



Previewing Egypt's 2012 Presidential Elections

Another Step Forward in the Country's Political Transition—but Not the Last

Brian Katulis May 2012

Egyptians head to the polls this week in the first round of historic presidential elections that should mark the beginning of the end of formal military rule in the country. These are the first competitive presidential elections Egypt has ever had. They signal an important step forward in the opaque political transition managed by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces—which consists of a body of senior officers in the Egyptian military—since former President Hosni Mubarak stepped down in February 2011.

Most analysts estimate that no single candidate will receive more than 50 percent of the vote this week, which would require a runoff between the top two candidates in mid-June. If the election proceeds according to current plans, the military rulers will formally hand over power to a civilian government by the end of June.

Even after a new president is sworn into office, however, Egypt's political transition will remain incomplete. Egypt faces unresolved debates over plans for a new constitution and continued questions about whether Egypt's military rulers will give up power over their budget. The military's control of key sectors of the economy will make Egypt's political transition incomplete even after a new president is sworn into office and negotiations over power will thus continue to unfold for years to come.

In response to these changes in Egypt, the United States should begin to overhaul the way it has managed bilateral ties for decades. It should review the current package of military and economic assistance and make a shift from the current strong emphasis on military cooperation toward a more balanced approach that encourages Egypt's economic integration with the neighboring region and that uses diplomacy to promote Egypt's role as a responsible leader in the Middle East. Egypt's major transformations—and the increased importance of public opinion in Egyptian politics—will require the United States to change the way it has done business with Egypt for the past 30 years.

Background on the presidential elections

Egypt's presidential elections are based on a two-round electoral system of direct public secret ballot in which the winner must receive an absolute majority of the votes. If no single candidate receives more than 50 percent of the vote in the first round on May 23 and May 24, then the top two vote-getters will compete in a runoff scheduled for June 16 and June 17.¹ The Supreme Presidential Elections Commission, comprising senior judicial officials, administers the runoff elections.

Thirteen candidates are contesting the elections. The five that have received the most attention thus far are profiled in the text box below. No single candidate is expected to capture the more than 50 percent of the vote that is necessary to avoid a runoff.

Egypt presidential candidate profiles

Amr Moussa



A lifelong diplomat and former member of the Mubarak regime, Moussa is a popular figure known for his outspoken rhetoric against Israel and the United States during his tenure as Egypt's foreign minister (1991–2001) and as secretary general of the Arab League (2001–2011). His independent candidacy rests on a political platform that consists of a centrist

strategy to unite all political parties and institutions to advance Egypt's national interests.² If elected, Moussa has said he would only stay in office for one term or as long as is necessary to transition to a parliamentary system.³

Moussa's greatest campaign challenge is preventing himself from being labeled as a remnant of the Mubarak era.⁴ He has campaigned as an alternative to Islamist candidates by supporting current constitutional arrangements regarding religion and the state, while alleging self-serving behavior by the Muslim Brotherhood during Mubarak's rule.⁵

Moussa has stated that the Camp David accords between Israel and Egypt are "dead" due to both parties' failure to fulfill articles relating to the Palestinians, but that Egypt would honor the peace treaty with Israel. He has also endorsed the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative proposed by Saudi Arabia.⁶

Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh



This expelled former deputy chief of the Muslim Brotherhood is a polarizing figure whose independent candidacy is opposed by Brotherhood leadership, who reportedly are threatening expulsion for any member who supports Fotouh.⁷ Currently a prominent Islamist activist and secretary general of the Arab Medical Union,⁸ Fotouh has a way of attracting liberals and Islamists young and old alike, through his platform of populist economics and "people first" politics.⁹ Fotouh has said he would implement Sharia as a formal legal code, rather than seeing it as a symbolic "inspiration" for laws.¹⁰

Fotouh whetted his appetite for activism as a medical student in the 1970s while attending Cairo University, at which time he was introduced to the Muslim Brotherhood (and would subsequently be jailed three times in the course of his membership).¹¹ From 1987 to 2009 he served on the Muslim Brotherhood's Guidance Council, its top decision making body. Because the Muslim Brotherhood originally promised not to put forth a candidate, Fotouh's membership was suspended when he announced his candidacy in May 2011.¹²

