

## Middle East Report by Thierry Lalevée

### Islamic fanatics rampage in Egypt

*The Muslim Brotherhood has flexed its muscles in Asyut, and a showdown with the government is inevitable.*

In recent months, the political and social life of the town of Asyut in Upper Egypt has been radically transformed. It is still officially ruled by a governor, newly appointed last April by the central government in Cairo, but the power of decision-making affecting the daily life of the inhabitants of the city, has gradually shifted into the hands of the Ikhwan al Muslimiin (Muslim Brotherhood). In early April, the Brotherhood launched what can be best described as a general assault on the town.

The pretext for the operation was given on April 10, when a member of the organization was wounded after a fight with two policemen. Shot in the head, Shabaan Rashed died four days later in a military hospital in a Cairo suburb.

What has happened since, has become the most important test of strength to date between the central government and the Brotherhood, which has always been active in the region. Hours after President Anwar Sadat's assassination in October 1981, the Brotherhood rampaged in Asyut with a violence unequaled elsewhere. More recently during the riots of Feb. 25, the Brotherhood of Asyut was again in the forefront. By taking over Asyut, the Brotherhood had interlocking aims:

- First, to prove that the Brotherhood is now powerful enough to impose its own "Islamic Ikhwan order" on an entire city. This could not be done in either Cairo or Alexandria, which are better protected, but this could happen in a city hundreds of

kilometers south of Cairo.

- Second, to make a mockery of the police forces. It must be kept in mind that the new interior minister, Major General Zaki Badr, was appointed last March because it was considered that, as governor of Asyut up to then, he had successfully crushed the Brotherhood.

- Third, to control a strategic location. For centuries, Asyut has been at the crossroads of routes linking Egypt to Sudan as well as to Libya through the Western Desert. These same routes are still used by arms and drug smugglers. The latest information indicates that Libya is running a lucrative cocaine-smuggling network into Egypt, via Asyut. Considering also that Asyut is one of the main centers of the Egyptian Coptic Christians, the success of the Brotherhood involves another level of religious warfare.

Following the death of Shaaban Rashed, the Islamic groups launched a successful operation to take control of the university. Through sheer terror, which included the physical beating of professors and students, they imposed separation between women and men, according to a rigid interpretation of Islamic law, and attacked any male daring to speak to a woman.

They went on to change the curriculum of the university, banning the teaching of certain scientific subjects, while imposing interruptions to lead the prayer. In the city itself, the same method was implemented toward shopkeepers, with similar results.

The "Tala' al Iman" (Vanguard of

the Faith), a fundamentalist organization led by the sons of one of the historical founders of the organization, Hassan al Banna, has become one of the top financial powers of the province. Operating according to Islamic principles and working with its own Islamic Bank, "Tala' al Iman" controls almost everything from real estate construction to food markets, housing, cement factories, and clothes shops.

- As investigations show, such a financial empire cannot be built only through local power. Money pours in from Islamic fanatics working in the Gulf, and according to some, directly from Iran and Libya, through some embassies in Europe, notably in Scandinavia. Hence, far from being local events, Asyut's troubles have become the focus of an international mobilization among Islamicists. The connection with Cairo is very active. In recent months, some 20,000 weapons disappeared in the military garrisons of the capital; most found their way to Asyut, reports *Le Monde*.

These events coincided with the illness and death of Omar el Telmesani, one of the last historic leaders of the Brotherhood, but somehow considered as "moderate." In the weeks before his death, the battle for the succession among younger and more radical Brothers who have come out of the local groups, the *Komitehs* and *Gamaat* of the mid-1970s, had already begun. It has since intensified. Meanwhile the Brotherhood has become

Faced with these events, in addition to many other economic problems, the central government has remained ominously powerless. However, as rumors spread in Cairo of an upcoming social explosion, a showdown between the government and the Brotherhood is now inevitable.