

The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (MB) officially registered a week ago for the formation of a new political wing, paving the way for the establishment of the Freedom and Justice Party. With parliamentary elections scheduled in September, Freedom and Justice is expected to do well at the first polls of the post-Mubarak era. Just how well is the main question on the minds of the country's ruling military council, which would prefer to hand off the day-to-day responsibilities of governing Egypt, while holding onto real power behind the scenes.

Leading MB official Saad al-Katatny, one of the founders of Freedom and Justice, said he hopes for the party to officially begin its activities June 17, and to begin selecting its executive authority and top leaders one month later. Members of Egypt's Political Parties Affairs Committee will convene Sunday to discuss the application and will announce their decision the next day. They are expected to approve the request. Three and a half months after the fall of Hosni Mubarak, Egypt's leading Islamist group is on the verge of forming an official political party for the first time in its history

Following Mubarak's ousting, MB wasted little time in seizing what it saw as the group's historical moment to enter Egypt's political mainstream. They announced plans to form a political party on Feb. 14. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), which took over administration of the country following the deposal of Mubarak, did nothing to hinder this development, despite the military's deep antipathy toward Islamist groups. Political instability was (and is) rampant in the country, and the military sought to find a balance that would allow it to maintain control while appearing amenable to the people's demands, and bring life back to normal. Opening up political space to Islamist groups, including at least two emerging Salafist parties, and announcing plans for fairly rapid elections, was seen by the military as the most effective way to achieve this balance.

It bears repeating

that what happened in Egypt in January and February did not constitute a revolution. There was no regime change; there was regime preservation, through a carefully orchestrated military coup that used the 19 days of popular demonstrations against Mubarak as a smokescreen for achieving its objective. Though a system of one-party rule existed from the aftermath of the 1967 War until Feb. 11 of this year, true power in Egypt since 1952 has been with the military and that did not change with the ouster of Mubarak. What changed was that for the first time since the 1960s, Egypt's military found itself not just ruling, but actually governing, despite the existence of an interim government (which the SCAF itself appointed).

The SCAF wants to get back to ruling and give up the job of governing, but it knows that there

has been a sea change in Egypt's political environment that prevents a return to the way things were done under Mubarak. The days of single-party rule are over. If the military wants stability, it is going to have to accept a true multiparty political system, one that allows for a broad spectrum of participation from all corners of Egyptian society. The generals can maintain control of the regime, but the day-to-day affairs of governance will fall under the control of coalition governments that could never have existed in the old Egypt.

This opens the door for MB to gain more political power than it has ever held and explains why its leaders were so quick to announce their plans for the formation of Freedom and Justice in February. But the group has tempered eagerness with caution. MB is aware of its reputation in the eyes of the SCAF (and the outside world, for that matter) and is playing a shrewd game to dispel its image as an extremist Islamist group. It has been publicly supportive of the SCAF on a number of occasions, and has marketed Freedom and Justice as a non-Islamist party — it includes women and one of its founders is a Copt — based on Islamic principles. MB has also insisted that the new party will have no actual ties to the Brotherhood itself (though this is clearly not the case), while promising that it will not field a presidential candidate in polls due to take place six weeks following the parliamentary elections. In addition, MB has pledged to run for no more than 49 percent of the available parliamentary seats. This is designed to reassure the SCAF that it does not immediately seek absolute political power.

Focusing on whether the SCAF is sincere in its publicly stated desire to transform Egypt into a democracy misses the more important point, which is that the military regime feels it has no choice but to move toward a multiparty political system. The alternatives — military dictatorship and single-party rule — are unfeasible. But there are red lines attached to the push toward political pluralism, and MB is aware of these. Trying to take too much, too quickly, will only incite a military crackdown on the political opening the armed forces have engineered in the last three months. As for the SCAF, it is willing to give Freedom and Justice a chance in the new Egypt, so long as the underlying reality of power remains the same.

"Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood on the March, but Cautiously

[[http://www.stratfor.com/geopolitical\\_diary/20110518-egyptian-muslim-brotherhood-march-cautiously?elq=41bf685e9f334935bf6e721294dd7f91](http://www.stratfor.com/geopolitical_diary/20110518-egyptian-muslim-brotherhood-march-cautiously?elq=41bf685e9f334935bf6e721294dd7f91)]

is republished with permission of STRATFOR."