His attempts to appeal to many of Egypt's diverse constituencies have led opponents like Amr Moussa to accuse Fotouh of doubletalk—saying one thing to a Salafi audience and another to a liberal one. Fotouh has gained the support of the leaders of the main Salafi Nour Party, though it remains unclear how the Salafi rank and file will vote.¹³

Continued on next page

Ahmed Shafiq



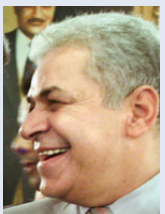
Shafiq's brief tenure as Egypt's prime minister from January 2011 to March 2011, his military experience as Egyptian Air Force commander, and his time as a diplomat and politician under Mubarak have caused speculation as to whether Shafiq's campaign will resonate with revolution-minded voters, who are not eager to return Mubarak regime officials to power and may see Shafiq as the military's candidate. His campaign platform rests on his promise to restore law and order within 30 days of being elected.¹⁴

Shafiq has spent his entire adult life in the military and in aviation, even serving as a fighter pilot in the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, and he holds advanced degrees in military strategy and sciences.

He has been accused of being out of touch with the Egyptian public, as his experience with the public was largely only as civil aviation minister from 2002–2011. During and immediately after the uprisings, public perception of Shafiq was largely negative, which caused him to retreat from the public eye until announcing his candidacy in December 2011.¹⁵

Similar to Amr Moussa, Shafiq is attempting to position himself as an alternative to Islamist candidates. He has intimated that he would appoint a Christian woman as vice president if elected, in order to defend women's rights.¹⁶

Hamdeen Sabbahi



Leftist independent presidential candidate Sabbahi is known for his nationalist ideology in the mold of Egypt's mid-20th century President Gamal Abdel Nasser and his criticisms of Israel and the United States, on which he has based his campaign.¹⁷

Sabbahi studied mass communication during the mid-1970s at Cairo University, during which time he was jailed and prohibited from working in Egyptian media for his public confrontation of Egyptian President Anwar El Sadat over rising food prices.¹⁸ Though he would be jailed several times throughout his political career, Sabbahi has remained undeterred. He went on to found and chair the Arab Nasserist Karama

("Dignity") Party in 1996 and many other influential political and social justice organizations.¹⁹

In 2000 and again in 2005, Sabbahi was elected to the lower house of the People's Assembly, and his role in prodemocracy organizations helped build opposition to Mubarak's policies in the mid- to late-2000s. His working-class background and widely known support of anti-Mubarak protesters in 2011 have bolstered his campaign. Unlike other major candidates, Sabbahi is neither an Islamist nor a former Mubarak regime official.

Sabbahi has vowed to "tear up" Egypt's peace treaty with Israel but qualified that he would honor international agreements that had not been amended by the Egyptian parliament or canceled by public referendum. He has also proposed an unlikely alliance between Egypt, Iran, and Turkey, while saying Egypt should sever relations with Saudi Arabia if it does not treat Egyptian expatriates better.²⁰



Muhammad Mursi

Leader of the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party, Mursi entered the presidential race after the FJP's first candidate, Khairat al-Shater, was disqualified by the presidential election commission.²¹

Trained in engineering in the United States, Mursi joined the Brotherhood in 1979 and became a member of the Brotherhood's Guidance Council in 1995. Mursi served in the lower house of Egypt's parliament for 10 years, from 1995 to 2005, and was the official spokesman for the Brotherhood's parliamentary bloc from 2000 to 2005. Since 2005 Mursi has played a key role in drafting the Brotherhood's political program and been its leading spokesman. In April 2011 Mursi resigned his position in the Guidance Council to become president of the Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party.²²

Mursi has said he would revise the peace treaty with Israel to create a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital and have Israel recognize the "right of return" of Palestinian refugees. He has also highlighted the possibility of Chinese investment in Egypt as a means of stimulating economic growth.²³

The candidate who wins is elected for a four-year term, and the current constitutional declaration limits a president to two terms.²⁴ But with so many unanswered questions about Egypt's overall political system, it remains unclear whether the winner will serve a full term until 2016. The current elections are taking place prior to the drafting of a new constitution, which means that Egypt's new president could take office and end up seeing the terms of that office redefined by the new constitution.

