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NATIONAL SECURITY RESEARCH DIVISION

The Muslim Brotherhood, Its Youth, and Implications for U.S. Engagement

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Cover photo: Young supporters of a Freedom and Justice Party candidate in the 2011/2012 Egyptian parliamentary elections (Associated Press).

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Summary

The Muslim Brotherhood (MB) did not lead the January 25, 2011, Revolution that culminated in the toppling of President Hosni Mubarak, but it has managed to position itself as one of the primary beneficiaries of the uprising. Before the revolution, the MB occupied a tenuous position in Egyptian politics. Many of its senior leaders were in prison, and the group lacked representation in parliament after its boycott of the 2010 elections. More than a year after the revolution, the MB's fortunes could not be more different. As the struggle over how to apportion power in post-Mubarak Egypt unfolds, the MB has emerged as a legal entity operating a sanctioned political party, Freedom and Justice (FJP). The FJP has already demonstrated its electoral clout—first by winning a strong plurality in the parliament,¹ then by taking the presidency when their candidate, Muhammad Mursi, beat former Prime Minister Ahmed Shafiq in a runoff. President Mursi has already shown a clear willingness to tilt the post-Mubarak balance of power in Egypt away from the military and toward the Brotherhood.

For all its newfound power, the group faces a number of challenges, and among the most notable are generational divides within the organization. Young people, including MB youth, were at the forefront of change in Egypt but remain marginalized in the political transition and within society more broadly. Egyptian youth face acute unemployment, delays in marriage, and a lack of say in decisionmaking despite heightened expectations after the revolution. Just like other institutions

¹ The lower house of the parliament was subsequently dissolved over a dispute in the constitutionality of the electoral law.

and groups, the MB is vulnerable to youth grievances. Although individuals under the age of 35 make up a large share of the MB's membership, their participation is modeled on the principle of "listen and obey,"² reducing them to the status of cogs in a wheel that is turned by senior leaders. This overbearing hierarchy has already led to splits within the MB and will continue to challenge the organization's cohesion going forward.

The Organization of MB Youth

The MB channels youth participation through a variety of programs that cater to specific age cohorts. Children cannot become full-fledged members of the organization but they may affiliate with the Brotherhood through the organization's scout program. When they reach secondary school, they can be incorporated into the MB's student section and begin the process of becoming full-fledged members of the organization. There are parallel structures for incorporating these individuals into the FJP, in which younger members are represented through youth secretariats. There is a secretariat in each of Egypt's governorates and the youth secretary is tasked with strengthening bonds among younger members, recruiting new members, and preparing the party's youth for future leadership.

The Roles of MB Youth

MB youth are central to the Brotherhood's outreach efforts—including its missionary, charitable, and political activities. During election season, MB youth put up flyers, participate in rallies, and direct voters to polling places. And in a role that has taken on greater importance since the uprising, MB youth serve as the organization's "muscle," manning the demonstrations and counterdemonstrations that are used

² *Al-Sam' wa al-Tā'a*, or "listen and obey," is the phrase used by the Muslim Brotherhood to describe the binding nature of leadership decisions within the organization.

to communicate the MB's demands and challenge its political competitors. During the January 25 Revolution, MB youth were crucial to the protestors' ability to outlast regime repression. MB youth helped protect fellow protestors during the "battle of the camels," in which the regime dispatched camel-riding thugs in a failed attempt to drive protestors from Tahrir Square. Similarly, MB youth worked in the field hospitals that treated the wounded and helped hold the square during the evenings when participation dwindled and protestors were most at risk of losing their base to security forces.

MB Breakaway Groups

The MB had already spawned several breakaway parties prior to the revolution, but the political opening that followed Mubarak's fall accelerated the trend. Five groups are now competing for constituencies similar to those of the FJP, although these breakaway parties are small and do not pose a significant electoral challenge. At this point, the real influence of the breakaway parties lies in their ability to lay down markers on issues that the FJP then feels compelled to adopt. The defections are also significant in that many of those who have left the MB are arguably among the organization's best and brightest. The defectors include MB "aristocracy" who are descendants of the Brotherhood's original leadership, others who were selected by their peers to represent the MB in the revolutionary coalitions formed after the uprising, and some of the MB's best interlocutors with non-Islamist groups.

Issues that Divide MB Youth from Senior Leadership

Generational divides within the MB are revealed most starkly in internal debates over four key issues. The first is the reconciling of the Brotherhood's various missions. Many MB youth who split from the organization have reservations over the Brotherhood's lack of separation between its religious and political activities. A second source of division is the organization's positions on social issues, including gender equal-

ity and minority rights, on which MB youth in general—and break-away youth in particular—tend to be more progressive than senior leadership. A third generational divide is the more modest scope and pace of change sought by senior leaders versus the more revolutionary aspirations of its youth cadre. The final source of tension can be traced to internal practices, which are characterized by a strict hierarchy that marginalizes youth voices.

Recommendations on Engagement

MB youth merit attention not only as a challenge to the Brotherhood's organizational cohesion, but also as a potential conduit for expanding U.S. engagement with the group. This study presents several recommendations on how the United States can incorporate MB youth into engagement efforts:

Understand divisions within the MB, but don't try to game them. The rationale for including MB youth in the engagement process is to better understand a complex, diverse organization and not to play on splits within the MB or determine who does and does not speak for the MB.

Regularize and routinize engagement, including among members of Congress and FJP parliamentarians, to reduce politicization of engagement efforts. Engagement will be most effective when it has bipartisan support in the United States and embeds contact with the MB as part of broader engagement with Egypt's profusion of political parties.

Expand engagement to the grassroots level, targeting youth leaders and student union activists outside the major cities. A particular blind spot for the United States are the emerging leaders within the Brotherhood who are based outside major urban areas. It would benefit the United States to expand its contacts with young leaders

from these outlying areas in order to provide a fuller understanding of the MB's rural membership.

Leverage existing outreach programs to include MB youth. In a period of budget constraints and competing priorities, the good news is that the U.S. government already has existing programs that can be used to expand engagement to incorporate MB youth.

Cultivate MB leader buy-in for youth engagement efforts. Due to the hierarchical nature of the MB, outreach to the youth wing will have to be coordinated with senior leadership.