

The Hunt for the Muslim Brotherhood: What Next?

Paola Caridi

1. From the law-courts to the mosques: repression and consensus-building

It is not the first time in the republican history of Egypt that the country has witnessed a highly violent, no-holds-barred repression of the Muslim Brotherhood. This happened in the middle of the 1950s, when Gamal Abdel Nasser, still in the phase of consolidation of the regime which had emerged from the so-called "Young Officers' revolution", unleashed an attack similar in numbers to that carried out from July 2013 until now by the authorities currently in power in Cairo. Around 20,000 persons arrested, executions and death sentences against the leadership of the *Ikhwan* (the Muslim Brothers), a repression which lasted for almost a decade, with various peaks. Those events have a great deal in common, in quantitative terms, with what has happened in recent months.



Ahram Online, 28 April 2014 - A court in Minya has passed death sentences on 683 supporters of former president Mohamed Morsi, including leading members of the Muslim Brotherhood.

The leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood and of the Justice and Freedom Party (the political expression of the *Ikhwan* which emerged after the revolution of 25 January 2011) is substantially all in the Egyptian jails, awaiting trial on charges so serious as to make the harshest penalties seem likely, including capital punishment. According to criticisms made by many human rights organisations, thousands upon thousands of persons, not all *Ikhwan* militants, have suffered a similar fate. Estimates speak of around 17,000 persons arrested, including leading figures from the revolutionary groups of Tahrir Square, whose positions have always been distant from those taken by the Brotherhood. Statistics concerning the numbers of victims

differ, starting from the bloody repression of the demonstrations by the Muslim Brothers at Rabaa El Adawiya in Cairo in mid-August 2013: the lowest estimates place the figure at more than 600 deaths, while some reports speak of more than 2,000. A few less than 300, on the other hand, is the number of persons killed in the terrorist attacks which have shaken the country since last summer: the victims, the overwhelming majority of whom belong to the police and security forces, have been killed by jihadist movements in attacks motivated partly by revenge.

The Muslim Brothers have always declared themselves not to be responsible for the attacks by means of statements broadcast on their communication channels and pronounced by representatives of the *Ikhwan* in Egypt and abroad. The *ad interim* government has, however, considered the distance taken by the representatives of the *Ikhwan* to be worth little more than the paper it was written on: the decision to consider the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organisation was in fact taken on 25 December 2013, on the day following the bloody attack on a police building at Mansour which cost the lives of at least 16 people and for which the Brothers had consistently denied responsibility.

Is everything predictable, then? Is it predictable that a regime which is in a process of rapid consolidation (including from the point of view of popular consensus), and in which the elements which made up the regime which preceded the 25 January 2011 are still very strong, should repress the Muslim Brothers? Is the on-going repression, therefore, a response in line with the behaviour of Egypt has shown from Nasser onwards? Only partly. It is true that, in recent months, the clash between the regime and the Muslim Brothers has not witnessed any of the moves towards accommodation which marked the era of the presidency of Hosni Mubarak. There might be one exception to this: the attempt by the regime - almost completely successful - to bring within its sphere of influence the Salafist tendencies within political Islam, thus confirming once more the interpretation by which the Salafists, from the moment of their emergence onto the socio-religious scene, are the main competitor of the Muslim Brotherhood, supported by Saudi financing and used since the time of Mubarak to rob the *Ikhwan* of its consensus in the vast suburbs of Cairo.

The clash with the Muslim Brothers is, therefore, total. It is not only an issue of the numbers and the persistence of the repression, which gives no room for any hypothesis of reconciliation, or of partial resettlement. What is total, differently from what occurred from the middle of the 1950s onwards, is the participation of sectors of the Egyptian state that at that time were considered *super partes*. We agree with the recent analysis of Nathan Brown and Michele Dunne, that

[u]nder Nasser - as well as Sadat and Mubarak - repression was the job of security agencies and special courts. The judiciary sometimes acted as a brake on the government's most authoritarian impulses. Now, all the instruments of the Egyptian state seem fully on board.¹

¹ Nathan J. Brown, Michele Dunne, "Egypt's Judges join in", in *Foreign Affairs*, 1 April 2014, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141088/nathan-j-brown-and-michele-dunne/egypts-judges-join-in>

