

Middle East Research and Information Project

Boxing In the Brothers

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The latest crackdown by the Egyptian state on the Muslim Brotherhood began after a student demonstration at Cairo's al-Azhar University. Dressed in black, their faces covered with matching hoods whose headbands read samidun, or "steadfast," on December 10, 2006 several dozen young Muslim Brothers marched from the student center to the university's main gate. Six of the masked youths, according to video and eyewitnesses, lined up in the middle of a square formed by the others and performed martial arts exercises reminiscent of demonstrations by Hamas and Hizballah.

Around 2,000 students were present for the show, which lasted approximately 25 minutes. Riot police immediately unloaded from trucks outside the university gate, massing only a few feet away from the unarmed demonstrators, but there were no clashes. No one was injured or arrested, and the protesters returned to the student center without incident. Classes were not canceled.

Nevertheless, Egyptian state television and Arab satellite stations treated the demonstration as major news, repeatedly broadcasting footage of what they had quickly labeled "the al-Azhar militias." Independent Egyptian newspapers such as al-Masri al-Yawm asked what the incident implied about the Muslim Brotherhood, while the government-controlled press, running close-up photos that exaggerated the demonstration's size, launched a campaign alleging that the Brotherhood is a violent organization with a paramilitary wing. Ruz al-Yusuf, a pro-government daily that frequently targets regime critics, featured close-ups of the black-clad karate performers on the front page, under the ominous headline "The Brothers' Army."

Four days after the al-Azhar demonstration, 124 students as well as 17 senior members of the Brotherhood—including Khayrat al-Shatir, the second deputy guide and the organization's third highest-ranking official—were arrested in pre-dawn raids. Police confiscated three personal computers, two mobile phones and 60,000 Egyptian pounds in cash (slightly over \$10,000) from al-Shatir, a wealthy businessman. Al-Shatir's son-in law, who works in the organization's media division, was also arrested. In the ensuing days and weeks, police rounded up several hundred Muslim Brothers from around the country.

Periodic repression of the officially illegal Brotherhood, however, had begun more than a year earlier, shortly after the 2005 parliamentary elections that brought the largest number of Brothers ever to the Egyptian legislature. Following the elections, the Brotherhood and its 88 MPs (who ran as independents to circumvent the government ban) played an increasingly visible role in public life, frequently criticizing the government and its handling of crises. The state responded by jailing the group's members, particularly at times when controversial regime-sponsored legislation was before Parliament. In May 2006, over 800 Brothers were in jail, including senior figures such as Essam al-Erian, a member of the political bureau, and Muhammad Mursi, head of the parliamentary department.

Only 60 remained in prison by mid-October, according to Human Rights Watch, and the regime of President Husni Mubarak was looking for justification for a fresh wave of arrests. Then the "al-Azhar militia" incident served up an opportunity "on a silver platter," in the rueful words of Muhammad Habib, the Muslim Brotherhood's deputy guide. In a rare reversal of political roles, the regime shrewdly exploited the demonstration while the Brothers proved ineffective at responding to the negative publicity. It was a fortuitous turn of events for the regime, coming just before Mubarak's proposal of sweeping amendments to the Egyptian constitution. The Brotherhood's reputation with the public was soiled at the precise moment when the regime was introducing new legal measures to rein in its most powerful domestic opponent.

More Bloody Elections

The stage for sharper confrontation was set in early November 2006, when student union elections in the national universities were raising Cairo's political temperature. Campuses became increasingly tense as various university administrations, in concert with State Security, sought to control the elections while students—including members of the Muslim Brotherhood, socialists and independents—resisted the interference.

The troubles began at Cairo University, where the university administration and State Security combed through the lists of nominees and arbitrarily disqualified students known to be affiliated with the Brotherhood. The pattern was repeated at Helwan, 'Ayn Shams and al-Azhar Universities. Well over 200 candidates were thus barred from running.

At Cairo University, Brotherhood students accused the administration of fraud and staged largely peaceful sit-ins within the university's gates. Word spread to students at other national universities. A 2005 initiative sponsored by the Brotherhood called Free Student Unions (FSU) regained momentum as the students attempted to establish independent unions free from regime influence. Socialist students joined in solidarity, in an infrequent instance of cross-ideological political activity. Yet as the FSU mobilized, the election campaigns became increasingly violent.