Further complicating matters, on the eve of the first round of the presidential elections, the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces signaled that it might issue a new interim constitution that could end up redefining the roles and responsibilities of a number of bodies, including the presidency.²⁵

The national debate during the presidential elections

Despite this uncertainty about the ultimate power of the presidency and continued questions about Egypt's political transition, the Egyptian public has followed the debates closely. Three issues have dominated the public debate for the past few months.

- 1. The economy.** The leading concern among most voters is the continued economic crisis, and most candidates have offered promises to alleviate the high unemployment and inflation. But none of the platforms address the full range of pressures Egypt is facing from public-sector debt, a currency crisis, and the need to comprehensively tackle large budget items such as energy and food subsidies. The campaigns have made a number of promises without presenting coherent plans with credible budget numbers.
- 2. Security and law and order.** Another leading concern is law and order. The continued clashes in the streets, combined with anecdotal evidence of increasing violent crime, has raised new questions about the security forces and the police. Recent clashes in front of the Ministry of Defense building in the Abbasiya neighborhood in Cairo reinforced the concerns about continued disorder and also raised new questions of whether civilian oversight of the security establishment is possible.
- 3. Islam and Egypt's new government.** A third overarching issue in the election debate relates to the overall identity and nature of Egypt and its political system. The sweeping victory for Islamist forces in parliamentary elections earlier this year sparked a debate over the right line to draw between religion and politics—a debate reinforced by the stalled constitutional-drafting process and the current presidential campaign. Many Egyptians viewed the Islamist political parties as trying to stack the deck in the constitutional process by including a large number of their supporters in the constituent assembly tasked with drafting a new constitution, which led to a boycott of the process by opposition figures and key institutions, including Al Azhar University. A court has ordered the creation of a new constituent assembly, and the main political forces are still debating the next steps.

Questions of whether to retain current constitutional arrangements regarding religion and the state (which already incorporates Islam as the state religion and the “principles of Islamic law” as the “chief source” of legislation) or to replace them with an Islamist system with Sharia, or Islamic religious law, playing a stronger formal role in both legal code and government, will remain the focal point of a broader ongoing debate.

Those three issues are among a long list of questions facing the next leaders of Egypt. Combined with broader questions about Egypt’s regional role—including the approach it adopts to its peace treaty with Israel—the country faces a tall agenda of unanswered questions.

This broader public discussion was featured when two leading candidates, Amr Moussa and Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh, squared off in Egypt’s first televised presidential debate on May 10, 2012. Both candidates attacked each other’s history, with Fotouh going after Moussa’s service in the Mubarak government, and Moussa hitting Fotouh’s ties to the Muslim Brotherhood and alleging links to the Gamaa Islamiya terrorist group. Fotouh painted Moussa as a representative of the Mubarak regime, which Moussa countered by noting he left the Mubarak government in 2001.

Moussa in turn accused Fotouh of complicity with the Mubarak regime by putting the Muslim Brotherhood’s interest in its own political power above the national interests of Egypt.²⁶ Moussa also faulted Fotouh for doubletalk, by relaying different messages to different constituencies such as religious conservative Salafis and liberals. Fotouh also stated that he intended to implement Sharia as a formal legal system, rather than a symbolic “inspiration” for laws, under Moussa’s questioning.

Neither candidate appeared eager to challenge the military or its prerogatives.²⁷ Both outlined more assertive positions on regional security issues and raised the possibility that the Camp David peace treaty with Israel would be reviewed and modified in some fashion.

This one presidential debate featured many of the issues on the minds of Egyptian voters. Questions about Egypt’s future are up for grabs and not just in this presidential election. No matter who wins the presidential elections, Egypt will continue to face uncertainty about its future.

