The disentangling of liberalism from democracy is one of the great paradoxes of our time, and the group that embodies this dichotomy more than any other is Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood.

The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood is the one of the oldest and most influential Islamist movements in the world and seeks to impose a fundamentalist vision on Egyptian society. The Brotherhood’s most important theoretician, Sayyid Qutb, developed a coherent ideology of radical Islam that inspired Osama bin Laden, and the Brotherhood’s ‘secret apparatus’ carried out attacks for decades (Munson 1988:77). The Brotherhood’s history and rhetoric make the West nervous. But within the context of modern Egyptian politics – and Islamic fundamentalist movements in general – the most striking thing about the Brotherhood is its commitment to moderation, in methods if not ends. How should such a group be treated?

When Hassan al-Banna first formed the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928, he had two main goals: to expel foreign influence from Egypt and to reconstitute Egypt as an Islamic state. These two goals still form the core of the modern Brotherhood ideology. Although nationalism and Islamism are typically seen as competing ideologies in the Arab world, one should not make the mistake of ignoring the genuine elements of Egyptian ‘nationalism’ that permeate the Brotherhood’s thinking. Today’s Muslim Brotherhood views outside influences in a negative light, and pursues what might be considered a policy of isolationism. It believes that Egypt is under political and cultural assault by crusaders (Christians and the West), Jews and secularism (Rubin 2002:93). First and foremost, however, the Brotherhood is committed to forming an Islamic state, which would entail the reformation of Egypt’s entire legal system to bring it into accordance with Shari’ah law.

Under Hosni Mubarak, the Brotherhood has adopted a three-tiered strategy to accomplish these goals. The Muslim Brotherhood’s most important strategy is its use of the democratic process (Swart et al 2003:3), which has allowed it to demonstrate its popular legitimacy on several occasions. The group is technically banned and therefore prohibited from directly competing in elections, but it has exploited loopholes in the electoral system by allying itself with other parties and running candidates as independents.

The Brotherhood’s entry into electoral politics began in 1984 when al-Tilimsani concluded an agreement with the Wafd Party, then the largest opposition group in Egyptian politics (Munson 1988:81). Muslim Brothers were able to run for parliament on the Wafd Party list in exchange for votes from Brotherhood supporters. Prior to the 1987 elections, the Brotherhood formed a new alliance with the Liberal Party, a smaller opposition party that was more easily dominated (Rubin 2003:33). The Brotherhood and its coalition partners won 17 per cent of the seats in parliament – an impressive result in a country where elections are stacked heavily in favour of the ruling party. The 2005 elections marked the culmination of this process. Running as independents, unencumbered by alliances with other opposition parties, the Brotherhood won 20 per cent of the seats in the Egyptian parliament. The Ikhwan exercised deliberate circumspection by running for only a small number of seats; nevertheless, the Brotherhood’s popularity is underscored by the fact that they won the vast majority of seats they did contest (Dunne 2005). Though it is difficult to extrapolate from these results with any degree of certainty, it is certainly plausible that a truly free election, with every seat in parliament being contested, would see the Muslim Brotherhood winning by a landslide.

The second pillar of the Muslim Brotherhood’s strategy has been its efforts to take control of the Egyptian student and professional unions (niqabat). As with the Brotherhood’s...
entry into the Egyptian parliament, this was accomplished using the democratic process. In 1992 the Brotherhood took advantage of its disciplined membership and voter apathy to take over the lawyers’ association. By 2003 it had taken over the journalists’ association, and the doctors’, pharmacists’ and engineers’ unions were under its control, too (Aboul-Enen 2003:31). These professional organisations are the main civil society groupings in Egypt, and controlling them gives the Brotherhood broad influence over Egypt’s educated elites. Though the Brotherhood’s domination of these civil society groups does not allow it to wield political power directly, it serves the Ikhwan’s broader goal of cultural Islamisation, which could eventually pose a long-term threat to the legitimacy of the secular regime.

Finally, the Ikhwan has formed a matrix of social services networks that provide food, jobs, healthcare and a sense of community to Egyptians. Egypt is plagued by numerous social needs that the government is either unable or unwilling to fulfill, allowing the Brotherhood to fill the gaps left by the state. From the Brotherhood’s perspective, these networks further its broader strategic goals in several ways. They portray the Brotherhood as a competent organisation capable of delivering services in the areas where the government has failed, present a positive image of the Muslim Brotherhood both inside and outside Egypt, and offer the important message that Islam and economic comfort are mutually reinforcing. The effectiveness of the Ikhwan’s social networks was starkly demonstrated after the 1992 Cairo earthquake, when the Brotherhood’s humanitarian response proved to be far more effective than that of the government. Brotherhood members rapidly set up shelters and medical tents, provided food, clothing and blankets to residents of the city, and donated US$1 000 to every family whose home had been destroyed (Walsh 2003:34). The Egyptian government, concerned that the Brotherhood was attempting to compete with the infrastructure of the state, subsequently barred the Brotherhood from carrying out such humanitarian operations in future, which only served to damage the government’s reputation and increase the popularity of the Brotherhood.