An example for all is the extraordinary condemning to death on 24 March this year of 529 defendants, considered to belong to the Brotherhood, in a trial relating to the clashes at Minya in August 2013 which themselves followed the repression of Rabaa El Adawiya. In these clashes a police officer was killed and, according to the charges, an attempt was made on the lives of a further two officers. This is the confirmation that it was not necessary, as it had been in the time of Nasser, to use special courts or to have recourse to military tribunals to try civilians, as the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces had done in 2011. In recent months it has been “[t]he regular judiciary [that] has led most of the recent crackdown on the Brotherhood”;² at Minya as at the other on-going trials which have seen charges brought against not only the deposed president Muhammad Morsi and his entourage, but also the entire leadership of the Muslim Brothers. Indeed, only a few weeks had passed since the first judgment at Minya before a second and even harsher death sentence was handed down on 28 April, again in the same city, against 683 members of the Brotherhood. This time the judges raised their sights, including in the same judgment the supreme leader Mohammed Badie, with the increasingly obvious risk of radicalising the Egyptian *Ikhwan*.

It would be a long, and possibly fruitless, task to look into the reasons behind the Minya judgments. The first judgment has been impugned not only by the world’s most important human rights organisations, including Amnesty International, for the lack of all the requirements necessary to qualify it as a fair trial, but also by those governments which carry weight. This included the US administration, whose Secretary of State, John Kerry, stated that such a “quick mass trial... simply defies logic”.³ The second judgment, that which included the supreme leader Mohammed Badie, also gave rise to the same embarrassed reactions, again from the US side.⁴ One can ask whether the Egyptian judiciary was acting as an integral part of a regime trying to consolidate itself as quickly as possible, including by means of exemplary sentences designed to crush any dissent, or additionally, or above all, as a state institution defending itself from the attacks made by the Muslim Brotherhood on the judicial system when Morsi, during his presidency, changed the leadership by replacing the Egyptian Attorney-General himself. In order to have a complete reading of the situation, it is however necessary to set the on-going clash in the context of the history of the Egyptian judiciary: the replacement of the Attorney-General was the result of a history in which the judiciary was an integral part of the previous regime, with the well-known exceptions of the “club of judges” who came out against presidential decisions during the last years of Mubarak’s rule.⁵ Furthermore, within the opposition, the Muslim Brotherhood was one of the movements hardest hit by the detentive sentences issued by the judges.

Whatever the correct reading might be, it is an undeniable fact that the regime, acting systemically, is participating with all its facets in the clash with the Muslim Brothers. This applies not only to the ju-

² Ibid.

³ US Dept. of State, *Mass Trials and Sentencing in Egypt*, 26 March 2014, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/03/223967.htm>. For reactions to the news of the Minya mass judgment, cfr. Aaron T. Rose, “Condemnation for Minya sentencing continues to build”, in *Daily News Egypt*, 29 March 2014, <http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/?p=230143>

⁴ US Dept. of State, *Egyptian Court Sentencing Recommendations*, 28 April 2014, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/04/225273.htm>; Joel Gulhane, “Concern continues to mount for Minya death sentences”, in *Daily News Egypt*, 30 April 2014, <http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/?p=232622>

⁵ On this point, see Daniela Pioppi, “The Judiciary and ‘Revolution’ in Egypt”, in *Insight Egypt*, No. 2 (August 2013), <http://www.iai.it/content.asp?langid=2&contentid=971>

diciary, to the state channels of communication, as well as some private channels, to the bureaucracy and to the educational and cultural institutions which depend directly on the public authorities. It also applies to the religious establishment, beginning with Al Azhar, which is once more supporting the civil apparatus and allowing itself to be used, through a policy of control over the mosques, as a vehicle for the setting forth of the faith, in such a way as to try, as in the past, to undermine the bases of consent of the *Ikhwan*.

A clear example of this policy of control is the decision taken by the Ministry for Religious Affairs to control the message being communicated in the mosques. It is an objective to be achieved by means of strong actions, which have been carried out by the Ministry in agreement with Al Azhar from last autumn onwards, such as forbidding imams who do not hold a diploma from Al Azhar from preaching in the mosques; closing smaller mosques in order to reduce the number of mosques (which stands at more than 100,000 according to the lower estimates); and stipulating, and thereby harmonising, themes for the sermon for the great Friday prayers. In addition to these tactics, an attempt has been made to limit the influence of personalities traditionally considered to provide significant support to the Brothers, including support in terms of public relations, such as Yussef al Qaradawi, the “sheik of Al-Jazeera”, Egyptian but resident at Doha now for many years. An example of this attempt, and of the on-going clash between the Egyptian religious institutions linked to the state and certain scholars who are not aligned with the positions taken by the Government, is the very tough argument conducted through statements, *fatwa* and reciprocal accusations last autumn between Qaradawi and the former mufti of Egypt, Ali Gooma.⁶