The next phase of Egypt’s political transition

The 2012 presidential elections mark an important step in Egypt’s political transition after the fall of Mubarak. But it is just one step of many to come.

When the Mubarak regime fell in 2011, a new internal order began to emerge—one that has competing centers of power that can be grouped into broad categories: the military,

intelligence services, and internal security forces; leaders who are holdovers from the Mubarak era; a diverse range of Islamist political forces and institutions; activist groups and civil society organizations; the judiciary; and the business community.²⁸

Among these groups, the security establishment still maintains a strong hand in power. Its political power remains relatively unchecked by any other body, and it has a strong control over large sectors of Egypt's economy.

But alternate centers of power have shaped Egypt's transition and helped propel it forward in the election calendar. From the protesters in the streets to newly elected members of parliament to civil society and business leaders, Egypt remains in the middle of a complicated negotiation over re-establishing new lines of authority and checks and balances in the governing system.

After a new president takes office later this summer, one key challenge will be advancing the constitutional reform efforts. As mentioned in the previous section, the constituent assembly formed to draft a new constitution was blocked by political protests and legal challenges, and a new negotiation is underway to establish a more inclusive and transparent process. Though the current constitutional declaration has a six-month timetable for the constituent assembly to write and present a constitution, the next constitution could take years from the start of the drafting process to the final approval in order for it to obtain broad legitimacy and support in Egypt.

In the meantime, the constitutional debate should address many issues—including reconfiguring the checks and balances between the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, as well as a likely redefinition of the strong presidential system currently in place in Egypt to new governing systems that cannot be easily predicted today. Some leaders have proposed a stronger parliamentary system in which the presidency has diminished roles on domestic policy, and others have presented models that involve minor adaptations to the current system.

The question of the future role of Islam in Egypt's government and legal system will also remain a central topic for debate—one that will probably spark more public protests, parliamentary debates, and broad national discussions about the country's future. No matter who wins the presidential election—even if it's a candidate with strong Islamist backing—Egypt's pluralism and multiple centers of power will likely cause the debate over religion and state to be a prolonged one.

Civilian oversight of Egypt's large and influential security institutions is another major issue that will shape broader debates for years to come in Egypt. The Egyptian military has already signaled several times that it would continue to resist significant parliamentary oversight of its budget and activities, but a range of political actors have called for a change in the military's role.

Egypt's participation in the Middle East will be shaped by these internal political transitions, and it remains unclear how Egypt will redefine its leadership in the region. During the past few years, Egypt played a less prominent role in regional security issues, even though it remained deeply engaged in the Arab-Israeli conflict, notably serving as broker between Fatah and Hamas.

Now many leading presidential contenders are calling into question the status quo of Egypt's relationship with Israel, and recent public opinion polls in Egypt show popular support for unspecified changes to the Camp David treaty. The presidential candidates cite the failure of the parties to make good on the treaty's provisions regarding the Palestinians, but offer no indication of how they might seek to alter the treaty itself. This issue—along with Egypt's cooperation on global counterterrorism efforts, its military's role in regional security, and its overall strategic orientation in a Middle East that has entered a period of multipolar regional competition pitting other regional powers such as Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia against each other—will remain top concerns for the country going forward.

All of these questions about Egypt's future take place in a period of great economic uncertainty in Egypt. The most immediate crisis is the economic troubles facing millions of Egyptians, and these questions will impact how Egyptian leaders move the country's political transition forward.

In sum, Egypt is in the midst of an incomplete series of major political, security, and economic transitions that will continue to unfold for years to come. How Egypt evolves in the coming years will impact U.S. national security policy in the Middle East on multiple fronts—dealing with regional security and the Arab-Israeli conflict, fighting terrorist networks, and responding to new political trends such as the rise of Islamist parties across the region.

The U.S. response

In reaction to Egypt's changes, the Obama administration has pursued a policy aiming to balance a number of U.S. interests and values. It has made some revisions to its development assistance strategy, and it has used public and private diplomacy to make clear its stance during difficult moments in Egypt's political and security transitions. The United States has also been a leader in the G-8 effort—the Deauville Partnership launched in May 2011—to provide Egypt with necessary economic support during this difficult period.

