A commitment to politics: the trajectory of the Muslim Brotherhood during Egypt’s 2011–13 political opening

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Prior to the 2011 Arab uprisings, Islamist parties in most Arab states had been systematically prevented from exercising any meaningful authority in government. Following President Hosni Mubarak’s ousting from power in 2011, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (MB) established a political party – the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) – and formally entered mainstream politics, providing a rare opportunity to examine the role of an Islamist party in the context of democratic transition. Contrary to concerns that the MB might use Egypt’s political opening to install an undemocratic regime, the movement instead committed itself to electoral politics and consistently adhered to the framework for political transition. An analysis of the MB’s political trajectory during the 2011–13 timeframe reveals that the movement endeavoured to protect Egypt’s democratic transition against the encroachment of the military and the judiciary. Despite the FJP’s efforts, sustained interference by non-elected institutions brought Egypt’s democratic experiment to a premature end. This course of events confirms that an Islamist movement is capable of fully committing to politics, but also indicates that political commitment alone is insufficient to ensure a successful transition to democratic governance.

Keywords: Muslim Brotherhood; Islamist movement; Freedom and Justice Party; Egypt; political opening; political commitment

Introduction: the organizational impact of political commitment

Prior to the 2011 Arab uprisings, Islamist movements in most Arab states had been systematically prevented from exercising any meaningful authority in government. Two instances in the last quarter-century that might have brought an Islamist opposition party into power in the Arab world were deliberately obstructed. In Algeria during the early 1990s, the military acted to prevent an electoral victory by the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), resulting in civil war. More recently, when the Palestinian resistance movement Hamas won the 2006 Palestinian elections, the international community intervened to undermine its capacity to govern (Brown 2013). Until recently, there was considerable speculation regarding how politically empowered Islamists in the Arab world might conduct themselves, but there were few concrete examples on which to draw. In the absence of empirical evidence, scholars nonetheless debated the extent to which an Islamist movement such as the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) might adhere to democratic conventions in practice. Stacher (2010) is critical of scholars who attempted to ascertain the Egyptian MB’s democratic credentials without
acknowledging the highly repressive and undemocratic political context in which this movement was operating. With regard to ideology, Stacher (2010) similarly objects to the tendency of scholars to highlight some of the conservative positions taken by the movement, without considering the broader social context. Many of the positions espoused by the MB are consistent with mainstream norms and ideals in Egypt, and as such, these positions do not represent an inherently narrow Islamist perspective. Ultimately, prior to the 2011 uprisings, the repression of Islamist movements across the Arab world precluded any practical assessment of their objectives. Hamzawy and Brown (2008) suggest that Islamists themselves may not have known how they would react if they achieved political power. An analysis of the MB’s trajectory during Egypt’s 2011–13 political opening provides important insight.

The 25 January 2011 Egyptian uprisings created an unprecedented opportunity for the political inclusion of Islamists in Egypt. As a movement with a broad agenda for social reform, the MB had historically viewed political participation as one of many potential modes of activism and influence. While members affiliated with the MB began competing in elections in 1984, their participation in politics rested on the understanding that the movement could not win an election against the ruling party. Acutely aware of these limitations, the MB fielded candidates for only a minority of seats so as not to appear threatening to the incumbent regime. The ideological impact of this restrained mode of participation ensured that the MB never fully committed to a political process that blocked its full inclusion (Brown 2012a). As a result of its experience with unfair elections, the MB began to de-emphasize calls for the implementation of Islamic law in lieu of demands for democratic reform (Wickham 2013). With the onset of the Arab Spring and President Hosni Mubarak’s removal from power, the former barriers to full political participation were lifted. Within the new political opening, amid widespread calls from the Egyptian public for freedom and democracy, the MB understood that victory at the polls had become a viable possibility. This paper argues that this realization – that for the first time in the movement’s history success was within reach – produced profound changes in the movement’s structure and orientation. Released from the constraints of semi-authoritarianism, the MB fully committed to and invested in the political process.

The impact of a commitment to politics on a movement as broad and diverse as the MB cannot be overstated. Certainly, the movement did not cease its non-political forms of social outreach and mobilization when it committed to politics. However, while it had previously insisted that no mode of activism should take precedence over another, during the 2011–13 period there was a clear shift toward the prioritization of political endeavours, often at the implicit expense of other activities. This arrangement inevitably provoked divisive elements within the movement, from both members who resisted the newfound centrality of politics to the movement, as well as members who supported the emphasis on politics in principle but preferred a different political strategy in practice (Wickham 2013). The most outwardly visible effect of the MB’s entrance into mainstream politics was the creation of a political party. In practice, the manner in which the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) was structured in relation to the MB served to reinforce the pre-existing hierarchy within the social movement. Senior members retained their positions of authority, thereby preserving the unity and cohesiveness of the movement and its newly created political party (Wickham 2013). As the FJP entered the political landscape as a legal political representation of the MB for the first time in the movement’s history, it demonstrated its commitment to the political process through the adoption of new guiding principles.
This paper argues that the post-Mubarak political opportunity structures enticed the Egyptian MB to commit itself to the political process and devote significant resources to this endeavour. During the first 18 months following the uprisings, the FJP’s activities displayed the growing salience of two features: an unprecedented level of political ambition, and a concern for the public image of the MB and its party. The movement wanted the FJP to succeed, but it also wanted to prove to both Egyptians and international observers that it was a moderate and responsible political actor (Hamid 2014). In practice, these new politically oriented attributes interacted with enduring organizational characteristics rooted in the MB’s experience with political repression. Traits such as caution and self-restraint had enabled the movement to survive – even thrive – under semi-authoritarianism, but were less conducive to conditions of greater political openness (Brown 2012a). The FJP persevered in its political pursuits, and after Mohammed Morsi was elected President in June 2012, the party’s ambition amplified into increased assertiveness. Electoral victory enhanced the MB’s sense of entitlement to preside over the political sphere (Wickham 2013). For anyone who questioned the limits of the inclusion–moderation hypothesis, or envisioned that the ‘paradox of democracy’ could empower elected Islamists to impose an undemocratic regime, this was the moment of truth (Schwedler 2013). It is contended here that the MB’s commitment to a democratic transition based on majoritarian principles was genuine and steadfast. Until the day Morsi was forcibly removed from power, the FJP worked within the existing system and remained consistently committed to the political process.

