

Who will the Egyptians choose for president?

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Interview with Rafic Greiche, head of the Catholic Church Press Office in Egypt, edited by Maria Laura Conte and Meriem Senous

What kind of atmosphere is there in Egypt in this election campaign?

I would say that the climate is uncertain, but let us thank the Lord. The atmosphere is heavy for various reasons. First of all there are too many candidates: there are thirteen in all, five of which belong to Islamist parties. Their leaning varies from fundamentalist to more than fundamentalist. That is, from among the Islamist candidates, there is not even one that can be defined as 'moderate'. It is this that the Christians are afraid of.

And then there are the socialist and liberal candidates, in the 'capitalist' sense.

Do you not consider the large number of candidates positively?

I believe that there is too much dispersion and division. 13 candidates are too many. A fair number of candidates is undoubtedly a sign of democracy, but an exaggerated number generates rifts and dispersion, meaning that something has not worked as it should have.

Who are the frontrunners?

The frontrunners are in order, Amr Moussa, former foreign minister of Mubarak's government and ex-secretary of the Arab League, and general Ahmed Shafiq. The choice is between a politician and a military leader. The majority no longer wants a military leader as president, as it no longer wants a dictatorship. But the votes are divided even with respect to this.

How does the Christian community stand in this context?

Even the Christian community is divided between Amr Moussa and Ahmed Shafiq. Some prefer a military leader, since they consider him the only one capable of really guaranteeing the security of the country. But others are afraid: they fear that the military will bring back a dictatorship and can give the Islamists the opportunity and pretext to use violence.

Unfortunately the Orthodox Coptic Church votes only for the military candidate because it

considers that only the military can protect them. Besides, it is 1,400 years that the Copts have had this opinion. Instead, in my opinion the Catholic Copts will vote for Amr Moussa.

Why Moussa?

Because Moussa is considered a laical candidate, a good diplomat, who knows foreign affairs; he knows Europe well, where he has good friends; he knows the Vatican with which he entertains good relations. He has many Catholic friends and is generally well-known to the Christian community. He has always been an opponent of Mubarak's, even as minister, so much so that Mubarak appointed him as head of the Arab League to get rid of him.

Are there any indications with regard to the Christian community's vote ?

Not officially.

Have the two leading candidates, Moussa and Shafiq, broached the subject of religion?

Have they used the issue of religion in their electoral campaign?

They are both open to the religious question, but the subject constitutes a priority for most people now. The point is to choose whether to vote for a diplomat or a military leader.

What were the recurring words, the most used during this electoral campaign?

The most used word was 'stability', together with 'we do not want a military leader'. Some even threatened to resort to violence if a military leader or one of Mubarak's men came to power. And then there is the question of the Copts and the women. Everybody is talking about women's rights. While on the contrary, as always, the fundamentalists want women to wear a veil and remain confined at home. As usual they want to make them into second class citizens.

And what about the economic question? Does the economic fragility of the country and unemployment not come into the debate?

This problem only comes after the other two and is dealt with above all by the socialist candidates. They are the only ones that speak about poverty, health, economic crisis, unemployment and hardship. They are Nasserite Socialists.

Who is the best candidate for the majority of the population that demonstrated in Piazza Tahrir for freedom, dignity and democracy?

Even the revolutionaries of Piazza Tahrir are divided. Among them are the laical and fundamentalists of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafites. The Tahrir protesters do not speak with only one voice. But those who have remained true revolutionaries, who maintain that 'purity' of the first true revolutionaries, will vote for the socialist candidates. They think that figures like Sabahi and Khaled Ali are closest to the revolutionary ideas fuelling them, considering them as the true Socialists of Nasser's time.

According to you, is there anything new in this election? Do you think that a new era is beginning for Egypt?

The first positive aspect of this election is the freedom of expression. There are many

candidates, as I was saying, even too many. Egypt is marching towards democracy even if there is always the danger that this process ends up in the wrong hands.

Which are the wrong hands?

Those of the fundamentalists. At first they were hidden and did not operate out in the open. But now they speak openly and lie. They promise a lot and do nothing.

The army has promised to withdraw after the elections. Will it keep its promise?

The army has promised to withdraw, but an army never withdraws. It will take a step backwards, remaining behind the scenes, but it will always be there. It is very important in Egypt.

Who is the army's candidate?

Officially it has no candidate, but in my opinion Ahmed Shafiq is the person that represents the army: he was a general, can count on the support not only of the military but also of the police and the secret services, Mubarak's former police.

According to you, will anything change thanks to this election?

This is a key election because the future president will have enormous power and many prerogatives in his hands. In fact there is no constitution defining and limiting his power yet.

Will he have the same powers as Mubarak?

Yes, and even more. For the moment everything will be in the president's hands. It is the first time in history that we find ourselves in this situation with a president who will be elected without knowing exactly what his powers are. This is extremely dangerous because if the candidate that is elected is not honest or is not able to write a good constitution, and does not begin to do what the military should have done 18 months ago, the situation risks getting worse.

We are keeping a sharp look out.

Have you seen interest in this election on the part of the population? Or does discouragement prevail?

The people are taking part and everyone is talking about politics. But you must bear in mind that 27% of the Egyptian population is illiterate and 40% lives below poverty line.

What is your general impression as the Catholic Church's spokesman?

I can see that the situation is very delicate. We are at a crossroads: if the elected president is a liberal person, honest, respectful of religions, Christians, women's rights and the disabled, then Egypt will manage to make great steps ahead. If, on the other hand, a president of Islamist origin is elected, Egypt will become like Pakistan within five years. We have these two extreme possibilities, with not much room for manoeuvre. A third way does not exist. Here it is all black or white, there is no grey. Everything is gambled on the people's vote.

Are you optimistic?

I am optimistic because I place my hope in the Lord. As a man, as an Egyptian, I am convinced that the Egyptians will have the wisdom to vote for the right person. But I do not hide the fact that I fear for the future of all the Egyptians, both Christians and Muslims.