But the United States has not yet undertaken a major strategy review on U.S. policy toward Egypt. The magnitude of the changes in Egypt, as well as broader shifts in the region, will require the next U.S. administration in 2013 to conduct a broader strategic reassessment. This past year's ousting of Hosni Mubarak, Egypt's longest-serving ruler, has opened the door to a protracted negotiation over power in Egypt with considerably

more input from the Egyptian people than any other time in recent memory. As a result, the Egyptian transition's risks and opportunities for the United States are considerable.

As Egypt completes the first period of its political transition with the presidential elections this summer, the United States should undertake a major interagency review of its Egypt policy. In the third quarter of this year, the White House should bring all of its agencies together—the State Department, Pentagon, Treasury Department, Commerce Department, and the key intelligence agencies—to conduct a thorough strategic policy review. This review would examine all options for updating the tools for engaging Egypt at a time of fundamental political change and would plan for the new government coming into office there. This strategic review would help prepare the Obama administration or a new U.S. administration for new negotiations with Egypt's leaders later this year and in 2013.

Once there is greater clarity about Egypt's political transition, the United States and Egypt should begin a bilateral strategic dialogue in early 2013 aimed at renegotiating the basic terms of their relationship. The shift in political power from the Mubarak regime to multiple centers of power and increased public political participation necessitates this strategic dialogue, which would provide structure for a process in which both countries can reaffirm their core shared interests and can identify areas for developing new ways to enhance the bilateral relationship and update the way Egypt and the United States have managed their ties for decades. The end goal of this organized negotiation is to help build a more stable foundation for U.S.-Egyptian bilateral ties.

The final result of this process would mean a fundamental redefinition of U.S.-Egyptian ties that would seek to build cooperation on economic growth, trade, regional diplomacy, and continued cooperation on regional security and counterterrorism cooperation. To achieve this, the United States and Egypt need to work to expand the range of contacts to include members of Egypt's parliament and Congress, and build broader business and civil society ties. With multiple centers of power emerging in Egypt, gone are the days when the United States can have a dialogue with a small set of leaders in Egypt's government. Just as Egypt has entered into a profound political and economic transition, U.S. policy must change as well.

Brian Katulis is a Senior Fellow at the Center for American Progress. With appreciation to colleagues Peter Juul and Eryn Sanders helped prepare this report.

