

A new future for Egypt:

Reflections on the Muslim Brotherhood's election victory

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"On Sunday 24 June 2012, Egypt's presidential election commission announced that Muslim Brotherhood (MB) candidate Dr Mohamed Morsi won the presidency, defeating ex-premier Ahmed Shafiq. Morsi has thus become the first Islamist to be elected head of an Arab state. The "international community"'s reaction to Morsi's win was surprisingly upbeat: Foreign Secretary William Hague congratulated the Egyptian people for their commitment to the democratic process and for electing a new President in this historic moment for Egypt. He also wished Morsi success in the challenging task ahead. The White House called Morsi's election "a milestone" in Egypt's road to democracy. The spokesperson of the European Union (EU)'s foreign policy chief, Catherine Ashton, issued a statement, saying that she welcomed the peaceful conduct of the presidential elections in Egypt. She congratulated Morsi on his election as the President of Egypt and said that she looked forward to engaging with him and his executive, which she trusted would be inclusive and representative of Egypt's diversity. She also encouraged the president-elect to reach out to all other political and social groups.

There had been similar positive reactions from the international community to Egypt's People's Assembly elections of late 2011 and early 2012 that gave the Islamist parties – the MB and the Salafis - a landslide victory. The MB's Freedom and Justice Party and the ultra conservative Salafi al-Nour Party gained more than 70 % of the seats.

These reactions to the Parliamentary and Presidential victories of Islamists in Egypt contrast sharply with the international community's reaction to the electoral win of Palestine's Hamas movement in January 2006. Hamas has its roots in the Muslim Brotherhood: The international community then reacted by boycotting Hamas and was complicit in furthering and deepening the bi-polarization at the domestic Palestinian level. There is a key difference though between the MB and Hamas: although both movements have chosen to compete in elections, the MB has renounced violence while Hamas has not.

Moreover, Egypt is a different case altogether and the power of the people since the Arab uprisings appears to have changed the international community: Egypt is a crucial ally of the "West" in the MENA sphere: It is the most populous country in the Middle East and the third-most populous on the African continent (its population size as at April 2011 stood at 82,999,393). Its political influence within the Non-Aligned Movement and the African Union stems from, amongst others, its strategic geographical position (in particular the importance of the Suez Canal), its diplomatic expertise, its military strength and historical events. The Arab League was formed in Cairo in 1945. Moreover, Egypt's role and efforts in the Middle East Peace Process since Camp David (1978) is also a crucial factor in its relationship with the West. In his first public speech as President elect, Morsi said that Egypt will remain steadfast to its international commitments — including the Camp David accords with Israel.

While celebrations of this defining event of the Arab "Spring" continue, Morsi faces many challenges ahead: not least domestically. SCAF (the supreme council of the armed forces) which took over after Mubarak was forced out in February 2011, still holds the main reign of power. Morsi confronts a polarised nation (he won 51.7% of the vote against 48.3% for Shafiq) and the challenging task of building consensus, dealing with an ailing economy and assuaging fears about the real intentions of the MB. A key demand of the revolutionaries is an amnesty for the thousands of young people the military has court-martialled since the Egyptian uprising. And he will be monitored for his achievements: A website, Morsimeter.com has been set up precisely to do just that: to keep a check on the new President of Egypt. The MB is however prone to deal-making with SCAF and the Egyptian people still have a major struggle ahead in their path to democratic achievements.