The Muslim Brotherhood in semi-authoritarian Egypt

The MB was founded in Ismailia, Egypt, in 1928 by Hassan Al-Banna, a charismatic schoolteacher. The social movement expressed broad ambitions with the ultimate goal of restoring Islam to its rightful position of centrality in the social order. In 1932, Al-Banna moved the MB’s headquarters to Cairo, where the organization’s membership quickly swelled and it became increasingly involved in political affairs (Soage 2008). The MB operated from the premise that foreign influences had usurped the desired primacy of Islam in organizing and maintaining the social order (Mitchell 1969). Although its ultimate goal was to implement a social order based on Islamic law, the organization sought to bring about reform first at the level of the individual, then at the level of society. Change should occur incrementally from below rather than as a sudden revolutionary event (Mitchell 1969). From a political standpoint, Al-Banna was highly suspicious of partyism and partisanship, but the MB nonetheless fielded candidates in both the 1941 and 1945 elections; in the former case they were pressured to withdraw, and in the latter case all MB candidates were defeated. Meanwhile, reformist ideals notwithstanding, the MB perpetrated acts of violence during the 1940s. While its targets were primarily British forces occupying Egypt, the movement also occasionally targeted the Egyptian state. In December 1948, a member of the MB killed Egyptian Prime Minister Mahmoud An-Nuqrashi Pasha, and Al-Banna was killed in reprisal a few weeks later (Wickham 2013).

Clearly, then, the MB during its formative years exhibited a tension between generating reform from below and achieving its objectives through force. This tension came to the forefront during the MB’s experience of severe repression by the Nasser regime. Following the Free Officers’ coup of 1952, the MB, now under the leadership of Hassan Al-Hudaybi, was initially spared disbandment by President Gamal Abdel
Nasser’s populist regime. However, after an attempt on Nasser’s life was attributed to the MB, the organization experienced the highest level of repression since its inception. Its leaders were arrested and held in prison camps (Kepel 1985). Among the incarcerated was Sayyid Qutb, a prominent member whose prison manifesto *Signposts* allowed for the interpretation that it was acceptable to use force against the oppressive state in order to achieve the implementation of an Islamic order. Even after his execution in 1967, Qutb’s writing continued to exert an influence within Islamist circles, including among members of the MB. Although Qutb’s ideology resonated with some members, his proposed methods were wholly incompatible with the non-violent gradualism favoured by the reformists within the movement. In 1969, Supreme Guide Al-Hudaybi wrote *Preachers, Not Judges* as a rebuttal to Qutb’s confrontational position (Wickham 2013). The MB became divided between reformists and militant Islamists, resulting in a rare schism between the two factions (Kepel 1985). The radical Islamists seceded from the movement, while the reformists continued to pursue their objectives in a non-violent manner under the banner of the MB.

Thus the MB’s ambiguities toward violence were formally resolved by the late 1960s. Moving forward, the movement’s gradualist approach to achieving its objectives was further consolidated under the leadership of Supreme Guide Umar Al-Tilismani (Wickham 2013). In the 1970s, the MB was granted a greater degree of freedom to organize and mobilize within society. Incoming President Anwar Sadat liberalized the economy and viewed the Islamists as a strategic countermeasure to the rise of leftist movements in Egypt (Awad 2013). While the MB reconfigured itself above ground, consistent with the movement’s multifaceted structure, it pursued political participation as only one of its many objectives. Even after the political space partially opened in Egypt, much of the MB’s political mobilization occurred on the periphery rather than at the political centre of Egyptian society (Wickham 2002). The organization was still technically illegal, and in the interests of self-preservation the MB preferred to pursue its activities outside the immediate purview of the state. The MB proved highly adaptive to operating in semi-authoritarian conditions. It cultivated networks in the parallel Islamic sector by connecting with individuals through the provision of social welfare and in the form of Islamic consciousness-raising. Additionally, during this period many Islamists, some of whom later joined the MB, became active in university student unions and went on to dominate the professional syndicates during the 1980s (Wickham 2002).

Under Sadat, the MB learned to tailor its activities in response to the opportunities and constraints provided by the regime, but it mainly confined its activism to the periphery of society. Following Sadat’s assassination, President Mubarak came to power in 1981, and in 1984 the MB began to participate in the political process more directly (Wickham 2013). Elections in semi-authoritarian regimes are freer but still unfair, as the opposition may be permitted to run, but it is never allowed to win. Under such preordained conditions, the MB adhered to the procedural tenets of electoralism, but it would not fully invest in the political process (Brown 2012a). When it was permitted to participate politically, the MB fielded a small number of candidates in elections, either as independents or by forming temporary alliances with other political groups, because the movement itself had no legal status (El-Ghobashy 2005). The movement was generally careful to contest few enough seats that it would not challenge the dominance of the incumbent regime, as it had no interest in provoking a direct confrontation. Members of the MB benefitted from their engagement with the political process.
as they acquired new skills and increased their visibility in the public sphere (Brown 2012a).

Meanwhile, the MB exhibited a discursive shift as it came to prioritize democratic reform in Egyptian politics as a necessary precondition to implementing its Islamic agenda (Wickham 2013). The official discourse of the movement’s leaders became more accommodating on issues such as women’s rights and the role of Copts, and more open to partisanship and political pluralism (El-Ghobashy 2005). This increased support for democratic reforms in part reflected an understanding that the movement would directly benefit from the expansion of political freedoms. However, it also denoted a process of ideological change that results from engagement with the political system. Byproducts of even limited opportunities to participate politically, such as engagement in within- and inter-group dialogue and interactions with structural constraints, can lead a social movement toward a position of greater ideological moderation (Schwedler 2006). While the MB had long since disavowed violence, it was now undergoing a process of political learning that accompanies political participation. Politics was just one of the MB’s many possible projects, and when state repression precluded such pursuits, the movement redirected its energy toward charitable, educational or socioeconomic projects. The MB’s cautious approach and adaptive capacity to seize opportunities where they existed enabled it to thrive under semi-authoritarian conditions (Brown 2012a).