The attack which has taken place in recent weeks on one of the classic centres of power and consensus of the Brotherhood, the system of the professions, forms part of the same strategy. In recent decades, some of the most important professions have been led by representatives of the Muslim Brotherhood: doctors, engineers, teachers, chemists, vets, a mass of professionals which illustrates not only the pervasiveness of the opposition to the Mubarak regime, but also, if not mainly, which the social sectors were which were represented by the *Ikhwan*, or at least by an Islamist tendency. During the most recent weeks, Egypt has witnessed a reshuffle of the leaderships of the professions, starting last December with the change in the balance of the powerful doctors’ profession, for many years the feud of Abdel Moneim Abul Futouh, the leading representative of the Brothers until his expulsion after the Tahrir Square revolution and his candidacy at the presidential elections. On 5 April, the leadership of the engineers’ profession also changed, a profession to which the deposed President Morsi himself belongs, as do a significant number of figures from the highest levels of the hierarchy of the *Ikhwan*. The attack on the Brotherhood is also evident from its decision to boycott the elections of the leaderships of the professions, as happened in the case of the engineers’ and vets’ professions.

Unifying the various elements that are participating in the no-holds-barred war against the Muslim Brothers is the common definition of the *Ikhwan* as no more and no less than a terrorist organisation,

⁶ Ahmed Morsy, Nathan J Brown, “Egypt’s al-Azhar Steps Forward”, in *Carnegie Articles*, 7 November 2013, <http://carnegieendowment.org/publications/?fa=53536>; Amr Osman, “Religion and Politics in Post-Coup Egypt”, in *openDemocracy*, 28 November 2013, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/node/77407>

considered to be mandating and carrying out the attacks against police officers that follow each other on an almost daily basis in various parts of Egypt. A terrorist organisation, meaning that all its members are defined as terrorists by the state media, such as those who are being tried for the bloody events which took place in front of the President's palace, or those which took place in front of the headquarters of the *Ikhwan* in the popular district of Moqattam in Cairo. The definition of terrorist also includes those who put themselves forward as candidates for the professions, or those who protest outside and inside the universities of Cairo and Alexandria.

Constructed in such a way that it can no longer be evaded, the hunt for the Moslem Brothers is also a general hunt against dissent, as is demonstrated by the arrests and severe sentences which abound in a world as clearly far from that of the Brotherhood as that of the Tahrir revolutionaries. Indeed, leading the hunt are two institutions which should have kept a sheen of neutrality, the military and the judiciary. The possible scenario, therefore, could not be less rosy. For, as Nathan Brown and Michele Dunne observe, this shift in the position of two fundamental elements of the institutional structure of the country

*not only damages the international reputations of the judiciary and the military but also colors how they appear domestically. Any future rebellion, therefore, might turn against all parts of the state, rather than just the president and those figures viewed as his henchmen, as was the case in the 2011 uprising against Mubarak.*⁷

2. The construction of a regional anti-Muslim Brotherhood front

The pressure on the Muslim Brotherhood is not only internal. The repression being conducted by the security forces and, in parallel, by a part of the judiciary is instead part of a strategy of containment which goes beyond national borders. It is not a question of a hidden strategy which shuns publicity. It is instead a strategy *en plein air*, which believes that it gains strength from its very public dimension, defining the sides clearly. On one such side is the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and its socio-religious apparatus made up (if not legally, then in the awareness and perception of the connections with the *Ikhwan*) of non-governmental organisations, associations, imams and mosques. On the other side is the regime in power in Cairo, including pillars of the Egyptian state such as the security services, the apparatuses of the forces of law and order, the armed forces and the judiciary, supported in the regional setting by Saudi Arabia and a great number of the countries belonging to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The Saudi support, previously known but not made explicit through obvious public acts, has become increasingly clear in recent months, being condensed into three actions which qualify the policy of Riyadh towards the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood as a true and proper clash. We are dealing, furthermore, with a clash which brings to an end an approach taken over previous decades towards organisations of the *Ikhwan* stamp which was, when all is said and done, ambiguous, above all in the Palestinian case, where an interested position had been taken towards the Palestinian Islamist movement Hamas. The three actions taken by the royal house of Ibn Saud are the signature of an agreement

