

Morsy Says He Is the Choice for Revolutionaries

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Full published dispatch

The Islamist aiming to be Egypt's president professes confidence his liberal rivals will swallow their fears of religious rule and vote him to victory in the election runoff against a former general he sees as the heir to the oppressive old regime.

And, in his first international media interview since he won the first round ballot, the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsy appealed to last year's revolutionaries by vowing, if elected, to keep Hosni Mubarak, the president they deposed, in jail forever - whatever verdict a court passes on him on Saturday. "It is not possible to release Mubarak," Morsy told Reuters on Thursday as he - and the political movement that transformed him from unknown to frontrunner in a matter of a few weeks - work to win over disappointed liberals who now face an awkward choice between the Islamist and Mubarak's last prime minister.

In the three days since results of last week's first round confirmed that the 60-year-old, US-trained engineer would face Ahmed Shafiq, a former air force chief who still cites Mubarak as a role model, Morsy has yet to win the endorsement of any of the main losing candidates.

He offered a number of policies intended to appeal to the centre and stressed that he was now the only alternative to more military rule, whatever misgivings about the Brotherhood still troubled those who launched the protests against Mubarak. "This nation and this people, who have revolted against Mubarak, will not accept his system again," said Morsy, laying claim to a revolutionary mantle which the Brotherhood's critics say is ill-deserved due to its hesitation in taking on Mubarak.

The movement, however, has shown it is the biggest single force among the mass Egyptians, surpassing by far the support for the secular, urban liberals who first took to the streets last year; a Morsy win would put the Brotherhood, which already has the biggest bloc in Parliament, in charge of all of Egypt's main governing bodies after the army hands over power by July.

It would extend gains made by Islamists across North Africa.

But Morsy cannot be assured of a win in a vote scheduled for 16 and 17 June after Shafiq, appointed by Mubarak in his final days in power, made a surprise surge into the runoff, winning over Egyptians desperate for a return of order after the 15 months of turmoil since Mubarak was ousted.

Seeking to broaden his appeal, Morsy has reached out to rivals who lost in the first round, saying he was opening up the vice-president posts and even premiership to those outside his group. He has tried to

woo wary liberals and Christians, saying in office he would not impose Islamic strictures on society.

With the decider looming, Morsy has the backing of ultra-orthodox Salafi Muslims, who control the second biggest parliamentary bloc. But he has yet to win the clear endorsement of any of the main centrist candidates squeezed out in the first round. And he may well need their support for victory.

"If they don't support the candidate of the revolution and don't support the march to stability and true freedom ... who will they support?" Morsy said in the interview at a hotel on the outskirts of Cairo.

"I am certain they will support the path of the revolution."

Polarized

Neither Morsy nor Shafiq won more than a quarter of the votes cast last week, leaving a big section of the electorate that frets about putting a conservative Islamist in charge or handing power back to the military men who have run Egypt for 60 years.

With the country deeply polarized, Morsy has not only sought to present himself as the rightful inheritor of the anti-Mubarak revolt, but he has also dismissed Shafiq's campaign claim that only he has the experience of office to deliver on promises.

"The old regime did not achieve anything for the Egyptian people. It was a failed system ... Nothing new will come of it, only a continuation of oppression and suppression," said Morsy, who pledged to quit the Brotherhood and its party if elected, so that he could be a head of state without partisan allegiance.

Morsy can rely on the disciplined network of Brotherhood backers who propelled him into the runoff after a much better-known figure from the movement was barred from standing.

But Shafiq has shown he too has a committed base of support, some of whom backed the old order and others who worry deeply that the most populous Arab nation could become a theocracy similar to the richest, Saudi Arabia.

Morsy said he was confident the runoff vote would be fair but said loyalists of Mubarak's forcibly disbanded National Democratic Party, the party that dominated power for decades, were "now working on the ground and are using unlawful means."

In his bid to reach out, Morsy on Wednesday met moderate Islamist Abdel Moneim Abouel Fotouh, an ex-Brotherhood member who came in fourth in the first round, but has yet to win any explicit support from him. Morsy said he had good ties with Hamdeen Sabbahi, a leftist who came in third, but had not met him yet.

"I am keen on dialogue and on unifying the ranks to face the attempt to bring back the old oppressive state," said the stocky and bespectacled Morsy, who is a father of five.

Officials said the Brotherhood has not, however, had significant contact with former Arab League chief and one-time Mubarak minister Amr Moussa, who came in fifth. Morsy also said he had not been in touch with liberal reformer Mohamed El Baradei.

"Rotation of power"

Many of Egypt's liberals and the big Christian religious minority are skeptical about the Brotherhood's promises after it reneged on a pledge not to seek the presidency. Some accuse the movement of being heady with its success in a parliamentary election and now bent on hogging power for itself.

Morsy, whose public stiffness early in the race has given way to a more relaxed and animated style, gesturing to make his points in the interview, insisted his program would offer freedoms to all, whether Christians, women or others outside the Brotherhood's membership of devout Muslims.

And he insisted that the Brotherhood, which has had a mass following in Egypt for decades despite official repression, was committed to political pluralism and the "rotation of power."

He said that if he won power, women would be free to wear what they wanted, echoing comments made this week when he said no one would be required to wear the hijab.

The Brotherhood's rise is also being watched nervously in Israel, which worries about the peace deal it signed with Egypt in 1979. Morsy said Egypt under him would be committed to the deal, but criticized Israel for not respecting the treaty.

An aide had said that, in office, Morsy would delegate others to meet Israeli leaders. Asked in the interview if he would sit down with Israelis, Morsy deflected the question, saying he would judge Israel by its actions: "This is not an issue of sitting, it is an issue of actions on the ground."

The peace deal with Israel was a cornerstone of Mubarak's foreign policy, inherited from his predecessor Anwar Sadat, who was assassinated by Islamists after the treaty. Egypt's army, expected to remain an influential player even after a formal handover to a new president, is likely to protect that deal, which helps bring it US\$1.3 billion a year in US military aid.

On the fate of Mubarak, now 84 and in failing health, Morsy made clear that, if elected, he would not be bound by whatever decision was made by judges, appointed under the old system, who are due to deliver a verdict on Saturday on the former leader's culpability for attacks on demonstrators last year.

Regardless of that judgment, the Brotherhood candidate said, he would go on working to uncover evidence for a fresh trial of the fallen leader to ensure he was convicted of corruption, vote-rigging and other crimes in office:

"When I am president, this will give me the chance to review the case and the verdict," Morsy said. "As president, I promise there will be a retrial of the killers of the martyrs."