Egypt’s secular-nationalist rulers have generally followed a two-pronged strategy in response to both the Muslim Brotherhood and the more radical groups that have splintered from it. The first leg of this response is repression, which typically consists of mass arrests and executions. Bouts of repression occurred in 1954, 1965, 1981, and throughout the latter part of the Mubarak regime. Though the arrest of Islamists who had committed violent acts was certainly warranted, many aspects of these crackdowns were troubling. Mass arrests were frequently carried out in an arbitrary manner, and against moderate Islamists who never organised or even advocated violence. Imprisoned Islamists have been routinely subjected to torture and even extrajudicial execution. In 2007, in response to the Brotherhood’s rising electoral challenge, Mubarak carried out a sweeping set of constitutional reforms that gave him the authority to dissolve parliament, ban religious political parties, weaken judicial oversight of elections, and grant the government extensive new security powers (BBC News 2007).

Yet repression alone does not explain the continued survival of the nationalist regime in Egypt. The regime has survived numerous challenges to its authority, in part because it has successfully mobilised religion for its own ends. The Egyptian government maintains stringent control over the clerical establishment in the country, and has demonstrated a great willingness to reward clerics who support the government line while punishing those who do not (Rubin 2002:81). This has been used to insulate the regime from religious criticism: after Sadat negotiated the Camp David accords with Israel, for example, the mufti of Egypt issued a fatwa proclaiming Sadat’s actions to be in accordance with Islamic law. Every president since Nasser has built mosques and supported religious education in a successful effort to deny the fundamentalists a monopoly on piety.

Mubarak’s policies of selective repression and the co-option of religion have, on the surface, been successful. His regime successfully put down a violent insurgency and maintained a firm grip on power for 25 years, and has done so without radicalising the Muslim Brotherhood. This is particularly impressive within the context of Egypt’s numerous socio-economic problems and the war on terror. Yet there are signs that the Mubarak’s long-term hold on power is crumbling. The Muslim Brotherhood has become too large to be successfully repressed, and its performance in parliamentary elections and domination of professional associations are indicative of an organisation with genuine popular legitimacy. If the popularity of the Ikhwan continues to grow, it is inevitable that the government’s own legitimacy will eventually start to erode. The regime’s recent actions, including an unpopular set of constitutional amendments and the use of state repression against even non-threatening opponents such as bloggers (Black 2006) seem to speak of anxiety rather than confidence. A better strategy would have been to undercut the attractiveness of the Brotherhood’s socio-economic agenda by becoming responsive to the needs of its citizens. In the absence of a serious strategy designed to undermine the root causes of the Brotherhood’s support, the long-term position of the government will become increasingly untenable.

Many of the Brotherhood’s demands are inherently just. It is difficult to dispute the proposition that intimidation is an undesirable feature in elections, or that critics of the president should not be subjected to violent harassment by police. Given the Brotherhood’s renunciation of violence and popularity with the electorate, this raises an obvious question: would Egypt not be better off if it simply let the democratic process take its course? Would it not be preferable for the Ikhwan to be granted official recognition as a political party, allowed to freely participate in elections and – if the voters wished it – govern the country? Furthermore, should the United States use its considerable influence over Mubarak to try to force him to make democratic reforms? The answer depends in part on the depth of the Brotherhood’s commitment to democracy. Pro-democracy arguments are useful for a party in opposition; less so for a party in government. It may be that the Brotherhood’s idea of democracy is merely a cynical ruse: ‘one man, one vote, one time’, in the words of Bernard Lewis.
Khalil (2006) has amassed a large volume of evidence which suggests that the Brotherhood, despite its advocacy of elections, does not desire a free society and if it came to power would curtail women’s rights, free speech and any aspect of culture perceived to be antithetical to Islam. The Brotherhood’s 2004 election platform articulated a vision of an Islamic state as epitomised in its statement that ‘Our mission is to implement a comprehensive reform in order to uphold God’s law in secular as well as religious matters … Our only hope, if we wish to achieve any type of progress, is to adhere to our religion, as we used to, and to apply the Shari’ah.’

This vision of an Islamic state is difficult to reconcile with a religiously diverse society. Though Shari’ah law may vary in its implementation, some of its basic prescriptions, such as the death penalty for apostasy mandated by the hadith, contradict the principle of freedom of religion, which is seen as a fundamental right in liberal states (Human Rights Watch 2004:11). It is similarly problematic to subject minorities, who may not be Islamic or even religious believers at all, to the dictates of Islamic law. These concerns are particularly relevant to Egypt, with its large Coptic minority. Copts have long harboured suspicions of the Muslim Brotherhood, which deepened in 1997 when Supreme Guide Mustafa Mashhour voiced his support for the jizya poll tax, which was historically levied against non-Muslims, and said that Copts could not be trusted to serve in the Egyptian army (Murphy 2002:241). In this climate, the imposition of Shari’ah law could provoke discontent and even sectarian violence.

