

Presidential Elections Will Not End Egyptian Instability

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

Washington has little ability to influence the outcome of this week's election, in which most leading candidates appear disinclined to maintain strong relations with the United States. But it can encourage the Egyptian military to minimize the likelihood of another uprising.

Despite the relative openness and unpredictability of Egypt's first post-Mubarak presidential election, scheduled for Wednesday and Thursday, the outcome will likely solidify two worrisome trends. First, radical ideologies will increasingly dominate Egyptian politics, steering the country in a theocratic, anti-Western direction. Second, Egypt may become more politically unstable, with the new president struggling against other power centers, including the military and the Islamist-dominated parliament.

BACKGROUND

The election is shaping up to be a competition between former Mubarak regime members and Islamists. Of the thirteen candidates, four are considered true contenders: former Arab League secretary-general Amr Mousa, who served as Hosni Mubarak's foreign minister from 1991 to 2001; former air force commander Ahmed Shafiq, who served as Mubarak's last prime minister; Muhammad Morsi, who chairs the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Freedom and Justice Party; and former Brotherhood Guidance Office member Abdel Monem Abouel Fetouh, who was ousted from the group last year when he announced his candidacy against the organization's wishes. (A fifth candidate, former Nasserist parliamentarian Hamdin Sabahi, finished second in the expatriate voting that concluded last week, but he is considered a long shot.)

None of these major candidates emerged as the clear front-runner during the campaigns. While polls suggest that Mousa is leading and Abouel Fetouh and Shafiq are gaining momentum, most Egyptians appear undecided. The 75 percent Islamist victory in the parliamentary elections, which concluded in January, would seem to indicate strong support for an Islamist president. Yet ongoing instability has damaged the Islamists' popularity and raised the

profile of former regime candidates, whose popularity derives from the belief that they can reestablish domestic security. Moreover, polls cannot adequately capture certain other factors, including the Brotherhood's unparalleled mobilizing capabilities, which should enhance Morsi's performance; Shafiq's outreach to the heads of influential rural clans, many of whom previously supported Mubarak's ruling party; and the possibility that the military could intervene to bolster a non-Islamist candidate such as Shafiq or Mousa. If no candidate wins a majority this week, the top two vote-getters will proceed to a runoff on June 16-17.

A RADICAL POLITICAL CONSENSUS

Although the unpredictability of the outcome demonstrates the relative competitiveness of post-Mubarak politics, the candidates' convergence on key policy questions illustrates Egyptian consensus on an anti-Western foreign posture and a legal system based on Islamic law. Indeed, the tenor of the campaigns reflected strong support for policies inimical to Western interests, with most major candidates calling for engagement with Iran and Islamist contenders aggressively using anti-American rhetoric for political gain.

For example, Abouel Fetouh -- whom many of the major Salafist groups have endorsed, including the U.S.-designated terrorist organization al-Gamaa al-Islamiyah -- called the assassination of Usama bin Laden "state terrorism" and accused Washington of conspiring to "hit Muslim interests." And Brotherhood candidate Morsi vowed that, if elected, he would demand the U.S. release of Omar Abdul Rahman, the so-called "blind sheikh" convicted for involvement in the 1993 World Trade Center attack.

Egypt's peace treaty with Israel was the most common foreign policy target of Islamist and non-Islamist candidates alike. Abouel Fetouh called the Camp David Accords a "national security threat" and, during a debate with Mousa, called Israel an "enemy." Mousa, though typically more circumspect on the issue, responded by calling Israel an "adversary" and agreeing that the accords should be reviewed. Although no candidate has called for abrogating the treaty outright, the Islamists have suggested that they will not deal with Israeli leaders if elected.

The candidates similarly converge in support of a legal system based on sharia. Morsi and Abouel Fetouh have both called for "implementation of the sharia," which is more strident than their previous embrace of an interpretive sharia approach. Meanwhile, even the non-Islamist Mousa advocates retaining Article II of the current constitution, under which the "principles of the Islamic sharia are the principal source of legislation."

The only candidate not following the anti-Western, pro-sharia pattern is Shafiq. The former prime minister has called implementation of sharia "difficult," accused the Islamists of "monopolizing religion to pass their own political agenda," expressed skepticism about opening ties with Iran, supported strong ties with the United States, and affirmed his commitment to Camp David. But his election could deepen Egypt's domestic turmoil, creating a different kind of policy nightmare for Washington.

EGYPT WILL STILL BE UNSTABLE

Even if this week's voting is fair and credible, the election is unlikely to restore political stability. For starters, the new president's powers will remain ill defined in the absence of a new constitution, and he will struggle for authority against the Islamist-dominated parliament and the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces. Meanwhile, even if a military figure such as Shafiq is elected, there is no mechanism forcing the SCAF to answer to him. The military may therefore remain autonomous for the foreseeable future, intervening in politics whenever it fears that its narrow interests are threatened.

The SCAF is already behaving in this manner. Last Friday, Egyptian state media reported that the council would issue an updated "constitutional declaration" allowing it to retain absolute powers in reviewing its internal affairs, including its budget. The declaration will also reportedly expand the president's powers, including the authority to dissolve parliament. This follows rumors that the SCAF has been trying to dissolve parliament via court order -- a

prospect that could ignite a severe confrontation between the military and the Islamists.

The election will not end Egypt's slide toward bankruptcy either. Although currency reserves have increased slightly in the past month, they have declined by as much as \$21 billion since last year's revolt and now stand at only \$15.2 billion. A further decline could threaten food subsidies, which would unleash unprecedented chaos given that at least 40 percent of Egyptians live on less than \$2 per day.

U.S. POLICY OPTIONS

The election marks the next stage in Egypt's post-Mubarak transition, but there is little room for optimism in Washington. Most of the leading presidential candidates appear disinclined to maintain strong relations with the United States, and deterioration of the Camp David Accords -- a linchpin of U.S. policy in the region for over three decades -- is possible. Perhaps most worrisome, the election will not solve Egypt's ongoing political instability, and may even exacerbate it given that the president's powers have not been defined constitutionally.

Unfortunately, Washington has little ability to influence the outcome, and the Obama administration is therefore wise in not declaring support for any individual candidate. But it can -- and should -- influence the extent to which the election catalyzes greater instability. Specifically, the administration should use its ongoing communications with Egypt's military leaders to insist that the voting be conducted fairly. Since late March, the Muslim Brotherhood has accused the military of trying to rig the election, and the tight restrictions on election monitors have only fueled such fears. The perception that Shafiq enjoys military backing could make for a delicate situation if he emerges as one of the two finalists.

Washington should also push the SCAF to follow a credible constitutional process rather than issuing diktats that enshrine a leading role for the military. Otherwise, the military will be setting the stage for a new round of mass protests that would severely hamper efforts to restore domestic security and reverse Egypt's increasingly dire economic situation.

Given the U.S. interest in regional stability, the prospect of chaos following Egypt's election should be deeply alarming to policymakers. Washington should therefore use its \$1.3 billion in military aid as leverage, encouraging the SCAF to administer the coming period with an eye toward minimizing the likelihood of another uprising -- one in which Islamists would likely play a leading role.

Eric Trager is a Next Generation fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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