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There are unconfirmed reports that the Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi has started negotiations with the banned Muslim Brotherhood (MB). Rumour has it that the regime has offered to soften its grip on the organisation under the condition that it refrains from political activism. Hope that this marks the beginning of a new era of political opening is dubious; it is unlikely that El-Sisi will pull back from defining the MB (a strong opposition group) as a terrorist organisation. Likewise, it is improbable that the Brotherhood will veer away from its antagonism towards an incumbent that pushed the Islamist group out of power.

The persecution that followed El-Sisi’s 2013 coup weighs heavily on the MB. Established in 1928, the movement is Egypt’s largest Islamist group. In the course of its history, the group has developed safeguards against organisational vulnerabilities, demonstrating high levels of resilience. Although tens of thousands of members—the Economist sets the number at around 40,000—are incarcerated, the organisation remains able to function. There are even signs which suggest that the MB has begun to rebuild its influence, as can be seen in its online and Twitter presence. These developments raise questions about the source of the Brotherhood’s resilience: how is the organisation able to survive sustained governmental attacks? The answer lies in its intra-organisational structure.

Egypt’s oldest and arguably most successful Islamist movement is a hierarchical organisation; strategic decisions are made at the leadership level and are then communicated from the top. The regime’s attempt to reach out to the MB stems from two realisations: that it is impossible to quell the organisation, and that a longstanding policy of repression carries high costs—both materially and with regard to regime legitimacy. Thus, El-Sisi’s regime has to concede that his iron fist policy does not work.

The Middle East in London

In survival mode: the Muslim Brotherhood in El-Sisi’s prisons

Barbara Zollner outlines how the Muslim Brotherhood has been able to survive despite El-Sisi’s iron fist tactics

Demonstrators in Cairo on 23 August 2013 hold up four fingers, a symbol of solidarity with the destroyed sit-in protest at Raba’a al-Adawiyya Square. Photograph by H. Elrasam for VOA
down. Network specialists argue, however, that hierarchical networks are vulnerable to security measures that target its top-tier. In line with this rationale, El-Sisi was quick to arrest MB leaders shortly after the 2013 coup, leaving the organisation at large debilitated and in disarray. Still, this was not enough to secure El-Sisi’s reach for power, as the Brotherhood had built up a presence in all spheres of Egyptian society. In order to curb this influence, the new regime needed to restrict the MB’s operational room.

A second, much wider wave of persecution followed which aimed to squash the group’s influence amongst the middle class and political elite. The regime thus stepped up its use of force, purging syndicates, public services, the judiciary, the military, the media, workplaces, neighbourhoods, etc. With the aim of outing suspected members, associates and sympathisers, a witch-hunt followed that left thousands imprisoned without the application of the most basic standards of judicial process.

Despite the regimes’ efforts to eradicate the MB, neither the grassroots nor the leadership structures could be broken up. A micro-level explanation for this level of resilience lies in the members’ loyalty to the organisation and the mission it represents. It has often been pointed out that an oath (bay’a) binds adherents’ allegiance to the Murshid (Guide). However, this pledge is only an outward expression that plays on the conscience of already dedicated members; arguably more important are social relationships that tie the individual on a deeply personal level to the organisation. Internal bonds of loyalty are furthermore strengthened through a selection process that starts at the grassroots. It effectively curtails the possibility of regime infiltration as recruitment draws on family and friends, thus installing trust in the dependability of grassroots circles, poignantly called ‘usra (family).

An internal education programme, which follows a defined training curriculum, further deepens this sense of belonging. Members are not only cognitively drawn into the Brotherhood’s ideas, but regular teaching sessions and meetings become the defining domain for personal interaction and social contact. The organisation thus replicates a patronage system – leaving the organisation or turning against it would result in social isolation and imprisonment, in exile or hiding; yet it remains functional as clusters of council members within prison and the outside can interact and decide on essential issues. Trusted communicative networks are particularly important for passing on sensitive messages and are furthermore crucial for sustaining the overall operational mode. However, the risk of participating in these communicative networks is somewhat reduced as common issues of debate, general information and, most importantly, leadership directives are usually not passed on in a secretive manner. As such, communication diffuses in a broad and expansive fashion that uses various channels, including the internet and online social network communications. Information is thus distributed effectively and rapidly; the prison walls do little to block the flow of communication.

In conclusion, the MB can endure long periods of persecution and imprisonment because of its administrative structure, which protects the organisation from state-pressure and infiltration. Despite efforts to break the MB and its considerable loss in popularity, the group remains a potent opposition. In the face of the upcoming elections, the regime thus searches for possible ways of relative accommodation, conceivably seeking a status quo not too dissimilar to that achieved under Mubarak. El-Sisi might thus hope to find more effective and less costly ways to contain the organisation’s social and political influence – while conceding to the reality that the MB cannot be destroyed.

The organisation replicates a patronage system – leaving the organisation or turning against it would result in social isolation and restrict a person’s access to social, economic and political wasta (clout, i.e. ‘who you know’). Moreover, the training programme supports the staffing of administrative ranks as members are handpicked for higher positions. Having invested in strict internal education, selection and progression for at least 40 years since the end of Nasser’s persecution, the MB has built a cadre of loyal members.

On the macro-level, the top-heavy hierarchical command structure is not only the cause of the MB’s vulnerability to targeted regime pressure but is also the source of its resilience. The hierarchical command structure, built around the Murshid and the Guidance Council, protects organisational integrity during periods of persecution. The Guidance Council is of particular importance for the organisation’s survival. It is a body of approximately 15-20 long-standing loyal leaders who tend to have a conservative understanding of the Brotherhood’s mission. Being the main board, the leaders demand strict top-to-bottom subordination. During times of persistent crises, when the Shura Council is unable to adequately function as the organisation’s parliamentary heart (as indeed was the case during decades of repression even since 1954), executive directions are negotiated in the much smaller Guidance Council circle. Its members do not meet as a closed group as most of them are handpicked for higher positions as members are handpicked for higher positions.

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