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Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood: New Leader, Renewed Challenge

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At the beginning of January 2010, 67-year old veterinarian and lecturer Dr. Muhammad Badi` was elected the new leader (*Murshid al-`Am*; “General Guide”) of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (*Ikhwan*) organization. Unlike in the past, the change of leadership did not result from the death of the previous leader (either by assassination– as was the case with the movement's founder and first leader, Hasan al-Banna – or by natural causes, as was the case with all five subsequent ones). This time, Badi` triumphed over a number of other candidates by a majority vote, after the incumbent octogenarian Muhammad Mahdi `Akef, who had served in the post for six years, chose not to continue in the post.

To be sure, the election process was not without controversy. First Deputy leader Dr. Muhammad Habib had chosen not to be a candidate on the grounds that the elections were taking place according to the personal preferences of `Akef, in violation of the movement's regulations. The election, he said, was not conducted democratically, and the organization's *Shura* Council (an

advisory board staffed with senior religious scholars) was manipulated according to `Akef's desire. With the announcement of the election results, Habib declared that he would no longer take part in the movement's leadership, after 24 years of service.

Responding to these accusations and rumors about internal strife and schisms within the 'Guidance Office', the movement's executive organ, the *Ikhwan* quickly moved to paint a picture of internal harmony. Its efforts included press releases and photographs of the new leader kissing the head of his predecessor, a gesture symbolizing respect, affection, friendship, and acceptance of his spiritual authority. However, the movement's official website, <http://www.ikhwanonline.com>, displays a pronounced orientation toward the glorification of the newly elected leader at the expense of the former one, who is reduced in stature to that of an ordinary member of the executive leadership.

The Brotherhood's internal tensions are not just, or even primarily a matter of clashing personalities. Rather, they are a manifestation of fundamental disagreements within the executive leadership, especially over the issue of the proper way to struggle against Husni Mubarak's regime. On the one hand, there are those who wish to see the *Ikhwan* more involved in national politics in an attempt to make its mark from the 'Inside'. On the other, there are people who despise Egypt's current regime, which is perceived as corrupt, and wish to distance the movement from any association with it.

Attempting to bridge the two positions, Badi's first ideological statement as leader placed himself between Hasan al-Banna, who paved the way for the movement's involvement in the political arena in the 1930s, and Sayyid Qutb, who was executed in 1966 for preaching armed struggle against the regime.

While he negates Qutb's violent preaching, he continues to claim that the two really expressed similar concepts and that Qutb was misunderstood.

The election of a relatively younger leader who is well connected on the regional level (he lived and worked in Yemen during the 1980s), a member of the international leadership, and a veteran political prisoner (he was jailed for 9 years) should be viewed as a strategic preparation for the challenges that the movement will face in the near future. These include parliamentary and presidential elections (scheduled for later this year and 2111, respectively), the approaching succession of Egypt's president (Mubarak is 82 years old), and various regional developments.

To a great extent, the *Ikhwan* has enjoyed the best of all worlds in recent years. It won 88 seats in the Egyptian parliament, invested in its *Da`wa* activities (preaching/missionary work), and strengthened its hold over provincial towns and professional unions.

One of the major ongoing issues of contention between the *Ikhwan* and the regime has been the latter's incarceration of many of the movement's activists and senior members. The most prominent of them, Second Deputy leader 60 year-old Khairat al-Shatir, was convicted and sentenced to a lengthy prison term in 2008 by a military court. The regime's continuing crack-down on the Brotherhood is a high priority matter for Badi`, who himself was incarcerated for a long period. The regime is not always quick to employ a 'revolving door' policy for its *Ikhwan* prisoners, signaling the organization to be wary of crossing 'red lines'.

The prisoners issue also touches upon the fact that the movement has been

officially functioning outside the law since 1954, and although it has numerous representatives in the parliament, it cannot operate as a political party. This is a reality that the *Ikhwan* have never been able to accept. As far as the movement is concerned, establishing a legal political party would be considered a major achievement, greatly improving their position vis-a-vis the ruling party.

All actions and maneuverings of the *Ikhwan* vis-a-vis the regime are calculated. The movement's ability to control and restrain the multitude of its activists and supporters testifies to its self-confidence and authority over its members. However, it does not testify in any way to an acceptance of the political realities in Egypt.

In view of this state of affairs, a portion of the *Ikhwan* is content, for now, with continuing on the same path. However, there are those among the movement's leadership who believe that this status quo approach is not in the organization's best interests, and that it should act quickly to take advantage of budding opportunities. Regardless of these tactical differences, today's *Ikhwan* not only presents an alternative ideology and world view to official Egypt's, but also an alternative model of governance which it believes the regime must adopt. Badi` articulated this vision clearly: referring to his democratic election as leader, he declared that "for the first time in Egyptian and Arab history, power has shifted hands in a peaceful and democratic manner", and that "the leader of the greatest Islamic movement in the world has relinquished power and adhered to free elections".

While its representatives in parliament continue to push forward religious legislation congruent with *Shari`a* concepts of governance, *Ikhwan* leaders protest against the long-standing failure to repeal the nearly 30 year-old State of

Emergency, the periodic court martials of their activists, and the authorities' ongoing infringements on civil rights and liberties. In this regard, Badi`'s support for the establishment of democracy serves the movement's interests partly because it is worded in terms that resonate in the West, and partly because a genuine democratic system would pose a real challenge to the ruling party in Egypt – the 'National Democratic Party'. Of course, Badi` is not the first *Ikhwan* leader to support democracy, but rather continues an ongoing policy. The message to Mubarak is clear: the Egyptian political system must be thoroughly reformed and democratized. In the event that this occurs, the *Ikhwan* no doubt believes that it will be able to realize its full electoral potential, leading to its assumption of power.

An indication as to the nature of the democracy the *Ikhwan* envisions is provided by both Badi`'s and `Akef's continued adherence to the decisions of the movement's *Shura* Council. According to the *Ikhwan's* outlook, the Council should be charged with guiding the leaders of Egypt in all major political and religious matters.

Regarding the looming succession issue, the Brotherhood's new leader, unlike his predecessor, is very explicit in rejecting the prospect of Gamal Mubarak succeeding his father as president of Egypt, indicating that the movement perceives this issue as part of its campaign against the current regime. Although Badi` avoids providing a clear answer when asked whether the *Ikhwan* will participate in the next elections, it appears that the *Ikhwan* under his leadership will attempt to exploit its full electoral potential in the upcoming elections, viewing the current reality in Egypt as providing an opportunity to advance its interests and objectives.

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