

Egyptian Presidential Elections: from the First to the Second Round

Magdy Samaan*

June is known in Egypt as the month of “Naksa” or “Relapse” – the month in which the Egyptian army was defeated in the Six Day War against Israel in 1967. Arabic dictionaries define “relapse” as “the return of the disease to the patient after recovery” and also as “bowing one’s head in humility and regret.” If the Nasser regime described its defeat with a euphemism to downplay it, the term seems exactly appropriate to the options for the “Egyptian revolution” during June this year.

Egyptians have lived through the euphoria of the end of the Mubarak regime, and the dream of the transition to a state that respects the rights of its citizens and provides them with the right to a decent life – under the slogan “Bread, freedom, human dignity” – but they have ended up in the forthcoming presidential elections with the same choice as before between the military and the Islamists. They must either go back to the practices of Mubarak’s “deep state”, or submit to an Islamic regime, which would mean that the people who shouted, after ousting President Hosni Mubarak, “Raise your head up, you are Egyptian” will have to continue in the struggle for freedom, justice and equality.

This paradox brings a lot of fateful issues that Egyptians have been waiting to resolve during the long, complicated transition period to a head in this unfortunate month. If the sentence against ousted President Hosni Mubarak of life imprisonment and the acquittal of his two sons and of aides to the Interior Minister were widely seen as a “relapse”, upcoming events such as electing a new president and choosing the Constituent Assembly are further scenarios of a possible “relapse”.

The first round of elections has brought Ahmed Shafiq, Mubarak’s last Prime Minister, and the Muslim Brotherhood candidate Mohammed Mursi, into a run-off scheduled for 16th-17th June.

On 14th June, just two days before, the Supreme Court will begin considering whether Shafiq should be able to run at all. The Court will be weighing up the constitutionality of the so-called “political law of isolation” passed by the new Islamist-dominated Parliament, which bans former senior Mubarak allies from participating in politics for the next five years.

The Court will also begin hearing a complaint about the constitutionality of the Law of Parliamentary Elections issued by the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF), which allowed members of political parties to run for seats normally reserved for independent candidates.

There are two possible scenarios: the first is to postpone the election, depending on the ruling of the Supreme Court, and return once again to a discussion about setting new dates for presidential and parliamentary elections. That would mean the continuation of SCAF rule, with the possibility of a new uprising. The second is to continue with the elections on the current timing, and install as the new president either the military figure of Shafiq or the Islamist Mursi.

Many Egyptians question the integrity of the result of the first round of the presidential elections, claiming manipulation in favour of Shafiq. In a press conference held after the announcement of the election results, presidential candidate Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh, who came in fourth place, said: “This is not the fair and free elections for which the revolution came to the streets.”

The result has brought two candidates into the run-off who do not reflect the goals of the “revolution”. For the majority of Egyptians, both candidates mean a “relapse” from the values that Egyptians were seeking. As Fahmy Howaidi, the prominent Egyptian Islamic writer, concluded in an article in the Al-Shorouk newspaper: “The first (Mursi) promises us a vague future, while the second (Shafiq) will return us to the bleak past.” He also quoted Sheikh Gamal Kotb, a former Al-Azhar Fatwa official, as saying: “Our choice has become between taking a drug which its manufacturing company has been banned from promoting or persuading of its efficacy, or a carcinogenic drug that kills whoever takes it.”

Most Egyptians feel that they are not represented in the elections. As a result, there have been strong calls to boycott the elections or to go and spoil the ballot.

The two nominees who are competing in the run-off entered the presidential race at the last moment. The Muslim Brotherhood announced its participation in the elections only one week before the date of nominations, but its financial and organizational capacity played a strong role in promoting its candidate, even though he is widely felt to lack charisma. Shafiq also started his official campaign late, but the support he got from the deep state networks pushed him forward.

The Brotherhood lost all its elections before 1952 to secular parties. In 1952, a group of military officers – many of them members of the Brotherhood – staged a coup that brought an end to Egypt's nascent experiment in democracy. Since then, the military establishment has used the Brotherhood as a scarecrow to justify the suppression of democracy, while at the same time tolerating the Islamization of society at the hands of the Brotherhood.

The scarecrow was used to circumvent democratic demands during the first Arab Spring witnessed by Egypt and Palestine in 2005 and 2006. Islamist electoral victories – in which the Egyptian Brotherhood won 20% of the seats in Parliament following a deal with the Mubarak regime and Hamas won 57% of seats in the Palestinian Parliament – gave authoritarian regimes a pretext for scaling back democratic reforms as a counterweight to the rise of political Islam.

It now seems as if the military candidate is reaping the harvest overseen by that scarecrow during the current tricky transition. Both military and Islamists seem to be the major beneficiaries of the January uprising. They exchange interests through their announced alliance as well as secret deals. They help each other: first the Islamists helped SCAF control the demands of the uprising by supporting the military's schedule for the transitional period, beginning with its support of the key constitutional amendments, which allowed the division of political power between the two camps, Islamists and "civil powers"; then, at the same time, SCAF helped the Islamist parties win the majority in the Parliament through closing its eyes to the suspicious funding which enabled them to dominate the election by illegal practices, such as indirectly buying poor people's votes and manipulating illiterate people by using religion in political competition.

But, at the same time, we should not ignore the possibility of a conflict inside the military institution, which can itself benefit the Brotherhood, a scenario which can serve to help control society by the application of religious laws.

Two weeks before the presidential elections, the Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party drafted a bill to increase the salaries of military personnel by 400%, and passed the Military Justice Code, which gives immunity to military personnel and has been seen as a sort of election bribe by the Brotherhood to ensure the acceptance of election results in the event that Mursi succeeds.

Shafiq presents himself as the civil candidate versus the Islamic state project presented by the Brotherhood candidate Mursi, while Mursi is trying to present himself as the revolution candidate, but for many Egyptians neither Shafiq nor Mursi are representing the civil state or the revolution goals, as the former is from the military and his policies will maintain its upper hand in the political arena, and the latter will work for a religious state.

If Mursi wins, the Brotherhood will continue to dominate the political scene by controlling executive power, as well as legislative power, and it will be in a strong position to apply Islamic law in a clear collision with public freedoms and even, some fear, democratic values. This is not incompatible with military control of society, using only God's word as its tool. The Brotherhood is aware that if it does not exploit its position at a time when its competitors are weak, it will lose its advantage in the face of the freer atmosphere that would be brought about if Egypt really did turn into a substantive democracy. It will continue Islamizing society by using religion to attack civil liberties and the growing youth movements to control the growing pro-democracy movement, but the hard political and economic situation in Egypt can nevertheless be an obstacle to the total success of the Muslim Brotherhood in tightening its control over the country.

If Shafiq wins, it will be an opportunity for the military to re-arrange its position in the country and ensure the continuation of interests that were built up during the era of Mubarak, with the continued dominance of the military leadership.

In any case, whoever wins, Shafiq or Mursi, the military will go on controlling the country from behind the scenes and the dynamic revolutionary tendencies will feel that they were defeated and that their demands have not been fulfilled yet, and the presidential elections will be the coronation of a military coup. That suggests that protests will continue in varying degrees.