance council) in January 2004, Akef, 80, has made important changes from the conservative and cautious approach to politics of his predecessors, Mustafa Mashhour and Maamoun al-Hodeiby. Like them, his formative experiences occurred during President Gamal Abdel Nasser's rule. He was a member of the paramilitary *tanzim al-khass* (special apparatus) in the 1950s, and was condemned in 1954 to twenty years in prison (commuted from a death sentence). After his release in 1974, he lived in Germany, where he served as the Muslim Brothers' international coordinator.

Akef has redirected the Society in a more reformist direction, bridging the attitudes of the so-called old guard and the "middle generation" of Muslim Brothers. He was a driving force behind the 2004 introduction of the "General Principles for Reform" and outreach to the secular opposition as well as the 2007 commitment to form a separate political party. His role generally is seen as one of consensus building, although he has come under criticism from many Muslim Brothers for his temper and missteps in media interviews.

Muhammad al-Sayyid HABIB, First Deputy General Guide

A geologist by training, Muhammad Habib, 65, is the Society's most prominent spokesman and one of its key political strategists. He was one of two deputy General Guides drawn from the "middle generation" of Muslim Brothers and is seen as a reformist, although a more conservative one than many of his generation. His political weight among the leadership is considered modest.

Muhammad Khairat AL-SHATER, Second Deputy General Guide

A computer engineer who made his fortune in the Gulf, al-Shater, 58, is a revered figure among younger Muslim Brothers and a key administrator and financier of the Society. He was elected to the *majlis al-irshad* in 1995, the year he was sentenced to a five-year prison term by a military tribunal. He is the most important Muslim Brother leader in his hometown of Mansoura, where the Society has a strong foothold. He is also seen as a bridge between the older generation and the more politically oriented middle genera-

tion. Described by many as the Society's "strongman", al-Shater could be a candidate for the post of General Guide, although it is likely that he will be serving a prison sentence into the next decade.

Mahmoud Ezzat IBRAHIM, Secretary-General

Often seen as one of the most conservative member of the leadership, Ibrahim, in his late 70s, remains extremely influential despite the more reform-minded direction the Society has taken in recent years. This is due in part to his closeness to General Guide Akef, his brother-in-law, but also because he is a prominent "martyr" who was severely tortured during the harshest Nasser-era crackdown in the mid-1960s and saw several of his comrades killed. Ibrahim has frequently spoken out against the positions taken up by younger, more moderate members of the Society and publicly chastised them. His position as secretary-general grants him considerable administrative power.

Mahmoud Ezzedin GHOZLAN, Adviser to the General Guide

Along with al-Shater and Ibrahim, Ghozlan is said to be a member of the small troika that wields most power in the Society. He acts as personal adviser to General Guide Akef and had been imprisoned several times in recent years. He was the Society's Secretary-General under Akef's predecessor, the late Maamoun Hodeiby, and is regarded as a traditionalist.

Abdel Moneim ABOUL FOTOUH, Member of Guidance Bureau

In his late 50s, Aboul Fotouh is the most prominent member of the middle generation of Muslim Brothers known for their reformist positions and the youngest member of the *majlis al-irshad*. He has frequently taken positions in the Egyptian and Arabic press against the older leadership, as well as engaged in dialogue with Western interlocutors over political Islam. Admired in activist circles for his willingness, as president of Cairo University's student union in the late 1970s, to criticise then-President Anwar al-Sadat to his face, he was a key architect of the strategy to establish an Islamist presence in professional syndicates in the 1980s and 1990s. He spent five years in prison after being sentenced by a military tribunal in 1995. While admired for his intellectual traits by many younger Muslim Brothers and frequently sought-after by the media, he is believed to have little influence over current policy.

Essam AL-ERIAN, Head of Political Bureau

A physician and contemporary of Aboul Fotouh, al-Erian followed very much the same political path, in both syndicate elections and as parliamentarian. Unable to stand for parliamentary elections due to his stint in prison, he still is heavily involved in the Medical Syndicate (of which he is the treasurer) and is perhaps the single most prominent Muslim Brother in the media. His moderate views have often clashed with the leadership's; for instance in late 2007 he was admonished for telling a journalist that the Muslim Brothers would respect the peace treaty with Israel (the Society's official position is that the treaty should be put to a public referendum). The perception that he is prone to grandstanding and political freelancing (in 2005 he announced he would run in the presidential elections, contradicting the Society's decision not to participate) has estranged him from part of the leadership.

Muhammad Saad AL-QATATNI, Head of the Muslim Brothers' Parliamentary Bloc

Al-Qatatni, a microbiologist in his 50s, hails from the Upper Egyptian town of Minya where he has been involved in the Society's charitable and political outreach for twenty years. He was elected to the People's Assembly in the 2005 elections, which brought in a number of Brother parliamentarians from Upper Egypt, a region traditionally less well represented in the Society, most of whose leaders come from the Nile Delta and Suez Canal cities. Despite being the most prominent elected Muslim Brother, al-Qatatni appears to wield relatively little power. In the past he has complained that the views of parliamentarians are not represented in the *majlis al-irshad*, and he has publicly disagreed with the draft political party program published in September 2007, notably on the issue of the eligibility of women and non-Muslims.