Internally, the MB’s organizational structure exhibits a great deal of formality, and its entrenched hierarchical structure tends to emphasize loyalty and discipline at the expense of equal representation within the movement (Brown 2012a). In particular, youth members and reformists have struggled to make their voices heard by the movement’s conservative old guard. However, the hegemony of the old guard is not absolute, and there are aspects of the movement’s organizational structure that uphold democratic conventions. The MB’s internal governance structure consists of two elected bodies, the Guidance Bureau and the Shura Council, as well as an elected Supreme Guide. The Shura Council makes decisions through deliberation and consensus, while the Guidance Bureau is responsible for implementing these mandates (El-Ghobashy 2005). Supreme Guide Mohammed Mahdi Akef, who served from 2004 until he voluntarily resigned in 2010, was known for encouraging discussion and internal debate (Brown 2012a). Under semi-authoritarian rule, it was difficult for the MB to conduct internal elections, as the movement had no legal status and its members were not permitted to convene. The MB’s determination to hold elections, despite the inherent risks, is indicative of the value placed on internal democracy. Indeed, as Brown (2012a) has observed, regular turnover at the highest positions of authority in the MB is noteworthy in itself, given that organizations in the Arab world are commonly structured around influential leaders and few associations outlast their founders.

Throughout the latter decades of Mubarak’s rule, the MB was subjected to successive iterations of state repression. During the 1990s, the regime retaliated in response to the MB’s domination of the professional associations. Similarly, after the MB overreached during the 2005 elections and won 20% of the seats in parliament, the movement was again subjected to state retribution (Brownlee 2010). Despite its demonstrated willingness to confine its political activities within the parameters set by the state, the MB repeatedly came under attack. Moreover, regardless of how aggressively the regime singled out and suppressed the movement, the MB did not resort to violence. In contrast to radical groups such as Jama’a Islamiyya, which perpetrated acts of violence against the Egyptian state throughout the 1990s, the MB remained stoically
disciplined (Brownlee 2010). Indeed, it was not because the MB was presumed to be a radical anti-system movement that it was judged so threatening to the Mubarak regime. Conversely, it was because the MB had consistently presented itself as moderate and supportive of the democratic process — even under political conditions that were far from democratic — that it was deemed such a threat to the prevailing order (Wickham 2002). However, the MB’s learned inhibition rendered it extremely reluctant to engage in activities that directly challenged the regime. According to the ‘paradox of moderation’, the temperament of an anti-system movement decreases the likelihood that it will contribute to processes of democratization (Tezcur 2010). The traits that had enabled the MB to survive under semi-authoritarianism prevented it from effectively resisting political repression. This accounts significantly for the movement’s lukewarm support for the revolutionary cause during Egypt’s 2011 uprisings.

The Muslim Brotherhood during the 2011 uprisings

The 25 January 2011 uprisings in Egypt erupted just two weeks after the Jasmine Revolution had successfully overthrown the Tunisian dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. The MB was not among the instigators of the Egyptian protests, many of whom were youth, leftists and liberals. By nature, the MB is not a revolutionary movement, and it preferred a gradualist approach to social and political change. The movement had been conditioned by years of semi-authoritarian rule, such that it was too restrained to risk challenging the regime directly. The MB’s typical caution and uncertainty were evident as the protests unfolded and the movement vacillated between supporting the revolutionaries and negotiating with the regime. Tellingly, in the wake of the Tunisian Revolution, rather than calling for similar demonstrations in Egypt, the MB’s leadership sent a letter to the Egyptian regime, detailing a series of demands for political reform (Pargeter 2013). Days later, when mass protests erupted in Cairo’s Tahrir Square and throughout Egypt, the MB withheld its support and refrained from participating. The movement kept its distance not least because it recognized that if the demonstrations failed, its members would become the targets of forceful backlash from the disgruntled regime (Pargeter 2013). Early on, some youth members petitioned the Supreme Leaders for permission to join the protests; their request was eventually approved, provided that the youth participated, as individuals, without the formal backing of the movement (Wickham 2013). For the MB, an official endorsement of the revolutionaries was too risky.

However, as the popular uprisings progressed, the MB understood that it could not afford to disregard such a significant event in Egypt’s history. On 28 January, the MB belatedly entered Tahrir Square and joined the demonstrations. From the outset, the MB’s leadership was careful to emphasize that the movement was moving with the protests and not leading or controlling them. The MB was aware that if the impending revolution appeared to be driven by religious concerns, it could be discredited by both the regime and the international community (Hamid 2014). Supporters of the uprisings emphasized their common Egyptian identity, advocated freedom and new opportunities for all Egyptians, and avoided making explicitly religious references. Rather than positioning itself at the forefront of the protests, the MB applied its strong organizational skills throughout Tahrir Square. Members distributed food and water to protestors, provided medical and security services, and connected the first microphones in the square (Wickham 2013). While offering support to the cause, the MB downplayed its own involvement in the uprisings and sought to reassure fellow
protestors that it had no intention of co-opting the demonstrations for its own purposes. The movement further underscored its commitment to a united front by officially backing Mohammed ElBaradei, a secularist leader who emerged as the spokesperson for the protestors’ demands (Pargeter 2013). Its common refrain of ‘participation, not domination’ proved as applicable to the revolutionary scene as it had to semi-authoritarianism.

As the protests continued, Mubarak undertook various measures in an attempt to appease the demonstrators and restore public order. On 28 January, he implemented curfews in Cairo, Alexandria and Suez, and deployed troops onto the streets. Adopting a more conciliatory approach, he then dismissed his cabinet and appointed his first vice president, political ally Omar Suleiman. In a final attempt to dissuade the protestors, on 1 February Mubarak asserted that he would not seek another term and vowed to implement constitutional reforms (Moustafa 2011). For its part, even after the MB had established a presence in Tahrir Square, and even as it expressed support for the demands of the revolutionaries, it appeared to be indecisive. Early in February, the MB began calling for Mubarak to relinquish power, and on 4 February it issued a statement refusing to engage in dialogue with the regime. However, by 5 February the MB had repositioned itself and agreed to meet with newly appointed Vice President Suleiman (Pargeter 2013). Just as the MB’s behaviour had been conditioned by the regime under standard semi-authoritarian conditions, so the movement continued to respond to actions taken by the regime during the course of the protests. Although a few other opposition groups attended the meeting on 6 February, most boycotted it to indicate that the time for dialogue had passed. By contrast, given the as-yet-uncertain outcome of the uprisings, the MB was unwilling to exclude itself from the negotiations. If an arrangement with the regime were to be brokered, the MB wanted to be involved in the process (Pargeter 2013).

