

## **DATELINE MEI**

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### **The Curse of the Pharaoh**

**P R Kumaraswamy**

**M**ohammad Mursi, as the first democratically-elected President of Egypt, is a novelty in the Arab Middle East. Otherwise, since the end of World War II, new leaders came because older ones had either died in harness or were overthrown, often violently. First and foremost, Mursi's election puts an end to months of uncertainty not only over Egypt's transition to democracy, but also the willingness of the army to relinquish power.

Mursi's victory is a crowning glory for the Islamists in Egypt and perhaps beyond. Having been banished since the 1952 revolution that ended monarchy in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood has captured power through a democratic process. Even though Mursi was quick to resign from his membership of the organization following his victory, he represents the worldview of the Islamists, perhaps with his own variations.

#### **CHALLENGES AHEAD**

**M**ursi's victory is anything but a landslide. In May when there were multiple candidates, he could secure 24 per cent of the valid votes; and, in the June run-off elections, he barely got a simple majority (51.73 per cent of valid votes). If the official figures are accurate, Hosni Mubarak's last Prime Minister Ahmed Shafiq secured 12.3 million votes (which is about 900,000 votes less than Mursi's), and this makes the contest close. While the Salafis rallied around the Muslim Brotherhood candidate as less of the two evils, Shafiq remained the only hope for the 'secular' Opposition, after former Foreign Minister Amr Musa secured just over 10 per cent (hence came fifth) of the votes in the first round. With only 50 per cent of the Egyptians voting in the run-off elections, Mursi enjoyed the support of just a quarter of the citizens; he, thus, desperately needs the backing of the rest of the country. Though not uncommon in closely contested elections, it reveals the difficulties facing Mursi.

Mursi has to manage powerful challenges. One, despite being the most populous Arab country and rich civilization, modern Egypt lacks robust political institutions. Since 1952, its leaders

have evolved a personality cult that has subsumed institutions like judiciary and legislature. If these were not enough, the Supreme Court has recently declared the first post-Mubarak parliamentary elections as illegal and hence the parliament has been dissolved. For weeks the drafting of a new constitution has been mired in rows over its composition. In short, lack of an elected parliament and absence of a new constitution confront President Mursi.

Two, in the absence of a strong political institution, the army became the most powerful institution in many Arab countries and Egypt is not an exception. Over the years, it has expanded its role in various aspects of Egyptian society and even economy. The legal status of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), which has governed the country since Mubarak was overthrown, is not clear and its continued existence would have to be anchored in the new constitution. In recent weeks, the army has curtailed the powers of the President and usurped greater authority. Thus, despite Mursi's election, the army is unlikely to relinquish its veto over sensitive domestic and foreign policy issues and the newly-elected President would have to navigate within the limits set by the military.

Three, Mursi was not the first choice of the Muslim Brotherhood, but was a dummy candidate for the millionaire businessman and the deputy leader of the Islamist Khairat al-Shater. When the latter was disqualified on technical grounds, the Islamists embraced Mursi. It would be equally difficult for Mursi to manage the more radical Salafis who demand a stricter adherence to Islam. Though the Salafis are happy at the defeat of the 'secular' Opposition, Mursi would have to accommodate them and their demands, if he were to avoid violence spilling over into the streets of Egypt. Indeed, some of the anti-Coptic violence in recent months is directly attributed to the growing influence of the Salafis and their intolerance.

Four, the problems that overthrew Mubarak are real and will not disappear anytime soon. Growing youth unemployment, widening economic disparity and internal communal tensions need not only political leadership and foresight but also sustained efforts. Moreover, it is fashionable to blame Mubaraks and Ben-Alis of Middle East for all ills of the society; corrupt leaders do not come from Mars but are home grown. It would be naïve to expect that the election of Mursi (or similar Islamist leaders in other countries if free-and-fair elections are held) would usher in a corruption-free Egypt. While he can make an earnest effort, the ultimate success rests on ordinary men and women of Egypt. Given these limitations, Mursi will be a President but not presidential.

## FOREIGN POLICY

Mursi's election naturally generated euphoria among other Islamist groups in Middle East and as off-shoots of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, some of these groups, especially Hamas, could hope for improvement in their relations with Egypt and might even seek political guidance. The Islamic Action Front might even hope to replicate Mursi's success in Jordan. There are suggestions that relations would improve considerably between Egypt and the Islamic Republic Iran.