In terms of specific policies, the Brotherhood has stated that the ‘[t]he Media should be cleansed of anything that disagrees with the decrees of Islam’ and there should be ‘a ban on improper and offensive series and television programs’. It has also stated that Egypt’s economic system, political system and culture should all be ‘derived from Islam’, that the ‘focus of education’, at least in the early years of schooling, ‘should be on learning the Qur’an by heart’, and that ‘women should only hold the kind of posts that would preserve their virtue’ (Khalil 2006:46). Cumulatively, it is not hard to see why Rubin (2002:144) argues the Islamic state would inevitably be a dictatorship:

The Qur’an accepts the idea of ‘shura’ [consultative council] and this fact makes it possible to justify parliamentary institutions as Islamic. But the revolutionaries’ determination to impose their values and interpretations on society requires a concentration of power beyond what a genuine representative system is likely to supply. Moreover, the fundamentalists believe God has specified right and wrong; the people have no right to do what they wish.

What are the implications of this rising brand of democratic Islamism? From an American foreign policy perspective, the popularity of the Muslim Brotherhood would seem to necessitate realpolitik: support for a friendly dictator over a potentially destabilising and dangerous democracy. However, the Egyptian case also demonstrates the limits of pure realism. It is an unfortunate irony that realpolitik, designed to address the problem of interstate security, may well have exacerbated non-state security threats. Terrorism has various causes, but it is at least partially the result of political pressure. Closed, authoritarian rulers such as Mubarak have succeeded in shutting themselves off so completely from criticism that they are no longer accountable to their citizenry. The violent political pressure that builds up in these countries, stoked by poverty and massive social problems, must find another avenue of release: radical groups which are repressed at home take their political activism abroad. The fact that 16 of the 19 9/11 hijackers were Saudis is one manifestation of this trend, as is the prominence of Egyptians such as Ayman al-Zawahiri in al-Qaeda. Zawahiri is part of a minority of radical Egyptian Islamists who, in the late 1990s, decided to focus their energies on attacking the US rather than overthrowing the Egyptian government. Rubin (2002:169–173) argues that their decision by was not the result of religious or ideological conviction, but was a practical decision brought about by their failures at home. Neither the Muslim Brotherhood’s strategy of working within the system, nor the violent anti-government insurgency of the radical groups, seemed to offer the promise of successfully establishing an Islamic state. This lead Al-Zawahiri and others to decide that ‘the road to Cairo runs through Washington and Tel Aviv’ (Rubin 2002:171).

By marrying an Islamist political ideology to a sincere belief in procedural democracy, the Brotherhood has evolved into the quintessential illiberal democratic movement. The Muslim Brotherhood is undeniably popular, but the pro-democracy rhetoric of the Brotherhood should not obscure its proscriptive policy preferences, which are likely to undermine freedom of speech, religion and gender equality if the Brotherhood ever came to power. Additionally, an Egypt ruled by the Muslim Brotherhood would certainly be more hostile to the West and Israel than the current regime, and might result in domestic sectarian violence between Muslims and religious minorities. In short, this would not be a desirable outcome for either Egyptians or the rest of the world.

However, the maintenance the status quo is almost as problematic. The Egyptian government has responded to growing political opposition by becoming increasingly intolerant, brutal and capricious. Its repression of Islamists, an effective tool for maintaining power in the domestic context, has also had the unintended consequence of exporting fundamentalism and terrorism to other states. Even if these problems are disregarded, and the current regime is judged to be the best of a set of bad alternatives, the long-term survival of the regime in its current form is by no means assured. It is true that the Brotherhood does not pose a direct threat to the Egyptian government in the short to medium term, since its commitment to working within the political system controlled by the regime puts it at an inherent disadvantage. In the long term, however, the Brotherhood’s broader project of cultural Islamisation poses a direct challenge to the legitimacy of the secular-nationalist state, and this is a challenge that the government will find very difficult to confront directly.
The impacts of environmental degradation on refugee–host relationships

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Although refugees can and often do bring positive social and economic changes to host communities, the influx and presence of refugees have also been shown to at times have negative impacts on individuals within a hosting community or even on the community as a whole. Therefore it is important not only to investigate the impacts of the presence of refugees on the hosting communities, but also to consider how these impacts have influenced the overall relationship between the two groups. In particular, one must determine what factors and influences on the hosting communities could contribute to a contentious or even conflictual relationship between the two groups. A better understanding of factors that contribute to or prevent conflict will ultimately assist those working with refugees with the coordination of projects that lessen the likelihood of conflict between refugees and host communities.

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