

COMMENTARY

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Mursi's Burden: Proving No Support to Extremism **Hayat Alvi**

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A year and a half after the 2011 revolution that overthrew Hosni Mubarak, Egypt has reached a new milestone. The first ever democratically elected president, Mohammad Mursi, has taken his official oath of office and is in the process of forming his government. Regardless of individual Egyptians' political preferences and ideological orientations, this is an extraordinary achievement. Indeed, Egyptians are divided about these developments, especially given the run-off between Mursi and the former Prime Minister under Mubarak, Ahmed Shafiq. The onus is now on Mursi to calm all fears and trepidations about his ideological platform and social policies.

In his 29 June 2012 speech in Tahrir Square, he said something that can be seen as a cause for some concern. *The Guardian* reports: "In his first public speech, addressing tens of thousands of people in Tahrir Square on Friday, Mursi promised to work to free Omar Abdel-Rahman, the spiritual leader of men convicted in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing."

Since the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) became involved in the 2011 revolution, the "Turkish Model" of Islamist governance has been cited as a possible model for Egypt to follow and implement in the post-Mubarak era. Specifically, the Turkish Islamist AKP party is seen as the ideal prototype for Islamic politics. However, vowing to free Sheikh Omar Abdel-Rahman is a marked departure from moderate Islamism. It signals an embrace of the Sheikh's ideology, which clearly espouses violence and extremism. Mursi's oath of commitment to see the Sheikh

released from a life sentence in the US is a serious red flag, and does not conform to the Turkish model.

Mursi has also vowed to serve the people, and to improve Egypt's devastated economy. Improving the economy is a pragmatic priority, and other human development and quality of life issues must also be addressed. Egypt bears dire statistics pertaining to human development, which illustrate the miserable failures of the Mubarak regime. Literacy rates for males and females stand at 77 per cent and 62 per cent respectively. Unemployment, especially among the youth, is worsening in a population of 84 million. Data for 2005 shows 20 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line. Education expenditures constitute only three per cent of GDP, while military expenditures stand at 3.4 per cent of GDP along with US\$1.3 billion of US foreign aid filling the military coffers annually. In addition, Egypt suffers from environmental degradation and water source and standards problems that could reach crisis proportions in the coming years.

Why Mursi would make such a statement about vowing to secure Sheikh's release is the golden question. Was he trying to pander to popular sentiments, or has this been an MB agenda all along? Either way, it does not contribute to a wholesome image of Egypt's new president, especially in the eyes of Western powers.

According to *The Guardian* – “New York's mayor, Michael Bloomberg, responded on Friday night to Mursi's pledge, saying he would oppose any effort to ‘undermine’ Abdel-Rahman serving a life sentence. He said the sheikh's conviction was a measure of justice against a man ‘who tried to kill so many’.”

Mursi should concentrate on sound policies that focus on improving human development and quality of life, rather than giving reasons to raise red flags.

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