The MB’s double-play caused uproar among the protestors of Tahrir Square, who accused it of betraying the revolution by having one foot in the square and the other with the regime (Pargeter 2013). Equally unimpressed were the youth members within the movement itself. Fearful of losing its support base at this crucial time, the MB sought to justify its actions by issuing statements claiming that it had taken part in the meeting in order to relay the people’s demands to the regime and to assess the regime’s willingness to meet these demands. In the coming days, the ambivalent MB continued to oscillate between the regime and the revolutionaries. By 8 February, it had reverted back to denouncing the regime and calling for its removal, and yet on 10 February, it announced that it would partake in another round of talks with the administration (Pargeter 2013). Meanwhile, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) convened a meeting and issued a statement supporting the people’s demands. Having lost the backing of the armed forces, Mubarak addressed the public one last time and promised additional reforms (Wickham 2013). However, the protests persisted and by nightfall on 11 February Mubarak had tendered his resignation. In a move that would have considerable bearing on Egypt’s political trajectory following Mubarak’s removal, the SCAF appointed itself to oversee the transitional period. It suspended the constitution, dissolved parliament, and amended the electoral laws to permit the establishment of new political parties (Tavana 2011).

Clearly, then, the MB was neither a forerunner nor even an unequivocal supporter of the 25 January Egyptian uprisings. It initially remained detached from the protests, and although it eventually joined the demonstrations in Tahrir Square, the movement continued to prioritize its own self-preservation throughout the 18 days of civil unrest.
When Mubarak stepped down, the MB celebrated the success of the uprisings, but it continued to affirm that it did not seek to dominate the political sphere during the post-Mubarak era. The MB had to decide how best to proceed in a new political context characterized by great promise, prospects and possibilities – and an unprecedented level of uncertainty. In much the same way that it had previously courted the regime in times of convenience, the MB initially viewed cooperation with the SCAF as the most promising road forward. Following the SCAF’s revision of the electoral laws, the MB announced its intention to form a political party and to contest a portion of the seats in parliament (Farag 2012). The time had come for the MB to commit itself to electoral politics.

**Political commitment: the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP)**

The first and most significant indication of the MB’s newfound commitment to politics was the formation of a political party and the internal restructuring that accompanied this endeavour. Under semi-authoritarian rule, the MB’s pursuit of a broad range of activities – both political and non-political in nature – occurred partly out of necessity, as the movement adapted and responded to the successive iterations of relative accommodation and subsequent clampdowns that characterized the former regimes (Brown 2012a). However, this commitment to a diversity of pursuits also reflected a longstanding and deliberate decision by the MB not to favour political endeavours at the expense of other forms of social engagement. In particular, the notion of ‘partyism’ had been treated with suspicion by the movement’s founder Al-Banna, who viewed partisanship as a great source of potential divisions (Wickham 2013). Given its historical aversion to partyism, the MB’s decision to establish its own political party and formally to enter the sphere of partisan politics, following the 2011 uprisings, presents an interesting case for analysis.

Within two weeks of Mubarak’s departure, the MB had announced its intention to form a political party. With the electoral laws amended, the MB was able to fulfil the requirements for establishing a party, and the FJP was granted legal status on 6 June 2011 (Wickham 2013). As Hamid (2014) observes, the formation of a political party has consequences. In principle, it implies a distinction between two separate entities: an Islamist social movement concerned with its own survival and a partisan grouping fuelled by political imperatives. Whereas the MB, as a religious social movement, enforced strict membership procedures, the FJP, as a ‘civil party with an Islamic reference’, was open to anyone who supported its agenda. In practice, roughly 80% of the party’s nearly 9000 founding members were affiliated with the MB, effectively blurring the boundaries between the two entities (Wickham 2013). Overall, the extent to which the FJP operated independently from its founding movement appeared to be limited. Initially, Supreme Guide Mohammed Badie bypassed consultation and directly appointed experienced MP Mohammed Sa’ad Al-Katani to oversee the creation of the party. Specific leadership positions within the FJP were then allocated by the MB’s Shura Council, rather than determined through internal party elections. Although members such as Morsi and Al-Katani, appointed party president and secretary-general respectively, resigned from the Guidance Bureau before taking their new positions within the party, strong linkages between the movement and its party remained (Wickham 2013).

While the MB retained a significant degree of influence over the ostensibly autonomous FJP, the founding of a political party also had a considerable impact on the structural cohesion of the social movement. Not all within the MB supported the elevation of
politics within the movement; some objected on different grounds. The reformist Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh protested against the creation of the party in principle, arguing that the MB should confine its social activism to the sphere of civil society. (Interestingly, Aboul Fotouh was later expelled from the MB for his decision to contest the presidency.) Other reformists objected to the manner in which the party was situated in relation to the movement and questioned the extent to which the FJP would be independent of the MB (Wickham 2013). The fact that a large majority of the FJP’s membership was derived directly from the movement underscored the degree of continuity. Moreover, the ruling that members of the movement were forbidden from joining other political parties reinforced the perception that the FJP was merely a political reflection of the MB. The MB wrote the FJP’s platform and ratified its bylaws, and the FJP made decisions in consultation with the MB, thereby undermining its claim to autonomy (Pargeter 2013). Perhaps most significantly from the standpoint of the MB, the existence of the FJP ensured that a significant portion of the movement’s resources and agenda were devoted to the political domain, straining the movement’s internal cohesion in the process.

As Brown (2012a) has observed, Islamist movements modelled on the MB rarely split, but when they do it tends to be over issues of politics and organization, rather than due to ideological differences. Indeed, this was not the first time that politically motivated tensions had surfaced within the MB. In 1996, a reformist splinter group led by Aboul Ela Madi seceded from the MB in order to form the centrist Wasat Party. Insofar as the internal workings of the MB are concerned, a major outcome of this schism was the dilution of the reformist trend among the MB’s remaining membership. During the first decade of the 2000s, the reformist trend within the MB remained weak, and the old guard retained the balance of power. Internal elections held between 2008 and 2010 were hindered by the repressive political climate and ultimately reaffirmed the supremacy of the old guard (Wickham 2013). Under repressive regimes, organizational tendencies that emphasized discipline and obedience could be more easily justified, and the MB’s diverse membership had typically united in collective opposition to the ruling political order (Al-Awadi 2013). Following the 2011 uprisings, the external political situation improved, but internally the MB’s conservative and hierarchical qualities endured. More reformists defected from the MB to create their own political parties, including the Egyptian Current Party (Farag 2012). Once again, the reformist trend within the MB declined and senior leaders retained their positions of authority within the movement and the party.

