



## **Egypt, The Muslim Brotherhood at a Crossroad**

**Paolo Gonzaga** 23 September 2015

This is certainly not the first time the Brotherhood has had to reinvent itself. A first re-founding of the Muslim Brotherhood took place after the death of its charismatic founder, Hasan Al Banna, in 1947. On that occasion the Brotherhood remained without a General Guide – the highest office in a pyramidal organisation – until 1951, when Hasan Al Hudeybi was elected. This marked the beginning of a new phase that culminated in the hanging of Sayyd Qutb in 1966, following Nasser’s repression and the birth of the first jihadist groups.

Once again, the Brotherhood seemed almost on the verge of vanishing, overwhelmed by the radicalism of Qutb’s ideas, but instead it was reborn thanks to an openness to Sadat and the wise organisation of the famous Guide, Sheikh Omar al Tilmisani, who rebuilt the Brotherhood relying on new generations emerging from universities. Finally, following the assassination of Sadat a new repressive wave targeted the Brotherhood, which managed to achieve a degree of equilibrium only under Mubarak in the mid-eighties. This was based on the Brotherhood’s commitment to not become involved in politics and devote itself to social issues, which also suited the *Ra’is* who, with his neo-liberal economic policies, was dismantling the welfare system.

Later on, the so-called Arab Spring took the organisation to power for a year, with a conservative leadership that had only just expelled reformist elements. Morsi became president, but this experience turned out to be a disaster with the Brotherhood losing the support of the

majority of Egyptians and Egypt returning to the firm rule of the army. Al Sissi now governs with an iron fist and the Brotherhood is experiencing serious problems.

The Brotherhood's leadership had wagered on the coup d'état only lasting for a short period of time and therefore maintained a hard line, not acknowledging the legitimacy of the new authorities and rejecting proposals for compromise and reconciliation presented by the new government. The Brotherhood thus boycotted the referendum on the new constitution as well as the presidential elections, and did not even change its attitude when President El Sissi acquired international legitimacy thanks to *realpolitik*. The Brotherhood's leadership, either in prison or in exile, relied on street protests and a revolutionary approach that has resulted in a head on clash with the regime.

The most serious problem faced by the Muslim Brotherhood, with this renewed and extremely harsh repression, is probably the old leadership's loss of authority, due to the fact that the vast majority are in prison and in isolation under exceedingly harsh conditions. Those who are free and living abroad are suffering from the lack of an authoritative leader. This has resulted in the upper hand being gained by a base that increasingly speaks in radical terms and is not prepared to reach any kind of compromise after the blood shed by their brothers during the past two years of protests which were dispersed with bullets and arrests.

The organisation of the Brotherhood has been obliged to acknowledge these changed circumstances. Internal elections were held in February 2014, the outcome of which was not made public for security reasons. A committee was formed to manage this crisis and an administrative office set up abroad to manage the Muslim Brotherhood's affairs headed by Ahmed Abdel-Rahman, a middle-aged leader from the base. Press releases have stated that while the Supreme Guide, the *Murshid*, is still the qutbist Badi'e – in prison and given many life and death sentences – many of the positions in the Brotherhood's presidency offices, the *Maktab al Irshad*, and in new managerial groups, are now occupied by

the young, representing the new generation of *Raba'a*, which has become a sort of Sunni Korbala in the new Egyptian Islamist collective imagination.

The extremely violent clearing of *Raba'a al Adawiyya* Square, with almost a thousand killed and many wounded, marked a point of no return. If nowadays the younger members of the Brotherhood reach the point of questioning the leadership regards to the means to be used against an “oppressive state”, theorising a “lightly” armed struggle using bombs and targeted murders, it is precisely because the rhetoric of the “Raba'a martyrdom” has become predominant among the young. They are rediscovering jihad against the “unjust oppressor” – typical of jihadist rhetoric – and no longer dream of a secular and peaceful revolution, but an Islamic and armed one.

The old leadership appears to hesitate when faced with the positions assumed by the young, to a certain extent because of a lack of means and a little because this leadership is now opposed by a base rejecting their direction in every possible sense. Furthermore, with the current repression, nowadays the organisation no longer has its traditional pyramidal structure, but has instead been transformed into a sort of “network-like” organisation.

The new leadership is young, inexperienced and radicalised, and has enormously strengthened its links with the anti-system Salafists, so much so that the base now increasingly less perceives such distinctions. In recent communiqués and in the rhetoric of private television stations linked to the Brotherhood, especially in Turkey, El Sissi is called *taghut*, an oppressor to be removed in the Islamic sense. Accusations of apostasy are continuous, as is the call to *jihad*, a very violent rhetoric and one that is rather unusual in the Brotherhood.

This radical change is very dangerous for the Muslim Brotherhood and the older members are fully aware of this, remembering the teachings of Hasan al Banna, who did not exclude violence on principle, but warned people against practicing it when power relations are unbalanced,

threatening that this might even “lead the Brotherhood to extinction.” The conflict between the two souls of the Brotherhood continues, although time does not appear to be on the side of those in favour of the peaceful solution due to the continuous intensification of the government’s repression.

*Translated by Francesca Simmons*