

Turbulent future for Egypt's Christians after Islamist victory

Country/Region: Middle East and North Africa, Egypt

Egypt's Christians are facing a turbulent future following the election of an Islamist president, amid a power struggle between the Muslim Brotherhood and the military.



Egypt's new president Mohammed Morsi

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The country's electoral commission announced on Sunday (24 June) that the Brotherhood's Mohammed Morsi had won the poll by 51.73% of the vote. Fearful that a Muslim Brotherhood victory would lead to the establishment of an Islamist state, many Egyptian Christians had voted for the former prime minister Ahmed Shafiq, for which they have faced harassment and hostility.

The announcement of the result was delayed by several days while hundreds of allegations of electoral fraud were investigated. Some were upheld, but the chairman of the electoral commission dismissed what he said had been the two most serious complaints of electoral violations; one was that Christians had been prevented from voting in a village in Minya, the other that over one million ballot papers were marked in favour of one candidate before they reached the polling station. The chairman said that neither of the alleged incidents could be verified.

In his victory address, Mr Morsi declared himself a "president for all Egyptians" and called for a strengthening of "our national unity". As he establishes a government, he has promised that the prime minister will be a non-Islamist and that his ministers will represent a cross-section of society. He also said that he will preserve all international treaties, which would presumably include the 1979 peace treaty with Israel.

While these comments may seem to offer hope that Mr Morsi will be an inclusive president, upholding the rights of all citizens, they fly in the face of promises he made on the campaign trail to uncompromisingly apply sharia if elected.

He said, "*We will not accept any alternative to sharia... The Quran is our constitution and it will always be so.*"

In an indication of how Mr Morsi's victory is being heralded in the region, Iran's foreign ministry congratulated Egyptians, saying that the country was "in its final stages of the Islamic Awakening and a new era of change in the Middle East."

It remains to be seen how much power Mr Morsi will actually have to implement his and the Muslim Brotherhood's agenda. Islamists had looked set to wield considerable influence in post-revolution Egypt with a majority in parliament and control of the panel tasked with writing the country's new constitution.

But the latter was suspended in April, and last week's military coup, which saw the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) dissolve parliament, assume legislative control and give itself a constitutional veto, saw the Islamists' power unravel.

There has been speculation that the Muslim Brotherhood and the army have struck some kind of power-sharing deal in return for SCAF accepting Morsi's presidential win. But it remains unclear if they are in collusion with each other or on a collision course; some commentators have been predicting massive violence.

Either scenario could prove lethal for the country's Christians. Since the revolution, they have suffered a marked increase in violence at the hands of Islamists and, far from offering them protection, the military actually perpetrated one of the worst acts of brutality against them since that tumultuous event. Military vehicles charged at Christians who were protesting peacefully in Cairo last October in a massacre that left at least 25 people dead.