

Character must overcome creed

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The Australian

23 May 2012

P. 8

As Egyptians begin voting for a new president today, the key questions are whether an Islamist will win, and will this pave the way to a theocratic Egypt? But the country's future is less likely to be determined by the ideology of the president than by his temperament and political skills.

The poll was meant to mark the end of the shift to democracy after the overthrow of the Mubarak regime in February last year. Instead Egypt's transition remains mired in its muddled beginning.

A new parliament was elected, but its Islamist leadership has mishandled the process of appointing a constituent assembly. This has left Egypt without a new constitution and, therefore, voting for a president whose powers are not defined as the economy continues to fall apart.

The president will have to negotiate some power from parliament and the ruling military council, get the constitutional process moving and create early economic relief. Will the new president be capable of resolving the political, economic and constitutional questions dogging Egypt's transition to democracy?

Viewed purely from an ideological perspective, the four leading candidates neatly divide into Islamist and secular camps.

On the secular side are Amr Moussa, fired as foreign minister by Hosni Mubarak in 2001 when he grew too popular, and Ahmed Shafiq, Mubarak's last prime ministerial appointment. On the Islamist side are Abdel Moneim Aboul Futouh, thrown out of the Muslim Brotherhood when he defied its initial decision not to run a presidential candidate, and Mohammed Morsi, the Brotherhood's eventual contender after the movement reversed that same decision.

If you look at these candidates from the perspective of personality and political skills, the group splits across ideological lines. Only Moussa and Aboul Futouh, one secular and one Islamist, stand any chance of navigating Egypt towards a stable, democratic future.

Moussa, the frontrunner, commands respect across the political spectrum, even if he is accused of being a feolol, a remnant of the old regime. He has the experience and connections to deal with Egypt's ``deep state" -- those individuals and groups that profited from the old system and remain a major obstacle to remaking it.

In theory, Moussa could reassure the deep state that its prerogatives would not all be swept away at once, while carrying out gradual reforms. Would he do this? It is valid to ask if, after so many years as part of the old system, he is capable of thinking in new ways about how Egypt is governed and, more importantly, empowering new people to govern.

Likewise, Aboul Futouh draws broad support. He is backed by young leaders of the uprising and other liberals attracted by his moderate brand of Islamism. But he also has support from the stringent Salafists.

Aboul Futouh's detractors claim he delivers different messages to different audiences.

He is not as moderate as some would like, and he lacks experience in government. But his biggest challenge as president would be dealing with his old movement, the Muslim Brotherhood.

It is losing popular support and internal discipline, reflected in predictions that some members will vote for Aboul Futouh ahead of Morsi. The Brotherhood's leaders have no interest in seeing Aboul Futouh succeed.

Aboul Futouh's candidacy has demonstrated how quickly the Islamist side of politics has fragmented since Mubarak was overthrown.

If Moussa and Aboul Futouh represent the possibility of bridging Egypt's political cleavages, Shafiq and Morsi would probably lead to its deepening. Shafiq, a former air force commander, fuels fears among Islamists, liberals and the young revolutionaries of the military and old regime clinging to power. A Shafiq victory would result in a much more confrontational atmosphere.

In a similar way, a victory by Morsi would accelerate concerns about the Brotherhood's domination of the political system, not to mention fears about what it would do with this power to remake the country along Islamic lines. The fact that the uncharismatic Morsi was a substitute candidate, following the disqualification of the Brotherhood's preferred nominee and most powerful figure, Khairat el-Shater, will also reinforce fears that a Morsi presidency would be run from the Brotherhood's headquarters.

The Brotherhood's leadership of parliament has already been dogged by legal challenges and thinly veiled threats from the military.

Only Moussa and Aboul Futouh have the potential to transcend the divisions that block Egypt's democratic transition. But will they have the courage to do so?

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