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The Death of Morsi and Its Implications for the Muslim Brotherhood

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(source: Youtube.com)

The death of former Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi on June 17 sent shockwaves through the Muslim Brotherhood. While Morsi's death may have been predictable given the former president's ill health and Egypt's notoriously poor prison conditions, it still dealt another heavy blow to a movement already on its knees following six years of relentless repression.

Although the Brotherhood moved to label Morsi as the 'Martyr President', Morsi was hardly made of inspirational mettle. A bumbling figure with a charisma-deficit, Morsi's time as president was hardly marked by greatness. He will certainly never reach the hallowed status of Sayid Qutb, the movement's only real theoretician who was executed in prison in 1966. Furthermore, the Brotherhood has always prioritized organizational conformity over personality.

Morsi's death is significant nonetheless. As Egypt's first democratically-elected president, Morsi had become *the* symbol of legitimacy for the Brotherhood; proof that the movement had not only won the country's first free and fair elections but that it had also played by the democratic rules. While Morsi was incarcerated, he embodied the spirit of the revolution but more importantly served as a vehicle through which the Brotherhood could claim the moral high ground in the face of the return of raw authoritarianism.

Given this symbolic significance, while Morsi was alive the Brotherhood had no choice but to insist upon his return to power as a pre-condition for engaging in any rapprochement with the Egyptian state. The movement resolutely refused to shift on this issue, wedding itself to accepting nothing short of a full return to power through Morsi's reinstatement.

Theoretically, therefore, Morsi's death represents the chance for a new start and the opportunity for the Brotherhood to craft a new strategy to get itself out of the corner in which it has boxed itself since 2013.

Setting a New Tone?

The faction of the leadership residing in Turkey, known as the General Bureau, certainly seized upon the moment to strike a new tone. In a statement dated June 29, this faction announced its new strategy would focus on two central aims: liberating all political prisoners in Egypt by lobbying the international community and unifying the "revolutionary camp," namely the opposition, but also the main faction of the Brotherhood as represented by the traditional leadership (Ikhwan Online (<https://ikhwanonline.info/بيان-من-الإخوان-المسلمين-إلى-الأمة-حول>), June 29).

In a bid to convince the opposition of its sincerity, this faction vowed that the movement would not involve itself in the post-al-Sissi era in the "narrow partisan competition for power," but would work as a "general national current with an Islamic reference," allowing its members to join any party or movement that shared a similar vision.

While the traditional leadership did not go as far as to endorse such a radical move, it also expressed its readiness to work with other opposition currents. General Secretary, Mahmoud Hussain, declared that with Morsi's departure, he hoped other opposition groups would "come and sit with us." [1] While opposition parties are still unlikely to trust a movement that treated them so shoddily during its time in power, the Brotherhood is clearly hoping that through Morsi's departure, it can put its relations with the opposition on a new footing.

Recourse to Revolution

The overwhelming tone of this statement, however, was one of revolution. It proclaimed that Morsi's death had paved the way for a "new reality" and a "revolutionary agenda" that would bring about "total comprehensive change." Such calls are nothing new; this faction has long advocated revolutionary action in what it dreams will be a re-run of the Arab Spring. Similar calls have hailed from the traditional leadership that has also advocated a more revolutionary approach, in contrast to the Brotherhood's traditional reformist methods. In light of Morsi's death, however, this rhetoric has been cranked up.

Such rhetoric should not be conflated with any call for armed struggle. Both leadership factions are still at pains to distance the movement from violence. The General Bureau's statement stressed the use of "legitimate civil resistance" only, while a statement issued by the traditional leadership on July 3 emphasized the need for "peaceful civil resistance" (Ikhwan Online (https://www.ikhwanonline.com/official_statements/236207/Default.aspx), July 3) Any suggestion that Morsi's death will propel the movement down a more violent trajectory is misplaced.

Yet such calls for popular revolution are fantastical in the extreme. The Brotherhood is in no position to ignite any kind of rebellion as Mahmoud Hussain acknowledged after Morsi's death, "We demand popular rebellion but we cannot create it." [2] Indeed, as these empty calls for revolution indicate, the Brotherhood is still so shattered by its experiences that all it can do is shout ever louder while it waits for the al-Sissi regime to falter.

Reliance on Turkey

There is another danger facing the movement, which lies in its ever-reliant relationship with Turkey. Although the Brotherhood was given refuge in the past by different states, most notably Saudi Arabia in the 1950s and 1960s, its current dependence on Turkey, which has opened its doors to Brotherhood exiles, is of a markedly different nature.

This time, the movement risks being subsumed by its patron, President Erdogan, and his international Islamist agenda. Erdogan has succeeded in turning Turkey into the go-to hub for the Islamist current, eroding the power and standing of the Muslim Brotherhood. Where once the Egyptian Brotherhood was held up as the very embodiment of political Islam, Islamists of varying hues are now looking to Turkey for support and inspiration. The Libyan crisis is a case in point, with Turkey serving as the main backer and point of reference for the Islamist camp, including the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood.

Furthermore, through its dependence on Ankara, the Brotherhood is in danger of no longer being the master of its own destiny. It has become increasingly instrumentalized in the wider conflict that is defining the region between Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE on one hand and Qatar and Turkey on the other. Being caught up in this struggle will inevitably compromise the Brotherhood's autonomy and room to maneuver.

Ironically, the Brotherhood's best hope to avoid being subsumed or being catapulted into obscurity lies in the very regime it stands against. For all its talk of revolutionary action, waiting for a re-run of the Egyptian revolution is nothing more than fanciful, and the Brotherhood's only real option to save itself is to try to find a way back into Egypt. While this will be a struggle of gargantuan proportions given the regime's unrelenting stance, with Morsi gone, the way is at least open for the Brotherhood to adopt a more flexible and strategic approach that may enable it to carve out some space for itself inside Egypt once again.

Notes

[1] Interview with Mahmoud Hussain by the Mukamileen Channel. 20 June 2019. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8es3lwRS6oU> (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8es3lwRS6oU>)

[2] Ibid.



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