When 'Ayn Shams University held elections on October 29, the Brotherhood and FSU students standing outside polling stations to protest electoral manipulation met with a response usually reserved for national parliamentary elections. Thugs reported to be in the employ of State Security, as well as pro-government students, arrived at the polling stations with knives, clubs, bottles and pipes to discourage others from congregating there. They also tore down signs supporting Brotherhood candidates. Scores of young men faced off, and in the ensuing three days of bloody confrontation, three students were hospitalized. Images of the clashes made their way onto Egypt's political blogs, as well as Brotherhood websites.

For background on the Muslim Brothers, see Samer Shehata and Joshua Stacher, "[The Brotherhood Goes to Parliament](#)" (http://www.merip.org/mer/mer240/shehata_stacher.html), *Middle East Report* 240 (Fall 2006).

For background on the judges, see Mona El-Ghobashy, "[Egypt's Paradoxical Elections](#)" (<http://www.merip.org/mer/mer238/elghobashy.html>), *Middle East Report* 238 (Spring 2006).

For background on "reform" under Mubarak, see Issandr Elamrani, "[Controlled Reform in Egypt: Neither Reformist nor Controlled](#)" (<http://www.merip.org/mero/mero121505.html>), *Middle East Report Online*, December 15, 2005.

Two weeks later, the FSU organized alternative and unsanctioned elections at 'Ayn Shams that, again, drew the ire of State Security and pro-government students. Two more days of clashes added fuel to the fire. Student union elections became more violent as they progressed from one university to the next. While Egyptian NGOs, socialist groups and the Brotherhood published statements condemning the violence, elections had still not taken place at al-Azhar—the oldest and, arguably, the most important religious university in the Arab world.

In a Defiant Mood

Al-Azhar University's troubled experience with student union elections is important for understanding the infamous martial arts demonstration that took place on December 10. Al-Azhar students had not chosen their own representatives since 1992.^{[1] (#11)} As one Brotherhood medical student, Yahya Ibrahim, put it, "We would go home for a holiday and return to an appointed student union."^{[2] (#12)} In the winter of 2006, following the Brotherhood's success in the 2005 parliamentary elections and the formation of the FSU, students were in a mood to defy the usual administration shenanigans.

Ahmad al-Tayyib, president of the university, added something new to the tactics employed to exclude the Brothers on other campuses. During the first week of December, he expelled six Brotherhood medical students for their FSU activities. Students responded by trying to meet with al-Tayyib as well as organizing in solidarity with their dismissed classmates. At one point in the students' mobilization, according to Ibrahim, the State Security representative at the university, Hisham 'Abd al-Mun'im, told them that if they did not desist, they would be treated "like 'Ayn Shams." The students understood his words as a physical threat.

The Brotherhood students met to discuss their options: How should they register their protest? Ibrahim says the martial arts performance was chosen to show that they were not afraid of State Security's thugs. At that point, the Brotherhood student organizers claimed, students from the physical education department volunteered to demonstrate their karate skills. The Brotherhood students contacted the media and requested that they cover the performance.

It is unclear how much coordination took place between the al-Azhar students and the national Brotherhood. Though a member of the Guidance Office is serving as head of the group's student affairs department, the Brotherhood's senior leaders deny that they knew about the martial arts display, and the students say the leaders were not told. As Ibrahim describes it, "There is a relationship between the Brothers at al-Azhar and Brotherhood students at other universities. We have seminars and workshops together.... But there is no [working] relationship with the Society of Muslim Brothers. It's an intellectual or ideological relationship only." The deputy guide, Habib, was more cryptic. "They [the students] were wrong. Without a doubt, it was a bad choice to dress in black uniforms like Hamas.... But the students apologized and we sent out a press release to renounce the demonstration immediately."^{[3] (#13)}

Blackening the Brothers

Egyptian state media, however, went into overdrive. In addition to Ruz al-Yusuf's dramatic banner headline, regular front-page stories about the Brotherhood appeared in the flagship daily al-Ahram. The stories reported on the arrests of Brothers from around the country and aired allegations of illegal Brotherhood financial networks, money laundering activities and links to international terrorist financiers.^{[4] (#14)} Editorials cited the Brotherhood's militant past as evidence for its inherently violent character.