Additional organizational implications resulted from the MB’s decision to commit to and prioritize political participation during Egypt’s political opening. Since its inception, the Islamist movement had operated as a force of resistance against the prevailing order. Though it renounced violence at an early stage, it consistently positioned itself in opposition to (though not in direct confrontation with) the successive Egyptian regimes. Even as it participated in semi-authoritarian elections, the MB strongly resented the systemic biases that precluded its success (Brown 2012a). As a direct result of the repressive political context in which it evolved, much of the MB’s popular support was rooted in contesting the status quo. In contrast, the MB’s commitment to mainstream politics, after Mubarak’s ousting, necessarily reoriented its stance toward the political sphere. Where the movement had formerly been a pillar of resistance against the previous political order, the newly legalized FJP now sought an influential role within the emerging political system (Farag 2012). Also reflecting its newfound legality in a freer political climate, the movement came under pressure to replace its longstanding culture of
secrecy with a level of organizational transparency that was conducive to a more open political environment (Al-Awadi 2013). From within as from without, committing to politics and forming a political party reshaped the MB’s internal structure.

**Ambition: the FJP and the quest for electoral victory**

After the 2011 uprisings ousted former president Mubarak from power, the MB committed to politics because it believed that success would be possible in the emerging political system. However, to state that the MB worked within the bounds of the system is somewhat ambiguous, given that the system itself was undergoing a transition, and the balance of power between the military, judiciary and future elected officials was in flux. The SCAF had tasked itself with overseeing the transition process and was due to transfer power to a civilian government within six months, a commitment that ultimately remained unfulfilled. Initially, the MB signalled its political engagement by cooperating with the SCAF, not least because it understood that any successful transition would require the support of the military (Wickham 2013). Although this tenuous alliance deteriorated in the months that followed, as the SCAF increasingly embodied an extension of the former regime, the MB continued to adhere to the timeline and provisions of the transitional period. When the SCAF or judiciary issued rulings that compromised the MB’s interests, the movement nonetheless complied and continued to operate within the legal structure.

The MB had two goals when it entered mainstream Egyptian politics. First, it wanted to secure a legitimate position of influence for the FJP within the new political order. Though certainly ambitious, this objective should not be misconstrued as an attempt to dominate the political scene. The MB reassured Egyptians that it would not seek a majority in parliament, and it would not field a presidential candidate (Pargetter 2013). The MB claimed it was content to hold back and allow other sectors of society time to organize, before competing with them on more egalitarian terms (Hamid 2014). In part, this approach can be understood as a function of lingering self-restraint carried over from the era of semi-authoritarian repression. The post-Mubarak political climate remained highly uncertain and the MB feared the repercussions of over-investing. However, the decision to proceed, albeit with caution, also reflected the MB’s second objective upon committing to politics. Having endured decades of demonization by successive Egyptian regimes, the MB wanted to prove to Egyptians and international stakeholders that it was a moderate and responsible political entity. In an early gesture of good faith, the MB substantiated its commitment to inclusiveness by forming a cross-partisan electoral coalition with a diverse array of political groups, including the liberal Wafd and leftist Karama (Wickham 2013). Although many parties subsequently defected from this Democratic Alliance for fear of being overshadowed by Islamists, it reflects, nonetheless, the MB’s attempts at cross-ideological cooperation. As the MB continued its political pursuits, its self-restraint incrementally gave way to growing political ambition.

In March 2011, the MB seized an important opportunity extended by the SCAF for one of its members, legal expert Sobhi Saleh, to participate in the committee that would generate recommendations for amending the constitution (Pargetter 2013). The committee’s recommendations would guide the course of Egypt’s transition, and the MB’s inclusion in this project enabled it to influence two important issues. First, the movement could influence the timing of the constitutional rewriting in relation to the elections. Despite more benevolent earlier assertions, the MB supported the position that
elections should be held first and the constitution amended later, as the movement would be in a stronger position initially than if other political groups were given time to organize. Secondly, the movement could influence the manner in which the new constitution was drafted. The MB sought strong governmental oversight, according to which the parliament would elect a 100-person committee responsible for drafting the new constitution (Pargeter 2013). Having secured these two elements in the recommendations, the MB campaigned hard to have the principles approved by public referendum. Members framed a ‘yes’ vote as a vote for Islam, eliciting criticism that it was exploiting religion for its own purposes. In fact, this was the MB’s first display of partisanship. As a political entity with an Islamic frame of reference, the FJP was motivated to advance its partisan interests. When the referendum passed with 77% in favour, divisions between Islamists and secularists came to the fore (Pargeter 2013). This was the first major indication of the extent to which Egyptian society had fragmented since the strong display of unity in Tahrir Square. Leftists and liberals distrusted Islamists, and although they had high hopes for a democratic transition, their confidence in the system was limited.

As the parliamentary campaign got underway, the MB again adjusted its vision. It initially stated that the FJP would not contest more than one-third of the seats. Interestingly, this was the threshold that the MB had adhered to during semi-authoritarian elections, as a stronger showing would have granted the movement an element of authority in the form of veto power over the government’s constitutional amendments (Brown 2012b). Extending its reach, but still not seeking a majority, the MB increased the number of seats it would contest to 50%. Meanwhile, one of the demands of leftist and liberal groups was to reform the electoral laws so that candidates were elected according to a party list system, rather than as individuals. This would require parties to clarify their platforms and was intended to reduce both vote buying and personalism. The MB was poised to perform well in any elections and so, in a show of good faith toward the other sectors of society, it endorsed the new electoral law (Wickham 2013). However, the adoption of an electoral system in which two-thirds of the seats would be elected through a party list caused the MB to rethink its strategy, and it decided to contest a majority of seats after all. The FJP justified this turn of events by arguing that, in the context of the new electoral system, many of its candidates were positioned near the bottom of party lists and were unlikely to receive many votes. Accordingly, despite bold outward appearances, the Democratic Alliance, which had by now lost many of its prominent cross-partisan members, was not likely to secure more than 40% of seats in parliament (Pargeter 2013). As it turned out, the MB’s estimate was remarkably accurate.

