

Egyptian Christians fear Islamist victory in presidential elections

Country/Region: Middle East and North Africa, Egypt

Christians in Egypt fear an Islamist victory in the impending presidential elections as the Muslim Brotherhood candidate vows to implement sharia and polls show support for this agenda.

The Brotherhood, which has previously presented itself as a moderate Islamist party, is now taking a more overtly Islamic stance. Their candidate, Mohammed Morsi, has vowed to apply sharia if elected as president. He said:

We will not accept any alternative to sharia... The Quran is our constitution and it will always be so.

Morsi has gained the backing of a prominent hard-line cleric and TV preacher, Safwat Hegazy, who compared him to the medieval Muslim leader Salah Al-Din, who united the Muslim world, defeated the crusaders and captured Jerusalem. Hegazy said at a campaign rally:

We are seeing the dream of the Islamic Caliphate coming true at the hands of Mohammed Morsi... The people want to implement god's law



Abdeen Palace,
office of the President of [Egypt](#)
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A poll conducted by the Pew Research Centre, which interviewed a representative sample of 1,000 Egyptians between 19 March and 10 April on their political views, revealed strong support for this agenda.

Six in ten want Egyptian laws to follow the Quran strictly, while around a third want them to conform to Islamic principles but not strictly follow the Muslim holy book.

When asked whether Turkey or Saudi Arabia was the better model for the role of religion in government, 61% said the latter, where an extreme and puritanical version of Islam, Wahhabism, is strictly enforced.

The Muslim Brotherhood was given a favourable rating by 70% of the interviewees, five per cent down on last year, with the Brotherhood-affiliated Freedom and Justice Party receiving the highest rating of the political parties, with over half (56%) expressing a positive opinion of them.

The presidential race is however by no means a foregone conclusion. Former foreign minister and Arab League chief Amr Moussa is among the frontrunners; the Pew research found him to be overwhelmingly popular, with an 81% approval rating.

Abdel Moneim Abul Fotouh also fared well, with 58%. Surprisingly, given his more moderate Islamist stance, Abul Fotouh has won the backing of some hard-line Salafists. He was expelled from the Muslim Brotherhood after the revolution because of his insistence that he would run for president.

The group had initially said that it would not field a presidential candidate but recently changed its position on this. After taking the greatest number of seats in the parliamentary elections, it has found itself largely powerless in the face of the ruling military's control. The Brotherhood feels it has a right to rule.

Dilemma for Christians

The presidential race poses a great dilemma for the country's Christians, who have to choose between one of the Islamist candidates and former members of the Mubarak regime. Despite suffering discrimination and persecution under the latter, most would prefer to see one of its contenders win.

George Gamal, a 50-year-old Christian from Imbaba – the scene of a [deadly Islamist attack](#) on Christians a year ago – said:

If religion is mixed with politics, this country will be destroyed. It will be an Islamic emirate.

Christians have increasingly been the victims of violent attack since the fall of Mubarak and rise of Islamists within the political sphere. They fear that the country could become a strict Islamic state where their sizeable community of around 8 million people would not be welcome.

Marina Nadi, a Christian business administration student, said that she will not be voting for an Islamist candidate:

The Islamist-dominated parliament has done nothing to allay the Christians' fears about their future in this country.

Many Christians are backing Moussa, who has advocated a separation of religion and state, while others prefer Ahmed Shafiq, who was Mubarak's last premier.

Some say that they could live with an Abul Fotouh victory. He has expressed support for a law that would not require official permission for the building of churches or mosques – a matter over which Christians have experienced much discrimination and opposition – and also said that Christians and women should be allowed to run for president.

The Pew research found that a growing number of Egyptians believe that Islam is playing a major role in the political life of the country: 66% compared with 47% two years ago. And while most interviewees believe that Islam is playing a positive role in the country's politics, those who say its role is negative has increased significantly, from just two per cent in 2010 to 25% today.

The presidential elections, which begin on 23 May, will be a further – perhaps decisive – indicator of the extent of the role that Islam will play in Egypt's future.