Political power invariably comes with national responsibility. Governance is often different from election campaigns. Above all, Egypt is not an ideological state or at least there are no signs of it moving in the direction of the Ayatollahs. Mursi is now the Egyptian President and not a leader of the Muslim Brotherhood. Hence, his policies would be guided more by national consideration and less by ideological leanings. Egypt-Iran contacts were not new and even under Mubarak there were hopes of an impending normalization of relations that were broken following the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

They did not fructify because both countries were unable to overcome mutual suspicions, historical acrimony and interest divergences. In a limited sense, Saudi Arabia, which did not hide its displeasure over anti-Mubarak protests, will continue to wield considerable influence over any Egyptian overtures towards Iran.

On a much larger level, the initial reactions of President Mursi are along familiar lines. His first public statement was moderate and inclusive. In the past, Mursi adopted a hostile position regarding peace with Israel and in February threatened to "review the peace treaty with Israel if the US cuts aid (to Egypt)". So long as this is done through negotiations and mutual agreement, even a revision of some of the provisions of the Camp David Accords, especially regarding security measures in the Sinai Peninsula, should not be a problem. The post-Mubarak lawlessness in Sinai has been rampant and pipelines which carry gas to Jordan have been sabotaged over a dozen times, thereby disrupting vital energy supplies to the Hashemite Kingdom. Infiltration through Sinai has been causing social as well as security problems for Israel. Thus, a greater Egyptian security presence in Sinai, more than what were allowed by the Camp David Accords, would only serve the interest of Egypt's neighbours.

In his first post-victory speech, Mursi pledged: "We came to the world with a message of peace. We will maintain international charters and conventions and the commitments and agreements Egypt has signed with the world." This is largely seen as a pledge to maintain the formal peace with Israel, a key to Egypt's political proximity with the US and even its relevance in American peace initiatives. Mursi also observed: "We will not allow ourselves to interfere in the internal affairs of any country in the same way that we will not allow any interference in our affairs." This can be interpreted as Egyptian opposition to any regime change in Middle East as well as its

reluctance to be a role model for other countries which are facing similar popular protests and upheaval.

### **RETURN OF ISLAMISTS**

**I**s the Islamist victory in Egypt the harbinger of a new trend in Middle East? Most definitely, Yes. Mursi's election comes against the backdrop of similar victories in Morocco and Tunisia for the Islamists. The recent elections in Bahrain and Kuwait also saw similar trends. In January 2006, Hamas won a landslide victory in the Palestinian elections. Also, last year one witnessed the hat-trick victory for the Islamist Justice and Development party in Turkey. The reluctance of King Abdullah of Jordan to concede some of the key demands of the Opposition is seen as an attempt to throttle an impending sweep by the Islamists. If and when free elections are held in other parts of Middle East, the outcome is likely to be no different; the Islamists will win convincingly.

In short, free multi-party elections favour the Islamists. To a large extent this is an admission of the prolonged failure of the secular parties in meeting popular demands. They served slogans when people needed basic requirements. The last revolutionary change in the Arab world occurred in 1969 when Muammar Gaddafi overthrew monarchy in Libya. The Arab republican regimes soon degenerated into family rule, personality cult, populist sloganeering and anti-Israeli rhetoric; they forgot issues of governance, accountability and welfare. Even the oil-rich countries are no different; they sought legitimacy through a welfare model of cradle-to-grave subsidies but forgot accountability. The Islamists, in contrast, enjoy an image of being pious, less corrupt and socially-conscious.

As most leaders know, political honeymoon is shorter than the marital ones. Mursi would have to show concrete results if he were to avoid return of another revolution. Mubarak was compared and condemned as pharaoh. That comparison to historic Egyptian leadership also has a religious ring; it is pre-Islamic and hence un-Islamic. Mursi, a leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, might be called a pharaoh if the Salafis see him as too much of a secularist to their taste.

### **QUO VADIS?**

**I**ndia will have to deal with the new leadership rather carefully. As happens within the country, there are multiple power centres in Egypt and Mursi is not the only addressee. Power struggle among various sections and institutions within Egypt would be constant and this would undermine a sense of direction and leadership. India will have to learn to deal with this. Wisdom lies in minimizing political hopes and expanding economic ties. Reviving the economy will be more urgent than providing stable democratic framework. Otherwise, Tahrir Square will be filled with protesters; this time around Mursi might be the pharaoh. Hence, the Indian focus will have to be economic than political.

For the conservatives in Egypt, the US-trained engineer is not a Salafi; for the liberals and minority Coptic Christians, he is not secular; and, for the military, he is a civilian. Moreover, Mursi is neither a Nasser nor a Khomeini to radically transform the direction of Egyptian policy, domestic or foreign. Will he at least be an effective captain who will navigate Egypt through these troubled times? Only time will judge.

**Note:** This article was earlier published in *The Pioneer* on 1 July 2012. Web Link:  
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**Professor P R Kumaraswamy is Honorary Director of MEI@ND**

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