Although the FJP sought an increasingly prominent role for itself in Egypt’s new government, its dedication to the democratic transition remained steadfast. For its part, the SCAF began to display self-interested motives as it interfered more heavily in the transition process. In October 2011, the SCAF-appointed interim government introduced a series of supra-constitutional principles. Informally dubbed the Al-Selmi document, this document was designed to protect liberal rights against infringement by Islamists (Moustafa 2012). It also served military interests by ensuring the armed forces’ continued role in the coming political order (Hamid 2014). Viewing the declaration as an affront to their political aspirations, the MB and other Islamist groups took to the streets in protest. The situation escalated when the Salafis remained in Tahrir Square, chanting religious slogans and provoking the already fractious secular–Islamist divide in Egyptian society. At this point, in a clear testament of its...
commitment to the political process, the MB emphasized the need to consolidate Egypt’s democracy through parliamentary rather than revolutionary means (Hamid 2014). To some extent, the MB’s calls to take the transition off the streets and into the institutions reflected its traditional non-revolutionary ethos. However, the MB was more concerned that civil unrest would delay the electoral process and prolong military rule. In practice, the administration repealed the new principles and voting went ahead as scheduled. Despite the foregoing civil unrest and threats of boycott by some liberal parties, Egypt’s parliamentary elections proceeded in a peaceful and organized manner. The FJP’s Democratic Alliance won more than one-third of the total votes, earning it 43% of seats. The Salafis’ Islamic Alliance won an impressive 25% of seats, giving Islamists a strong majority in parliament and unsettling the defeated liberals and leftists (Wickham 2013).

Having secured a clear parliamentary victory in Egypt’s first free and fair elections, the FJP was eager to begin exercising its popular mandate. However, the Islamist-dominated parliament soon confronted a series of barriers from the secular opposition, the judiciary and the military. The FJP and Salafi Nour Party collaborated in appointing the 100 members of the Constituent Assembly (CA) that would draft the new constitution. Along with 50 members chosen from within parliament, the CA’s composition included external legal experts and civil society representatives (Wickham 2013). Secularists complained that two-thirds of the CA were Islamists and that minority groups, such as women and Copts, were underrepresented. The FJP defended the Islamist majority in the CA by the fact that it reflected numerically the Islamist representation in the current parliament. While this stance was arguably uncharitable toward other sectors of society, it was consistent with the principles of majoritarian democratic representation. A quarter of the CA members boycotted the first meeting, while a group of activist legal experts led a complaint with the Higher Administrative Court (HAC) (Wickham 2013). The CA was ultimately disbanded on the basis that some parliamentarians had self-selected for membership (Awad 2013). Meanwhile, the elected parliament found its authority increasingly undermined by the SCAF, which denied the FJP the right to form a new government, arguing that this responsibility was reserved for the president. The MB chose the only recourse that would enable it to govern effectively within the existing system: it reneged on its earlier promise and entered the presidential race (Pargeter 2013).

That the MB had never intended to field a presidential candidate is evidenced by the divisions that this decision provoked within the movement. Only upon finding itself unable to govern did the FJP set its sights on the position of executive authority. Initially the party searched, without success, for an external candidate to endorse. The MB then referred the question of contesting the presidency to the Shura Council, where it was approved by a narrow margin of 56 to 52 (Wickham 2013). Hamid (2014) argues that the MB’s stakes in the presidential elections were twofold. The obvious motive was to secure the party’s capacity to govern and keep the increasingly intrusive SCAF in check. Secondly, the movement was concerned with maintaining its own internal cohesion. Aboul Fotouh, a reformist and former member of the MB, was running for president and the movement’s leaders feared a rift in the MB if he emerged triumphant. This prospect was particularly threatening because it would disprove the supposition that Islamist success could only be achieved from within the MB’s institutional framework (Hamid 2014). Evidently, the implications of not running for president were deemed more ominous than those caused by the very decision to run. In addition to Aboul Fotouh, Hazem Salah Abu Ismail, a former member turned Salafi, emerged as
another presidential contender. The MB questioned the merits of remaining on the sidelines if a more conservative Islamist might come to power instead. Weighing all these considerations, it decided to enlist a candidate (Hamid 2014).

The FJP’s candidate of choice was Khayrat Al-Shater, an influential businessman and prominent figure within the movement’s financial networks. He had become a leader in the MB’s Renaissance Project, an Islamically sanctioned programme of political, economic and social reform (Wickham 2013). As the presidential campaign progressed, the FJP faced two significant setbacks. First, a ruling issued by the Presidential Election Commission (PEC) disqualified Al-Shater based on criminal charges he had incurred during the Mubarak era. (The Salafi candidate Abu Ismail was also disqualified.) While the eligibility of Ahmed Shafiq, a loyalist to the former regime, was also disputed, his standing in the campaign was ultimately restored. Although the MB resented these decisions, it remained committed to the electoral process and registered its second choice candidate, Mohammed Morsi. Morsi possessed extensive parliamentary experience, but he lacked Al-Shater’s charisma. Nevertheless, owing to the MB’s strong organizational backing, Morsi advanced to the second runoff against Shafiq (Al-Awadi 2013). Two days before the polls were scheduled to open, the Supreme Constitutional Court (SCC) invalidated one-third of the lower parliamentary seats reserved for independent candidates, charging that FJP members had contested them as well. The SCAF then dissolved the entire lower parliament and assumed legislative authority (Wickham 2013). The runoff thus took place in the absence of an elected legislative parliament, a constitution or checks on the PEC’s authority. The MB vigilantly observed every presidential polling station and independently tabulated the votes. On 24 June 2012, having secured 51.7% of the vote, Morsi was declared Egypt’s first democratically elected president (Wickham 2013).

Assertiveness: Morsi and the task of governance

Although Morsi had won the presidential race, albeit by a narrow margin, in practice his capacity to govern was constrained by a series of crippling military decrees and judicial rulings. Consequently, the MB’s increased political assertiveness during Egypt’s post-election period must be understood in the context of intrusive institutional continuities with the former regime that sought to undermine its governmental authority. The SCAF was unwilling to relinquish its privileged position in society, and the balance of power between the elected and non-elected institutions had assumed a zero-sum dynamic (Tabaar 2013). Whereas under semi-authoritarianism, the MB had responded to repression by conceding, the movement now countered these constraints with determination. Morsi assumed his role as president on 30 June 2012, having begrudgingly taken his oath before the SCC, in the absence of the recently dissolved legislative parliament (Wickham 2013). Having been stripped of lower parliamentary representation, the FJP invoked Morsi’s executive powers as the only remaining means to assert its right to govern. During the ensuing months, Morsi issued several bold presidential decrees that were intended to promote stability and prevent the non-elected institutions from overreaching. Although the president’s actions were controversial, the objective was never to undermine the democratic transition (Fadel 2014). The MB remained committed to politics and exercised its political influence, to the extent possible, by working within the parameters of the transitional system.

