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Egyptian Youth: Cautious but Hopeful

Egypt's presidential race has begun, with millions of Egyptians ready to take part in May 2012's historic elections. For the first time in their lives, Egypt's youth will witness a president other than Hosni Mubarak.

By Deena Adel for ISN

Mubarak ruled for 30 years until he was forced to step down in February 2011 following mass protests that called for his ousting. Egypt's Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) has been ruling the country during this transitional period.

Elections will take place over two days, on May 23-24. If none of the candidates receive over 50 per cent of the vote, a run-off election between the top two contenders will take place on June 16-17. Egypt's new president will be named June 21.

Egyptian youth are approaching election season with a mix of emotions; some are hopeful, while others are decidedly not; some are happy to be voting for a president for the first time, while many remain uncertain about their country's future.

"We still have a long way to go," says Ayman Abdelghani, a 26-year-old engineer. "Hopefully a new president will help speed things up."

Mariam Khodeir, a 25-year-old entrepreneur, says she's cautiously optimistic -- but still approaches the elections with jaded skepticism. "We thought getting rid of the regime would fix the problem, but we [Egyptian citizens] are the problem," she says.

Mohamed Abdelmalek, a waiter at a coffee shop, agrees that Egyptians need to be more proactive regarding the country's future development. Abdelmalek says he has overheard many of the young people he serves lattes to discuss the presidential elections. "They want to make an informed decision about who to vote for, and that is a great thing," he adds.

Egypt's presidential elections are set to be the most competitive in the country's modern history. [Many candidates](#) have been unofficially campaigning for months, with some emerging as likely frontrunners: Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh, Amr Moussa and Hazem Salah Abu Ismail.

The moderate Islamist

Viewed as a moderate Islamist and a supporter of the 2010-11 revolution, [Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh](#)

is a strong contender in the race to become Egypt's next president; his criticism of Egypt's current military rulers has won him the support of many anti-SCAF protesters.

A student activist in the 1970s, Aboul Fotouh was the president of Cairo University's Student Union in 1975, from where he graduated with degrees in medicine, and later, law. The 60-year-old physician currently serves as the secretary general of the Arab Medical Union, which helped set up field hospitals in Tahrir Square during the protests.

A former prominent Muslim Brotherhood leader, Aboul Fotouh went against the Brotherhood's decision not to field a presidential candidate by announcing his intention to run in May 2011. This bold move led to his expulsion from the organization. While he may have lost the Brotherhood's support, he has gained many opposition activists' endorsement through proving his independence.

In an indirect reference to Aboul Fotouh, the president of the Freedom and Justice party (the Muslim Brotherhood's political arm) said that, "the party will not endorse any presidential candidate that left the MB, even if he was once a leading member in the organization or even if his ideals are similar to those of the Muslim Brotherhood."

Indeed, Aboul Fotouh was not just *any* member of the Muslim Brotherhood -- he was an influential leader within the organization. For two decades he was one of 16 members of the Guidance Council controlling the Muslim Brotherhood. Aboul Fotouh was also imprisoned twice by Mubarak's regime during crackdowns on Islamists (1981) and on the Muslim Brotherhood (1996-2001). Nonetheless, he is highly regarded for his 'moderate-to-liberal' views, with many secular and liberal activists saying they will vote for him.

With her lip piercing and blonde highlights, Heba Ayman seems like an unlikely voter for the Islamist candidate. "I am voting for Aboul Fotouh because, out of all the candidates, his political views are closest to mine," the 21-year-old student affirms.

The household name

Another frontrunner in the presidential race is former Secretary General of the Arab League, [Amr Moussa](#), who also served as Egypt's Minister of Foreign Affairs for ten years; the 75-year-old's biggest advantage is his household name.

Egyptians know him because of his previous work with the government -- just as much a hindrance as an advantage. Many have shunned him due to his association with the previous regime; others fondly remember his occasional strong stance on certain issues -- particularly regarding Israel -- during his time in government. In fact, many believe that Mubarak was so intimidated by Moussa's popularity that he purposefully redirected him to the Arab League, away from national politics.

"Mubarak feared him because he knew that we all loved him," claims Morsi El-sayed, a taxi driver. "Amr Moussa was always against Mubarak's tyranny. I hope he's our next president."

Ahmed Halim, an accountant, does not share his opinion. He sneers at the mere mention of Moussa, and says he has not yet decided for whom he will vote -- but he knows his vote will not go to Moussa. "He was part of the corrupt regime," he says. "That is reason enough to never vote for him."

Halim's colleague, Rasha, tells him that Moussa spoke well on a television talk show the previous week, and that she thinks he's a "good man."

The 25-year-old shakes his head and says, "That man is an opportunist. He just wants to be president, so he will say anything people want to hear."

Moussa is known to be a charismatic speaker, and his long career as a diplomat, combined with his eloquence, will mean he will fare well with the voting public. He is also known for taking a tough stance against Israel, boosting his popularity with the pro-Palestine section of the Egyptian population.

As a leading liberal candidate, he is likely to receive a share of the anti-Islamist vote. 22-year-old Dina Said, who by her own admission is “not into politics,” says she will vote for Amr Moussa because she wants a liberal president.

The Salafist thinker

Garnering the conservative Islamist vote, Hazem Salah Abu Ismail has emerged as the third strong contender in the presidential race.

Abu Ismail represents the Salafist movement in Egypt -- which, judging by the number of Salafist representatives who were voted into the parliament earlier this year, is quite significant: The Salafist Nour party won about 25 per cent of the vote, a total exceeded only by the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom & Justice party which won over 40 per cent of the vote.

The 51-year-old candidate has made a lot of headlines due to his controversial statements which included calling for a boycott of Pepsi products “because Pepsi stands for [Pay Every Penny Saving Israel](#).”

In television appearances, Abu Ismail has said that he believes in mandating Islamic dress, prohibiting bikinis, gambling, and alcohol. However, he later blamed the media for bringing up these issues and said that now is not the time to discuss such matters; all decisions would be carefully considered before being implemented, adding that he would guarantee freedom for all, but with some ‘restrictions to protect society.’

Abu Ismail's platform includes the implementing of an Islamic financial system and Sharia law -- which many Egyptians agree should be instituted.

Mohamed Abdelghani, a 29-year-old taxi driver, says that Sharia law will be the solution to Egypt's problems. “God knows best and we should follow his rules,” he says. Abdelghani will vote for Abu Ismail.

Driving around Cairo, Abu Ismail's face can be seen on posters hung on many of the cars slowly navigating through the city's infamous traffic jams. Omayma Abdelrahman, a 25-year-old mother of two, says she stuck the poster on her car, too.

“I support him because I want an Islamic Egypt,” she says. From behind her *niqab* (face veil) Abdelrahman is just as outspoken as thousands of other brave Egyptian women who stood in Tahrir Square demanding the fall of the regime. “I went to Tahrir over twenty times,” she boasts.

Will Abu Ismail win the elections and become Egypt's first Islamist president? Omar Raouf, a political science graduate student deems it unlikely. He then adds, “But with Egypt's continuous political surprises, anything is possible.”

Deena Adel is a Cairo-based journalist and producer. She contributes to various local and international publications such as Egypt Independent, GlobalPost and the Washington Post.

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