⁷ Nathan J. Brown, Michele Dunne, "Egypt's Judges join in", cit.

between Saudi Arabia and Qatar at the beginning of 2014 limiting the support given by Doha to the Muslim Brotherhood (not only in Egypt, but also in Palestine and Syria), the subsequent withdrawal of the Saudi ambassador from Qatar after the equivalent move had been made with the ambassador from Egypt, and the addition of the Muslim Brotherhood to the blacklist of terrorist organisations.⁸

Together with actions formally of a political stamp are actions of an economic character, which have been of fundamental importance both because they have weakened the Muslim Brotherhood and because they have settled the strategy conducted by Saudi Arabia since the immediate aftermath of the outbreak of Arab uprisings in December 2010. After 3 July 2013, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Kuwait decided to extend to Egypt a significant aid package, of a total value of more than 12 billion dollar, at the moment in which the Islamist President Morsi was deposed and a military-backed government was inserting itself. In addition to the first package, further aid was provided over subsequent months by Saudi Arabia and the Emirates of a total amount of 5.8 billion dollar, including petrol products. The total aid provided by the “conservative” GCC front is already equal to double the amount which Qatar had promised to Egypt when it was led by Morsi.

The strategy implemented by the Gulf countries, led by Saudi Arabia, clearly illustrates, furthermore, how the “Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood” issue is part of a complex regional conflict which is far from being resolved and whose final result is not yet clear: the Egyptian *Ikhwan al Muslimin* was indeed added at the beginning of March to the blacklist of terrorist organisations which also includes three other bodies, two Syrian (Isis and the Al Nusra front) and one Lebanese, namely Hezbollah. The varied composition of this list (which does not include, in substance, only organisations with historical links to Iran and the Assad regime) shows how the geopolitical role of Riyadh is more at issue than distancing movements labelled as terrorist from the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam. At issue, therefore, is hegemony over the region on the part of an alliance of states: this is true both of Saudi Arabia together with Egypt and a good part of the Gulf emirates, and of Qatar, which, with the deposal of Morsi, suffered a very heavy defeat, and which must now re-establish an alliance of countries in which the Muslim Brotherhood managed to get into government.

One should also set in this context the delicate and unpleasant incident of the on-going proceedings against four Al-Jazeera journalists, arrested in two different sets of circumstances and accused of false reporting and of belonging to a stated illegal movement, such as the Muslim Brothers. Peter Grete, Mohammed Fahmy and Baher Mohammed have been detained for more than 100 days, while a fourth journalist, Abdullah al-Shami, has been in preventive detention for more than six months, and on hunger strike since 23 January. All the journalists reject the accusations as false, and the most widely-held interpretation is that the two sets of proceedings against Al-Jazeera staff form part of an attack against the Qatari television channel, considered the *longa manus* of the political hegemony of Doha on the regional scene. The Al-Jazeera case is symbolic of what is going on as regards information in Egypt in the wake of the crackdown by the post-3 July regime not only on journalists and independent titles, but also on a free reading of events. The true and proper media campaign organised over recent months

⁸ Mai Shams El-Din, “Egypt’s political deadlock extends to the Gulf”, in *Mada Masr*, 14 March 2014, <http://www.madamasr.com/node/2372>

against the Muslim Brothers, consistently defined as terrorists and censured, is an integral part of a communication strategy of which the Brothers remain the main target. For months, the *Ikhwan* have therefore been forced to resort once more to the means they employed before 25 January, above all the internet, social networks and websites managed to a great extent from abroad, despite having lost, during the period of Morsi's presidency, some of their previous credibility. The way in which the men around the presidency managed relations with journalists has indeed weakened the information which comes from official Islamist sources today.

3. The Muslim Brotherhood decapitated: what next?

Its entire leadership in jail, awaiting trial and judgment, which in many cases are expected to be "exemplary", above all after the mass death sentences of Minya; thousands of militants, supposed as such, or even without any proven connection to the Muslim Brotherhood, in jail, accused of belonging to an outlawed movement, or of violence, or of incitement to violence; a ban on leaving the country for those representatives who have not yet been arrested; a block on the funds, bank accounts, and sources of financing of the Muslim Brotherhood; demotion of those imams suspected of being connected to the Brothers: at first sight, there is no future for the largest Islamist organisation of the contemporary Arab period. After the presidency and deposal of Morsi, defeat is clear.