Endnotes

- 1 International Foundation for Electoral Systems, "IFES Election Guide – Election Profile for Egypt" (2012), available at <http://electionguide.org/election.php?ID=2221>.
- 2 Hatem Maher, "Meet the Candidates: Amir Moussa," *Ahram Online*, April 2, 2012, available at <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/36/124/36116/Presidential-elections-/Meet-the-candidates/Amr-Moussa.aspx>.
- 3 Neil MacFarquhar, "In Egypt, Preparations for a Rarity: A Real Vote," *The New York Times*, March 8, 2011, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/09/world/middleeast/09cairo.html>.
- 4 "Times Topics: Amr Moussa," *The New York Times*, April 2, 2012, available at http://topics.nytimes.com/topics/reference/timestopics/people/m/amr_moussa/index.html.
- 5 Leila Fadel, "Coptic Christians Fear Rise of Islamists on Eve of Presidential Elections," *The Washington Post*, May 12, 2012, available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/coptic-christians-fear-rise-of-islamists-on-eve-of-presidential-elections/2012/05/12/gIQAAnhgCLU_story.html; Abdel-Rahman Hussein, "Egypt's First Presidential Debate," *Egypt Independent*, May 11, 2012, available at <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/egypts-first-presidential-debate-digest>.
- 6 Ilan Ben Zion, "Amr Moussa: Camp David Accords 'Dead,' But Egypt Still Honors Peace With Israel," *Times of Israel*, April 30, 2012, available at <http://www.timesofisrael.com/leading-egyptian-candidate-denounces-israeli-peace-treaty/>.
- 7 "All You Need to Know about Egypt's Presidential Candidates," *Ahram Online*, April 9, 2012, available at <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/36/122/38868/Presidential-elections-/Presidential-elections-news/All-you-need-to-know-about-Egypt's-presidential-can.aspx>.
- 8 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, "Egypt's Transition: Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh" (2011), available at <http://egyptelections.carnegieendowment.org/2011/10/05/abdel-moneim-aboul-fotouh>.
- 9 David D. Kirkpatrick, "Top Challenger in Egypt Vote Is an Islamist, and Moderate," *The New York Times*, March 12 2012, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/14/world/middleeast/top-challenger-in-egypt-vote-is-an-islamist-and-moderate.html>.
- 10 Abdel-Rahman Hussein, "Egypt's First Presidential Debate," *Egypt Independent*, May 11, 2012, available at <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/egypts-first-presidential-debate-digest>.
- 11 "All You Need to Know about Egypt's Presidential Candidates."
- 12 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, "Egypt's Transition: Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh."
- 13 Tamim Elyan, "Presidential Vote Splits Egypt's Strict Islamists," *Reuters*, May 9, 2012, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/05/09/us-egypt-election-salafis-idUSBRE8480WH20120509>.
- 14 Yasmine Fathi, "Ahmed Shafiq," *Ahram Online*, April 2, 2012, available at <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/36/124/36798/Presidential-elections-/Meet-the-candidates/Ahmed-Shafiq.aspx>.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 "Shafiq Might Appoint Christian Woman as Deputy," *Egypt Independent*, May 15, 2012, available at <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/ahmed-shafiq-says-might-appoint-female-christian-deputy-n1-hold>.
- 17 Ekram Ibrahim, "Hamdeen Sabbahi," *Ahram Online*, April 2 2012, available at <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/36/124/36856/Presidential-elections-/Meet-the-candidates/Hamdeen-Sabbahi.aspx>.
- 18 "All You Need to Know about Egypt's Presidential Candidates."
- 19 Ibrahim, "Hamdeen Sabbahi."
- 20 "Sabbahi Says He Would Tear Up Israel Peace Treaty," *Egypt Independent*, May 6, 2012, available at <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/sabbahi-says-he-would-tear-israel-peace-treaty>.
- 21 "Egyptian Presidential Candidates: The 13 Candidates," *BBC News*, April 26, 2012, available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-17859639>.
- 22 Mostafa Ali, "Who is Mohamed Mursi?" *Ahram Online*, May 8, 2012, available at <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/36/122/41186/Presidential-elections-/Presidential-elections-news/Who-is-Mohamed-Mursi.aspx>.
- 23 "Mursi Vows to Improve Egypt's Economy, Says Israel Treaty Needs Revision," *Ahram Online*, May 16, 2012, available at <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/7/41785/Egypt/Presidential-elections-/Mursi-vows-to-improve-Egypt's-economy,-says-Israel.aspx>.
- 24 Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, *Constitutional Declaration 2011* (2011), available at <http://www.egypt.gov.eg/english/laws/constitution/default.aspx>.
- 25 Gamal Essam Al-Din, "SCAF to issue interim constitution before presidential poll," *Ahram Online*, May 21, 2012, available at <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/42159/Egypt/Politics-/SCAF-to-issue-interim-constitution-before-presiden.aspx>.
- 26 Ben Brumfield, "2 Presidential Candidates Face Off in Egypt's First Such Televised Debate," *CNN.com*, May 10, 2012, available at http://articles.cnn.com/2012-05-10/middleeast/world_meast_egypt-elections_1_hosni-mubarak-muslim-brotherhood-al-ahram-center.
- 27 Abdel-Rahman Hussein, "Egypt's First Presidential Debate," *Egypt Independent*, May 11, 2012, available at <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/egypts-first-presidential-debate-digest>.
- 28 Brian Katulis, "Egypt's Uncertain Revolution: Where the Country Stands a Year Later and How the United States Should Respond" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2012), available at http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2012/02/egypt_uncertainty.html.