On 8 July, after a single week in power, President Morsi reinstated the dissolved legislative parliament. The judicial establishment sharply criticized this move and
issued a written statement ordering the immediate cancellation of Morsi’s decree. During a brief parliamentary session held on 10 July, which many secularists boycotted, Speaker of the House Al-Katani declared that the status of parliament would be reviewed for appeal by the Court of Cassation (Wickham 2013). While the MB’s legal experts did not contest the SCC’s ruling in principle, they questioned the manner in which it had been implemented. They reasoned that since only one-third of parliamentary seats had been nullified, the dissolution of the entire legislative parliament was unwarranted. The MB’s objective was never to overturn the judiciary’s decision, but rather to re-evaluate the SCAF’s application of this legal ruling. Meanwhile, in the absence of an overarching constitution, influential figures within the state establishment elevated the SCC to a position of supra-constitutional authority (Wickham 2013). The SCC’s increasingly authoritarian tendencies during Egypt’s political opening marked a notable departure from its relatively independent and progressive stance during the foregoing Mubarak era (Moustafa 2007). In the context of the present political crisis, the SCC invoked its binding authority and demanded the dissolution of the parliament for the second time. Morsi acquiesced, and Al-Katani promised that there would be no more unauthorized parliamentary meetings (Wickham 2013). However, a crucial point overlooked by critics who frame Morsi’s 8 July ruling as an act of insubordination to the legal establishment is the fact that its stipulations clearly uphold the core tenets of the SCC’s ruling. Rather than seeking permanently to reinstate the former legislative parliament, Morsi called for new parliamentary elections to be held within 60 days of approving the constitution (Wickham 2013).

One month after his confrontation with the SCC, in the context of an attack on border control officers near Rafah, Morsi moved against the armed forces. The Rafah security incident provoked a heated disagreement between the president and the military leadership, with the latter calling for a state of emergency to be implemented in the Sinai Peninsula, a measure Morsi deemed excessive. Amid rising tensions, Morsi seized the occasion to undercut the military and consolidate his presidential authority (Ozhan 2013). On 12 August, he announced the retirement of numerous senior military figures, including Minister of Defense Mohammed Hussein Tantawi, Chief of Staff Sami Anan, and the leaders of the Army, Navy and Air Force, all of whom were replaced by younger officers. Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi replaced Tantawi as Minister of Defense. Morsi also reclaimed the executive powers that the SCAF had appropriated for itself upon dissolving the elected parliament in June (Frisch 2013). Morsi’s efforts to subordinate the military to civilian rule were supported by many revolutionaries. In addition to Islamist proponents, many youth elements, leftists and liberals responded favourably, although the latter expressed concerns over the incremental ‘Brotherization’ of the state (Awad 2013). Conversely, oppositionists decried Morsi’s actions as means to secure dictatorial powers. Wickham (2013) argues that both interpretations overlook an important factor, which is that the displacement of the former military leadership appeared to have been negotiated with – and endorsed by – a subset of influential figures within the military itself, namely those who opposed Tantawi’s confrontational stance against the president. Accordingly, Morsi’s reshuffling of military personnel represented less of a unilateral imposition of presidential will and more of a coordinated leadership reassignment.

On 22 November, Morsi made his boldest move since taking office. He issued a presidential decree exempting both his decisions and the drafting of the constitution from judicial oversight (Brown 2013). Critics charged that the president’s assumption of absolute authority subverted the separation of powers and severely undermined the
democratic process (Ozhan 2013). However, Fadel (2014) argues that Morsi ‘acted in accordance with his responsibilities as the only democratically accountable official in the country’ (14). During the preceding weeks, the second appointed CA tasked with drafting the new constitution reached an impasse, with secularists and Islamists bitterly divided over the appropriate role of religion in society. In the context of escalating opposition, Morsi had legitimate reasons to fear that the SCC would dissolve the CA a second time, effectively reversing much of the transitional process. The president, therefore, acted pre-emptively to ensure the timely completion of the constitution (Brown 2013). Far from steering the country toward an authoritarian outcome, Morsi acted in the interests of enshrining a more inclusive and pluralistic political system. Fadel (2014) argues that despite the enduring controversy over the matter of religion, the new Egyptian constitution had a meaningful effect. It expanded political rights, decreased the power of the president, and increased the relative strength of the prime minister and parliament, thereby supporting a more open political configuration. Moreover, Morsi’s controversial decree was invoked as a temporary measure to preserve the CA, and, as such, it was never intended to be sustained. Once the president had approved the draft constitution, the decree was duly reversed on 8 December (Ozhan 2013). A public referendum over the constitution took place during the third week of December, and despite a low voter turnout, the new constitution was approved and implemented (Brown 2013).

Morsi had reaffirmed his commitment to the political process by using his 22 November presidential decree for the sole purpose of finalizing the stalled constitution, and by promptly lifting the restrictions on the judicial establishment, once the CA had fulfilled its duty. With the constitution endorsed by a majority of voters, elections for the new legislative parliament were slated to be held in the spring of 2013. At this point, the newly re-empowered judiciary forcefully reasserted itself against Morsi’s authority (Azzam 2013). The newly ratified constitution had weakened the judicial establishment by reducing the number of SCC justices and by placing greater restrictions on the SCC’s capacity to intervene in electoral proceedings (Lang 2013). The new constitution further delimited the judiciary’s sphere of influence by allocating the power to define individual rights to the political institutions, rather than to the SCC (Fadel 2014). The judiciary clearly resented having its status and authority circumscribed, and its persistence as an authoritarian enclave produced a sharp narrowing of Egypt’s political opening. The Supreme Administrative Court (SAC) overturned Morsi’s 8 July decree that had called for legislative parliamentary elections to be held within 60 days of approving the new constitution (Azzam 2013). As a result, the president continued to govern without a lower parliament, in a political environment increasingly dominated by non-elected institutions.

In this context, Egypt’s already tenuous security situation deteriorated further. In February, riots erupted in Port Said after state security failed to contain football hooliganism, resulting in nearly 80 deaths. The rioting resumed when the courts convicted 21 participants of murder, but only charged two police officers with negligence. Minister of Defense Al-Sisi cautioned that ongoing public disorder could destabilize the state, a warning that some interpreted to mean that the military was planning a coup against the Islamist government (Azzam 2013). The polarization of Egyptian society between Islamists and secularists intensified during the ensuing months, and oppositionists established cross-partisan groups including the National Salvation Front (NSF), a political alliance, and Tamarod (‘Rebellion’), a grassroots movement (Housden 2013). On 30 June, the one-year anniversary of Morsi’s presidential
inauguration, millions of protestors rallied in the streets, demanding his departure from office. The following day, Al-Sisi issued an ultimatum: Morsi had 48 hours to restore public order, or the military would intervene. The protests continued, and on 3 July the military followed through on its provision (Tabaar 2013). Oppositionists succeeded in their efforts to overthrow the president largely because their objectives coincided with elite interests among the military establishment (Housden 2013). The SCAF was concerned with preserving its status against the implementation of civilian rule. In a twist of irony, Minister of Defense Al-Sisi, the man Morsi had handpicked to replace his military adversary, Tantawi, became the man who toppled Morsi and eventually took his place as Egypt’s president.