The media campaign was relentless, continuing through the run-up to the referendum on the constitutional amendments on March 26. For example, a special episode of the popular television show al-Bayt Baytak (Make Yourself at Home), which airs on Egypt's Channel Two, featured a discussion with two ruling party members and al-Ahram's deputy editor, Tariq Hasan. The episode aired live the night before the referendum and was little more than propaganda encouraging citizens to turn out to vote. Each of the guests spoke about the importance of the constitutional amendments for Egyptian society. Hasan lectured at length about domestic terrorism, in which category he included the "al-Azhar militia" incident, claiming that its origins lie in Muslim Brotherhood ideology.

Recurring stories about the "al-Azhar militia" and illegal financial networks cast a shadow upon the group's image as a largely peaceful organization committed to working within the system. The tone of public discourse about the Brotherhood changed, with some beginning to wonder whether at least some of the state-run media's allegations could be true. The December 2006 martial arts demonstration, notwithstanding its disavowal by Habib and other senior Brothers, can only be seen as a public relations disaster. It was also a surprising mistake by a group known for its internal discipline.

The Interior Strikes Back

But the regime did not wait for the media to blacken the Muslim Brothers' image before rounding up the 124 al-Azhar students, including medical student Yahya Ibrahim, and 17 other Brothers in the wee hours of December 14. According to Ibrahim, State Security and police stormed the dormitory shortly after 3 am, rousing the sleeping students on their list, blindfolding them and binding their hands. The students heard the officer in charge communicating with his superior over a walkie-talkie, expressing confusion over the list of names. "Should I [just] bring them all?" he asked, to which the response was, "Yes, quickly." Not all of the hooded demonstrators were arrested, Ibrahim says, because "State Security did not know who they were because their faces were covered."

The students would spend 70 days in prison, without being formally charged, before being released on February 21, 2007. Yet their reintegration into the university did not proceed smoothly. Ahmad al-Tayyib expelled 60 of them, explaining at a meeting with the students that al-Azhar was a place for education—not for political activity.

The 17 senior Brothers arrested on December 14, such as Deputy Guide Khayrat al-Shatir, were less fortunate still. They were eventually charged with money laundering, financing banned political activity and trying to revive the Brotherhood's paramilitary wing. A month after the arrests, on January 28, Egypt's prosecutor-general froze al-Shatir's assets, along with those of 29 others. Businesses owned by Brothers, including several publishing houses and import/export firms, a pharmaceuticals manufacturer and a construction company were closed, the merchandise confiscated. The frozen assets have been valued at tens of millions of dollars.

The next day, a judge in a Cairo criminal court rejected the charges against al-Shatir and his co-defendants and ordered them freed without delay, but police simply rearrested al-Shatir and the 16 others. Then, on February 6, President Mubarak intervened by ordering that al-Shatir and 39 other Brothers be tried in front of a military tribunal. This was to be the first time that Egyptian civilians would face military tribunals since the regime employed them against the Brothers in 2001. (A petition of protest circulated among Egyptian politicians

and intellectuals.)

In the following months, there have been more arrests. One group that seems to have been targeted is the “parliamentary kitchen,” a collection of staffers that helps forward the parliamentarians’ policy research and coordinates their agendas. According to one MP, Muhammad al-Baltagi, 19 of these aides were arrested shortly after the events at al-Azhar.^{[5] (#15)} It seems very unlikely that the “kitchen” staff has anything to do with the student affairs department, student union elections or the al-Azhar demonstration. Another, more political logic is at work.

Entrenching Authoritarianism

On December 26, 2006, Mubarak formally proposed 34 amendments to the constitution. Ostensibly, the changes aimed to modernize the constitution by limiting presidential powers, enhancing multi-party competition and eliminating anachronistic references to socialism. In reality, the amendments, which were subsequently approved by Parliament and ratified on March 26, 2007 in a national referendum, further solidified the legal underpinnings of authoritarianism in Egypt.