Clear also is the loss of consensus, which is not a consequence of the repression which has been on-going since July 2013, but rather from the performance in government of the Muslim Brotherhood, which was marked by a disconnected management between the Morsi presidency and the preceding regime, whose structure had remained still unchanged. The controversial proposal for a constitution of November 2012, which responded to the strategy of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces to waterproof the presidency and the legislative branch, itself proved to be a gesture which further isolated the Muslim Brothers. The loss of consensus was immediate, the result above all of the inability of Morsi and the Brotherhood to work together with the other political forces to design for Egypt a shared social and institutional future. Right from the beginning, Morsi's presidency was characterised by a *modus operandi* stained by the decades spent by the movement in a semi-clandestine existence. With the presidency obtained, the Brothers had acted immediately by *occupying power* for fear of losing it, not even attempting to build alliances or to cooperate. We should place in this context the attempts to upset the institutional balance, both by replacing the Attorney-General and changing the leadership of the armed forces, with the entry onto the scene of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi himself, appointed by Morsi to the post of General Mohammed Tantawi. It is not by chance, therefore, that it is precisely the judiciary and the armed forces which are today the two sectors in the front line of the repression of the Muslim Brotherhood.

In addition to the loss of consensus among a widened electoral base which is not necessarily made up of supporters of the Islamist movement, it is necessary to consider the Brotherhood's structural crisis,

which has been underway, the truth be told, for years. This crisis is due to internal pressure which is not only generational, but above all ideological/programmatical. The discussion of the programme of the Muslim Brotherhood, which has been underway for some time, since before the revolution of 25 January 2011, has been synonymous with, and symbolic of, the evolutionary crisis of the Egyptian *Ikhwan*, which has been blocked on several occasions both by the arrests of certain of its leaders during the last years of the Mubarak presidency, and by the outbreak of the insurrection of 2011 and the consequent stiffening of the positions taken by the conservative leadership of the *Ikhwan*. On the eve of the revolution, the Muslim Brotherhood was anything but a compact movement. It was, rather, going through a phase of internal discussion in which, for the first time, the new generations had emerged thanks to a public outpouring, though blogs and also defections and the adoption of extreme positions by certain representatives of the reforming wing, of a debate on ideology and programme. Indeed, the revolution of 25 January 2011 confirmed the internal splits, with on the one side the young Islamists, protagonists of the epic of Tahrir Square together with their lay contemporaries, and on the other the conservative leadership, protagonists, *vice versa*, of an attempt at compromise with the old regime in the first days of the revolution.

It was this stiff conservative leadership which managed the Muslim Brotherhood's rise to power, for the first time in its long history, which had been until then either clandestine or marked by a sometimes ambiguous relationship with the Egyptian regime. And it is this leadership which has now been decapitated. It is, however, the more varied base of the movement which is paying the highest price in terms of the violation of human and civil rights. It remains unclear what path will be taken by the composite sector which identifies neither with the Salafist programme, nor with the religious and conservative conformity which seems to have decided to support Sisi. This is political Islam in marked transition, having come partly out into the open in the clear and convinced support which it gave to the revolution of 25 January 2011, in which it was one of the elements which clearly opposed the conservative leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood. For this sector - the most interesting in Egypt - one can imagine a miserable future, like a car forced to stop because the road is no longer passable, and because, in a period of violent repression, all suspects are tarred with the same brush. It is therefore difficult, for the moment, to foresee a significant role for the reforming wing and for the young Islamists who were part of the varied scene of Tahrir. Indeed, after 25 January and the establishment of the Justice and Freedom party, it was the reformers and the young who were *de facto* purged within the Muslim Brotherhood. A purge which deprived the organisation of figures who, during the period of government, would have allowed it to have a more open attitude towards cooperation. Today, the Muslim Brothers, partly withdrawn once again into a semi-clandestine state in order to protect what is left of the movement, do not have figures of such significance as to take the baton from the leaders in jail. Not that such a lack of charismatic figures has ever carried great weight with Islamist movements, as is exemplified by the story of Hamas, an organisation decapitated over its decades of existence by the military operations and targeted homicides of Israel. It is, however, a fact that Islamist movements react to significant repressions, such as that in progress in Egypt, by returning to the opacity of clandestine or semi-clandestine structures in order to reconstitute the connective tissue. The question which we should ask is whether, in this case, the *Ikhwan* will have to trust themselves to the support of militants in exile, an occurrence rare in their history.

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