

## **Jihad or Ballot-Box?**

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George W. Bush's policy of encouraging democracy in the Middle East has hit a bump in the road in the last few weeks. Elections to the Egyptian People's Assembly had promised to be another step toward democratization in a country that Mr. Bush has looked to as a pathbreaker for the region. But several rounds of balloting have been marred by deadly violence and severe irregularities--and have also resulted in a big win for the Muslim Brotherhood.

Although the Brotherhood remains illegal, its candidates stood as "independents" while identifying their affiliation more openly than in the past. They came away with 88 seats by the early returns, a number that may increase slightly when all of the counting is completed. Impressive though these numbers are, they understate the Brotherhood's success. Trying to avoid a government crackdown, the group offered candidates for only 125 of the 444 seats at stake, which means that something like three-quarters of them triumphed. This will give the group 20% of the seats in the assembly, the largest opposition bloc that body has ever had.

In theory, that should be good: Mr. Bush's strategy rests on the premise that the give-and-take habits of democracy will work as a tonic to cure the region of its propensity toward terrorism. But the Muslim Brotherhood, although it renounced violence 30 years ago, is the granddaddy of all radical Islamist groups: Such terrorist outfits as Hamas, Jamaat al-Islamiyya (whose spiritual leader, Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman, was behind the 1993 World Trade Center bombing), and parts of al Qaeda sprung directly out of it. And the Brotherhood's own adherence to democracy is uncertain.

To allay skepticism on the latter score, the group issued a "reform initiative" in 2004 that "stressed respect for partisan plurality, free elections, and the rotation of power." Its spokesman added that the Brotherhood advocates "complete equality in rights and duties" for Egypt's Christian Copts and believes that "women are legally competent and have full rights." For a time earlier this year, Brotherhood cadres were instructed to use the slogan "freedom is the answer" instead of its traditional "Islam is the answer."

Some prominent Egyptian liberals have credited these claims, or argued that the Brotherhood is in a state of evolution that ought to be encouraged. As the political scientist Amr Hamzawy put it: "Faced with ruling elites primarily interested in preserving their power and weak liberal opposition actors . . . the cause of political transformation in the region is best served by bringing in Islamist movements and their popular constituencies." Despite such counsel, the Bush administration has respected the Egyptian government's position that the Brotherhood is an illegal organization, and has spurned contact with it. At the same time, it has wrestled with similar questions about the roles of Hamas and Hezbollah in the political processes of the Palestinians and Lebanon.

The issues posed by Hamas and Hezbollah are not hard to figure out even though the necessary answers are discouraging. Each of these organizations commands substantial support within its polity, and democracy will be seriously attenuated if those citizens are not represented. But neither can democracy work in the presence of armed groups that intermingle violence and politics in the process of working their way to power, much as Lenin, Mussolini and Hitler did. Nor do the claims by Hamas and Hezbollah that their arms are intended only for use against Israel alleviate the problem. Democracy is robbed of most of its meaning if the state is not sovereign, as it cannot be with private groups carrying on their own wars across its borders. The unhappy fact is that until Hamas and Hezbollah disarm, democracy in those places will be partial at best.

The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt poses a different problem. The group is not armed: In its early decades it carried out assassinations and maintained a secret army, but gave this up in the 1970s, in a bargain with the regime. Still, its attitude toward violence remains highly equivocal.

The Brotherhood has forcefully condemned recent terror bombings in Egypt and Jordan. On the other hand, Brotherhood leaders have consistently endorsed the killing of Israelis in Israel and Americans in Iraq, explicitly including civilians. The symbol of the group is a Quran bracketed by crossed swords, and its pronouncements--and the chants of its demonstrators--continue to affirm the importance of jihad.

Its Web site features an article explaining what the group means by "jihad." It denounces those who "defin[e] jihad in an apologetic way that stresses only the dimension of individual self-discipline." In truth, it says: "jihad . . . can, of course, entail the use of force when peaceful means are not successful."

Then, too, there is the problem of the Brotherhood's democratic convictions. One important reason to doubt these is its own internal structure. It is headed by a "Supreme Guide" who is elected for life by the 15-member "General Guidance Council." The council itself is not elected by the members but perpetuates itself by co-opting additional members as need arises. The entire structure of the organization resembles the so-called "democratic centralism" of Communist Parties, in which members rise through the ranks through promotion by higher officials rather than by selection from below. And the membership is secret. Of course, the secretiveness may be a necessary response to repression. But the group is tolerated enough to run an open and highly successful national election campaign, and still it has taken few if any visible steps to democratize itself. Recently some members split away, issuing a public statement complaining that the Brotherhood's internal ethos is: "I listen and I obey."

As for the Brotherhood's endorsement of women's rights, its Web site features an article by the only woman candidate that the group put forward in the election. Its title: "Men are Superior to Women." And ubiquitous in Brotherhood pronouncements and literature is the central goal of creating a new caliphate to rule the entire Islamic world (and perhaps beyond). How this can be reconciled with democracy, not to mention peace, is hard to picture.

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How should we respond to the Brotherhood? Although there is much about it that is worrisome, its continued illegality makes no sense, nor does America's refusal to talk to it. (Whether the Brotherhood would wish to talk to America, which its Supreme Guide recently called "an enemy of humanity," is another question.) With a powerful new bloc in parliament, the Brotherhood's illegality is essentially a moot point.

The real problem is the effective ban on virtually all other independent parties as well as persistent efforts to hamper or cripple NGOs. When Ayman Nour broke the mold

and succeeded in registering his liberal Tomorrow Party, the Mubarak regime proceeded to wage an ugly campaign of violence, dirty tricks and trumped-up prosecution to destroy it and him. The regime's strategy seems to have been to annihilate the liberals so that the Americans would realize that the only alternative to the incumbents is the Islamists. There was even evidence of outright collusion between the regime and the Brotherhood in the recent elections until the Brotherhood's surprisingly strong showing in the early stages brought on a violent crackdown by the authorities in the last round of voting.

Much that the Brotherhood has long stood for--a new caliphate, the inferiority of women, the absolutist claim that Islam is the answer not only to spiritual questions but also economic and political ones--is abhorrent. But these ideas have considerable appeal in Egypt and in the broader Arab and Islamic worlds. The triumph of democracy and its concomitant values in that region depends on the defeat of these ideas in open debate. They cannot be defeated by repression. In the sunlight of free political competition, perhaps the Brotherhood will indeed rethink its tenets. And if not, one hopes that most Egyptians will see why those tenets are fallacious.

Is there a danger that the Brotherhood could ride to power through the democratic system and then destroy it, as Hitler once did? Yes, there is. But there is a rising tide of democratic sentiment in the Middle East, and if it leads to the triumph of democracy in Egypt, it will not be so easy to turn around and snuff it out. At the top of Egypt's political agenda, as promised by President Mubarak in his recent election campaign, is constitutional reform. This should include strong guarantees of political and civil rights that could present some kind of protection against a theocracy or other new dictatorship.

Of course such parchment barriers can be overridden by raw force. The risks cannot be reduced to zero. But the bold policy of democratizing the Middle East, like any grand undertaking that promises substantial rewards, cannot be risk free.

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