Conclusions: when political commitment is not enough

Two key points emerge from the MB’s short-lived experience of governance in post-Mubarak Egypt. The first, as has been argued above, is that the movement fully committed to politics and devoted significant resources to this endeavour during Egypt’s political opening. Despite the many difficulties it encountered during the 2011–13 period, and even as structural continuities endured and the political space began to close again, the MB never once reneged on its commitment to working within the system. The second observation, which the 30 June 2013 protests and ensuing military coup rendered all too clear, is that political engagement, while necessary, is not sufficient to ensure success. This is particularly evident in unstable, unconsolidated democratic transitions, where many political parties are inexperienced and the rules of political participation are not well established (Schwedler 2013). During Egypt’s political opening, both the military and the judiciary demonstrated a capacity to intervene in Egypt’s transition in ways that significantly obstructed the democratic process (Ozhan 2013). As such, an assessment of the extent to which MB’s political strategies served to protect or weaken Egypt’s transition to democracy must necessarily take into consideration the broader political context. The analysis here reveals that the FJP remained committed to the political process, but was unable to overcome the institutional barriers that worked to prevent the establishment of a democratic system of governance in Egypt.

As an Islamist party governing for the first time, during a highly uncertain period of political transition, the FJP faced several compelling challenges. One significant challenge was to pursue the party’s partisan agenda without marginalizing the other sectors of Egyptian society (Wickham 2013). The FJP was elected on an Islamist platform, and accordingly, from a strictly majoritarian standpoint, it had the mandate to advance its political programme. However, given Morsi’s narrow presidential victory, it was clear that he was presiding over a deeply divided nation. Efforts effectively to rebuild an inclusive Egyptian society would require cooperation and concessions across all sectors of society (Fadel 2014). At times, the approach taken by the FJP perpetuated distrust among the non-Islamist sectors of society, undermining their confidence in the legitimacy of the democratic process and leading oppositionists to voice their discontent in the streets rather than through institutional means. Nevertheless, the MB cannot be held singularly responsible for the deterioration of relations between the Islamist government and the predominantly secular opposition. Beginning with the initial appointment of a committee tasked with devising recommendations for amending the constitution, actions taken by the
military often served to entrench and exacerbate the Islamist–secular divide in Egyptian society (Faris 2013).

A second challenge facing Morsi and the FJP concerned the execution of mundane governmental tasks, such as developing the economy and providing security in the emerging political system. Upon taking office, Morsi launched a 100 Day Plan intended to produce improvements in the areas of bread, fuel, traffic congestion, waste collection and security. Though ambitious, this programme lacked the longer time horizon needed to generate sustained and meaningful progress (Wickham 2013). Al-Awadi (2013) argues that Morsi’s inheritance of a struggling economy does not absolve him of responsibility for its further deterioration under his rule. The issue of state security is more complex, since critics of Morsi’s failure to reform the security sector clearly underestimated the military’s immunity to Morsi’s efforts (Fadel 2014). As such, a third noteworthy challenge facing Morsi and the FJP was to defend against the encroachment of institutional remnants of the former regime that sought to forestall a successful transition (Wickham 2013).

Thus, despite a sustained commitment to the political process, the MB’s experience of governance ended in failure. Since July 2013, the movement has been subjected to the highest level of state repression since the 1960s. In the aftermath of Al-Sisi’s coup, the military appointed former SCC chief jurist Adly Mansour to the position of interim president. The military’s handpicked government also included economist Hazem El-Bablawi, who served as prime minister, and the secularist ElBaradei, who briefly served as vice president until he resigned a month later. Acting president Mansour issued a constitutional declaration that exempted the military’s decisions from civilian oversight (Faris 2013). Meanwhile, dozens of senior figures in the MB had charges filed against them. On 8 July and again on 28 July, peaceful protests organized by supporters of the MB were countered with heavy-handed repression by the armed forces. In one particularly brutal incident, on 14 August, the military unleashed violence against pro-Morsi demonstrators at Al-Nahda and Rabaa Al-Adawiya squares in Cairo, resulting in at least 635 deaths (Williams 2013). ElBaradei resigned from his post as interim vice president, citing an escalation in state violence that precluded the possibility of reconciliation between the divided sectors of Egyptian society (Al-Akhbar English, August 14, 2013). As the military continued its forceful crackdown largely with impunity, proponents and members of the MB were also subjected to litigation. In June 2014, the courts upheld death sentences for more than 180 affiliates of the Islamist movement, including deposed President Morsi and Supreme Guide Badie (Middle East Monitor, June 21, 2014).

One significant difference between the experience of the Egyptian MB and the trajectory of the Justice and Development Party (AKP)’s predecessor parties in Turkey concerns how the state responded to the Islamist movement once it had been removed from power. The Islamist Welfare Party won 22% of the vote in Turkey’s 1995 elections; six months later the party formed a coalition government and Necmettin Erbakan became Turkey’s first openly Islamist prime minister (Bonner 2009).
following year, Erbakan was forced to resign because the military viewed his religious policies as a threat to the secular nature of the state. Although democracy was quickly restored after the 1997 soft coup, measures were taken to limit the role of Islamists in society. The Welfare Party was disbanded, six former members were banned from political participation, and then-Istanbul Mayor Recep Tayyip Erdogan and three other Welfare activists were briefly incarcerated (Bonner 2009). However, Islamists in Turkey did not experience the harsh backlash that the Egyptian MB has endured since July 2013. Conversely, many members of the former Welfare Party were able to reorganize, and the reformist trend among them went on to form the AKP that later dominated Turkey’s 2002 elections. Thus, Islamists in Turkey had multiple opportunities to learn and develop new political strategies based on their experiences in government (Mecham 2004). Historically, the MB has proven highly skilled at adapting in response to political constraints. The Turkish case suggests that the greatest barrier to the MB’s political learning curve is not the presence of a powerful and privileged military in principle, but the specific recourse of a harsh repression that has denied the MB future opportunities to participate in political life.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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