Article 5 now explicitly bans political activity based in any way upon religion. Months earlier, in mid-January, the Muslim Brotherhood had announced plans to establish a political party.^{[6] (#6)} Brotherhood officials declared the party would be a civil political entity with a religious marja’iyya (foundation). The revisions to Article 5 prohibit the possibility of such a party and provide the regime with more legal tools for curtailing the Brotherhood’s activities.

Article 76, relating to presidential nominations, was modified to ease the restrictions on nominating presidential candidates from legally recognized parties. This article, first amended in 2005, made Egypt’s first-ever “presidential election” possible. (Previously, the president had been chosen in yes-or-no referenda on a single candidate.) The 2007 modification did not, however, alter the requirements for nominating independent candidates. The restrictions on independents are so severe, in fact, that it is practically impossible for such candidates to stand in presidential elections. These restrictions are aimed, in large part, at preventing the Brotherhood from ever being able to nominate one of their own for president.

The changes to Article 88 eliminate the system of judicial supervision of elections that began in 2000 (“one judge for every ballot box”), replacing it with an “electoral commission” composed of sitting and retired judges partly chosen by the regime and further stipulating that balloting occur on a single day. This amendment is widely seen as an attempt to remove Egypt’s independent judges, who have proven troublesome for the regime in the past, from the electoral process.

The amendments to Article 179 have proven to be among the most controversial. Marketed as the “Egyptian PATRIOT Act,” this article now embeds wide-ranging anti-terrorism measures in the constitution. The amendment empowers the president to refer cases to military and exceptional courts, and allows the police to search homes and conduct surveillance—including wiretaps and other electronic searches—without warrants.

The amendments also enabled potential changes to Egypt’s electoral system. Before 1990, elections were held under a “party-list” or modified “slate” system that limited opportunities for independent candidates to run for office. Egypt’s Supreme Constitutional Court ruled the system illegal in 1990. Since then, legislative elections have been conducted under an “individual candidacy” system by which hopefuls are not required to belong to legally established political parties. The Brotherhood has run its members as independents ever since, even though they campaign openly as affiliates of the organization. Under the pretext of strengthening political parties and enhancing the role of women and minorities in political life, the 2007 constitutional amendments enable the return to a “party-list” system with a limited number of seats reserved for independents (the number has yet to be determined). The real purpose of the change, however, is to reduce significantly the ability of the Brotherhood to compete in elections. The Mubarak regime has gone further than the usual electoral engineering—changing the constitution in order to mold the electoral law to its liking.

When the 34 amendments were first proposed, some opposition parties withheld judgment, while others accepted some of the proposed changes in principle.^{[7] (#7)} But when the amendments, especially Articles 88 and 179, took their final form, all segments of the opposition (including the citizen protest group Kifaya) called for a boycott of the national referendum needed to approve them. The Muslim Brothers were among the first to criticize the proposed amendments.

In January interviews, Deputy Guide Habib characterized the proposed amendments as “a move backward with regard to freedoms.”^{[8] (#8)} Muhammad Saad al-Katatni, chairman of the Brotherhood’s parliamentary bloc, declared: “The primary goal of the amendments is to intensify authoritarianism and to prepare for inheritance of power [by Husni Mubarak’s son Gamal] and the curtailment of the opposition in general.”^{[9] (#9)} Al-Katatni went on to cite the Supreme Administrative Court’s rejection of the application by 12 political parties for legal status in early January 2007 as evidence of the regime’s weak commitment to political reform.^{[10] (#10)}

The constitutional referendum took place ten days earlier than originally scheduled. Egyptians overwhelmingly stayed home. The government reported 27.1 percent voter participation while the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights estimated the figure at less than 5 percent. Other civil society and rights groups put the figure even lower, with widespread reports of vote rigging and deserted polling stations.

