

Engagement, not Fear Needed with Egyptian President Mursi

Muslim Brotherhood candidate Muhammad Mursi wins the second round of Egypt's presidential elections



Egyptians celebrate the election victory of Muslim Brotherhood candidate Muhammad Mursi (Jonathan Rashad)

By: Cornelis Hulsman, Editor-in-Chief, *Arab West Report*, 25 June 2012

CAIRO, Egypt (AWR) – Muhammad Mursi was declared president Sunday after several days of uncertainty that resulted from a presidential election that exposed deep polarization in Egyptian society - those who favor an Islamist civilian president and oppose a member of the Mubarak regime were pitted against those who fear Islamists but were willing to vote for a member of the old order.

Muhammad Mursi received 51.7% of the vote. His rival Ahmed Shafiq received 48.3 %. Turnout in the June 16-17 poll was put at 51%. The counting was supervised by the Presidential Election Committee, which was certainly not dominated by Muslim Brothers. They had been looking into claims of fraud before announcing their decision. There is no doubt that the past parliamentary and presidential elections were the freest and most honest of all elections since 1952. This does not mean there was necessarily a complete absence of irregularities at some polling stations or at some stages during the election process. But they were nevertheless far better than previous elections.

The electoral standoff between the two parties was worsened by the fact that both received so close to the 50 percent. It would have been easier to conclude a winner if the differences between the two candidates had been larger.

With these results, it is now the first time Egypt will be headed by an Islamist, and the first time since 1952 that a freely elected civilian has come to power in the country. Mursi would not have been able to come to power without the support of a substantial number of Egyptian liberals. Liberal Lili Fayed wrote “Egyptians get Mubarak down for two times peacefully.” This is how many liberals viewed Shafiq, Mubarak’s last prime minister, who was unapologetic for Mubarak’s rule.

Reduced powers for the president

In the past days there have been backroom negotiations between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), who dissolved parliament two days before

the first round of the presidential elections and issued a new constitutional declaration giving the military far-ranging powers in executive decisions as well as the detainment of civilians. SCAF also takes responsibility for forming the constituent assembly that will draft a new constitution to describe the limits of power of both president and parliament. Mursi has been advocating a shift in power from the presidency to the parliament. It appears Egypt may indeed go into this direction since SCAF's new constitutional declaration shows little support for a strong presidency.

Dr. Osama Farid, a friend of Arab-West Report and well-connected to the Muslim Brotherhood leadership, wrote on June 20 after the new constitutional declaration had been issued that the Freedom and Justice Party, the political arm of the Brotherhood, “should not hesitate to accept the presidency” with these restrictions.

Is fear for an Islamist president justified?

Mursi's Freedom and Justice Party is widely feared among non-Islamists for wishing to transform Egypt into a strict Islamist state. Senior Brotherhood members have made several statements to attempt to allay this fear, but now they have to show more than statements.

In the Western media, comparisons have often been made with Iran, Algeria and Turkey.

Iran: Religious leaders have sidelined non-religious opponents in first three years after the overthrow of the Shah. Fear is expressed that Muslim Brothers could attempt to do the same in Egypt. I do not think that fear is justified. Unlike Iran, Egypt does not have an ayatollah caste. Ayatollahs do have more organization. Muslims pay their zakat to the ayatollah of own choice which gives them strength. Egypt does not have this.

Algeria: The main victor in the elections prior to the bloody Algerian civil war was the FIS, a salafi party. The civil war was between the Algerian army and Salafis. Muslim Brothers are no Salafis. They are more pragmatic and ready to compromise.

Turkey: Prime Minister Erdogan is an Islamist who had to seek a compromise with a strong and secularized Turkish army. Turkey is therefore the best comparison to Egypt. And in fact, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood leaders look at Turkey as their model, even having visited the country. Erdogan visited Egypt in 2011. I have attended a election campaign meeting of the Freedom and Justice Party and found many representatives of medium-sized Egyptian businesses. These are not people who like to engage in political adventures that could ruin their businesses.

Of course, President Muhammad Mursi will not be alone. He will need an elected parliament. Demonstrators at Tahrir would like the decision of the Supreme Constitutional Court to annul the parliament to be reversed. Others speak of new elections to take place in November. It is very unlikely new elections will show a similar result as in the previous elections. Elections for the shura council and the first round in the presidential elections show the Freedom and Justice Party, while still remaining strong, might obtain fewer seats than in the previous elections. Widespread dissatisfaction among Salafis about the performance of the Nur Party show this party may lose a substantial portion of their seats in Parliament.

President Mursi, Egypt's new parliament, and SCAF will need to give priority to economic developments. Millions of Egyptians have been suffering from the economic decline Egypt has witnessed since Husni Mubarak was toppled. It is therefore important to put the struggle for political power aside and focus on economy.

The need to address Christian fears

The Freedom and Justice Party would also do well to address the fears of Egypt's Christians -- many of whom are now attempting to emigrate. It is not in the interest of Egypt to see large numbers of Christians leaving, in part because of the role they could continue to play in business links between Egyptian and Western countries. Most of the fears of the Muslim Brotherhood among Christians, liberals, and people in the West have been fueled by the old regimes that have presented themselves as 'the reasonable alternative' for the Muslim Brothers. One such effort was the short film of a young man being beheaded on Egyptian TV during the election campaigns. The death of this young man was said to have taken place in Tunisia. The presenter, associated with the old National Democratic Party of Husni Mubarak, then asked, "Is this Islam?"

I believe Christians should enter dialogue with leaders of the Freedom and Justice Party, telling them that this is their opportunity to show that they indeed want freedom of religion, as they have been so careful to point out in order to make Christians feel at ease. In order to reduce Christian fear, the Freedom and Justice Party will need to address the following issues:

- *Providing security.* This is not easy in a country where the police withdrew from the streets following the first days of the uprising in 2011. The election of Muhammad Mursi as president does not mean police-enforced security will immediately return, yet security for all Egyptians, including Christians, is of major importance.

- *Church building needs to be better regulated.* It is now a frequent source of tension between Muslims and Christians in mixed-faith areas where Christians want to build or enlarge a church.

- *Conversions from one religion to the other.* This issue has always been a major source of conflicts and thus laws and regulations are needed that address sensitivities, and yet do not hamper religious freedom. For one thing, it should be undoubtedly clear that a conversion was fully the convert's own choice. It should not be used as propaganda against the people whose religion he or she has left. A law should be similar for Muslims and Christians. A major issue are the problems with the Coptic Orthodox Church not accepting divorce except in cases of adultery or conversion to Islam, which has pushed Christians who wanted a divorce to convert to Islam and later seek a return to Christianity.

- *Honest reporting about sensitive subjects.* This includes religion. Too often misreporting has needlessly aggravated tensions. A recent example of this is a news article in the Salafi *al-Fath* newspaper that confused the Vatican with the state of Italy. Arab-West Report has documented numerous examples where media reports added to tensions. Egypt does not need this, and certainly not now.