Victim of Its Own Success

The Mubarak regime is intent upon remaking the rules governing the Brotherhood’s participation in formal politics. Just as the 2005 parliamentary elections placed the Brotherhood on the national stage, the regime’s current moves aim to put the Brothers back in their box. If the reinstatement of military trials and seizure of assets were warnings of worse to come, the Brothers appear to have gotten the message. As Muhammad al-Baltagi notes, “They are saying, ‘If you back down from your strong political participation, then it’s over. If you persist, then this will persist.’” In this sense, the Brotherhood is a victim of its own success—the unexpected breakthrough in the 2005 parliamentary elections and subsequent prominence in Egyptian public life has led the regime to step up its harassment.

Events in the region have also facilitated the current crackdown. Hamas’ performance in the January 2006 Palestinian elections and the outcome of the summer 2006 war between Israel and Hizballah produced an international environment even less hospitable to Islamist groups. US pressure on the Mubarak regime, which had greatly decreased as the results of Egypt’s 2005 parliamentary elections became apparent, ceased entirely after Hamas’ victory. Washington has remained silent as the Mubarak regime has arrested hundreds of Brothers

and transferred dozens to military courts. Despite meetings that took place in April between al-Katatni and House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer at both the Egyptian parliament and the US ambassador's residence in Cairo, there is no reason to believe that the Bush administration has softened the traditional US hard line against the Brotherhood.

Intensified repression notwithstanding, the Muslim Brotherhood is unlikely to exit Egyptian political life. Indeed, the very fact that the group fielded 19 candidates in the June elections for the upper house of Parliament indicates that the organization will continue its participation in formal politics.^{[11] (#111)} The group is adjusting to a new reality, however. As Habib stated in April, "We will continue to work according to our agenda but the tactics will be different... The repression is as strong and as annoying as in the 1960s and the 1990s but now they [the regime] are much smarter and plan better. They know better where to hit us."

Among these smarter regime sanctions are the severe financial measures aimed at the organization's ability to provide social services, which many believe to be the backbone of the Brotherhood's popular support. Seizing the assets of major financiers such as Khayrat al-Shatir might discourage others from funding the organization. The measures could also have been intended to drain the Brotherhood's campaign coffers before the June elections (in addition to blackening the group's image). Yet the impoundment of individual members' accounts and the effort to normalize the use of military courts bespeak a more enduring strategy of containment.

It is too early to tell what the effect of such measures will be. In April, Habib anticipated that "national-level activities will be affected because they require more money. But the activities and undertakings that take place at a local level, in the governorates and the cities, inshallah, will not be affected at all."

Ibrahim al-Hudaybi, a grandson and great-grandson of general guides of the society, was quoted in the May 2, 2007 Christian Science Monitor arguing that the current crackdown is "the worst attack on the Brotherhood since the 1950s." Yet the overwhelming consensus within the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood is that, at worst, comparing crackdowns is difficult and, at best, today's repression is nothing like that of the 1960s, when Brothers were routinely subjected to torture and many were forced to flee the country. As parliamentary department head Muhammad Mursi concludes, "In the 1960s, they [the government] were trying to destroy [us] completely. They wanted to rid Egyptian society of such a movement... Now, that is impossible. There are more roots than anyone can completely pull out from the streets."^{[12] (#121)}

Endnotes

Interview with Muhammad al-Baltagi, Brotherhood MP and professor of medicine at Al-Azhar University, Cairo, April 17, 2007.

Interview with Yahya Ibrahim, Cairo, April 15, 2007.

Interview with Muhammad Habib, Cairo, April 12, 2007.

See al-Ahram, January 15, 2007.

Interview with al-Baltagi, April 17, 2007.

Al-Masri al-Yawm, January 13, 2007.

Al-Masri al-Yawm, January 10, 2007.

Interview with Habib, Cairo, January 8, 2007.

Interview with Muhammad Saad al-Katatni, Cairo, January 15, 2007.

Al-Masri al-Yawm, January 7, 2007.

Al-Masri al-Yawm, April 15, 2007. None of the candidates were successful, as the regime arrested close to 500 Brothers—including candidates and campaign personnel.

Interview with Muhammad Mursi, Cairo, April 16, 2007.

CORRECTION: The original version of this article identified Ibrahim al-Hudaybi as the son and grandson of Muslim Brotherhood general guides. In fact, he is the grandson of one and the great-grandson of another. We regret the error.

Filed under: