

# Battle for Egyptian presidency heats up

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Khairat El-Shater, a leader of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, leaves the gates of the election committee headquarters in Cairo last Thursday after registering his candidacy for the country's presidency. Photo: Getty

More than 900 people have applied to contest the first free presidential elections in post-Mubarak Egypt.

Outside the election commission office in Cairo, poor farmers in sandals and the traditional long *galabiyas* have stood in line alongside well-known suit-wearing politicians.

Last week, popular comedic singer Saad El-Sagheer, performer of such hits as I Love You Donkey, emerged from the office brandishing his official papers to file for the presidency. However, the fun and games abruptly ended with the controversial announcement by the Muslim Brotherhood that it would field a candidate.

The move has blown the election - for which the first round of voting is due to take place on May 23 and 24 - wide open.

Having first promised it would not run a candidate, leading member Khairat El-Shater will contest the election for the Brotherhood. For some of its critics, this is part of a pattern.

The organisation first gave an assurance, only to compete for a set number of seats in the recent parliamentary election, but went on to put forward more candidates than it promised.

It also said it would not control Egypt's constitutional assembly, but it has since negotiated an Islamist majority in that important body.

For many liberals, leftists and Coptic Christians, there is a growing concern that the Brotherhood is making a power grab across all branches of government. Others see the Brotherhood's broken promises as naked self-interest, far from the selfless ideals embodied in the January 2011 revolution.

One joke made the rounds of Cairo's cafes last month (political satire is a post-revolutionary growth area), following the death of the leader of the Egyptian Christians, Pope Shenouda III. It went: "The Muslim Brotherhood has announced it will not run a candidate for the current vacancy at the top of the Christian Church . . . but it may yet change its mind."

Such cynicism is reflected, not just among traditional foes of the Islamist movement, but within the ranks of the Brotherhood itself. The decision to run El-Shater was backed by only a wafer-thin majority of the leadership, and some high-profile members have publicly dissented.

El-Shater is a big personality. A former engineer, he is now a multimillionaire businessman, conservative in both social and economic viewpoints, and described by Al-Ahram newspaper as the "Brotherhood's enforcer".

He is regarded as the most important figure in the internal workings of the Brotherhood in recent decades.

With his vast wealth, El-Shater is comparable to a presidential hopeful in another country, Mitt Romney.

But unlike Romney, opponents will find it difficult to depict El-Shater as an out-of-touch millionaire lacking the common touch.

El-Shater is a leader of an organisation with deep roots in working-class districts across Egypt, has experienced the inside of Mubarak's prisons and boasts a history of activism.

Until El-Shater's explosive arrival into the race, the former secretary general of the Arab League, Amr Moussa, enjoyed a clear lead in the opinion polls. A veteran of Egyptian politics, the 76-year-old told the Egypt Independent that, if the Brotherhood added the presidency to its majority in parliament, "it will be as if there had never been a revolution".

But many Egyptians are unswayed by Moussa's rhetoric, given that he hardly represents a revolutionary break from the past - for almost a decade he served in a Mubarak-appointed cabinet.

Meanwhile, two important rival actors in Egypt's post-revolutionary drama have no presidential candidate - the revolutionary movement and the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), which still runs the country.

Last week, a young Egyptian activist in the tiny Stella Bar, a two-minute walk from Tahrir Square, was gloomily contemplating the upcoming election, and questioning whether he would vote at all.

"Tahrir [Square] does not have a candidate in this election," he said. "Nobody represents what we experienced there."

The leaderless quality of the revolutionary movement was hailed by many supporters last year, but now, when the question of power arises, it has become a liability.

The revolutionaries have not rallied around a single organisation, individual or political programme and, in the absence of a candidate who clearly carries the torch of the revolution, former Muslim Brotherhood member Moneim Abul Fotouh has become the unlikely hope of some young radicals and "liberal Islamists".

Fotouh has few fans among the military top brass or the Brotherhood leadership (with whom he split last year), but he is respected by the general public and appeals to both the revolutionary forces and moderate Islamists.

Intriguingly, his campaign team is headed by a woman, an American University of Cairo political scientist.

Far away from Cairo's downtown bars and cafes, the military SCAF leadership is surveying every electoral move.

Analysts agree that the SCAF has two primary strategic goals - first, that the vast economic interests it controls (the army is involved in the production of everything from TVs to bottled water) remain untouched; and second, securing immunity from prosecution for the series of killings that have taken place on the streets of Egypt since the revolution.

If a candidate who seemed unlikely to agree with these demands looked set to emerge victorious, an unpredictable crisis could be unleashed.

It is currently doubtful whether any of the leading candidates would dare to openly challenge the military in these two key areas. Indeed, among the revolutionary movement there is strong suspicion that the Brotherhood has made a secret deal with the SCAF.

Whatever the truth of these theories, it is likely that challenges to the continuing power of the army and security forces will continue to emanate principally from street protests, rather than the office of president.

Meanwhile, the new president will have a massive economic crisis to deal with when he takes office.

A growing state deficit, rapid shrinkage in the central bank's foreign reserves, an unpopular IMF deal to finalise, a tourist industry on its knees and high unemployment are just some of the difficulties he will face.

He will also have to satisfy the desires of millions of Egyptians living in poverty, who remain proud of their revolution but have yet to experience real economic dividends from the overthrow of the Mubarak dictatorship.

*David Lynch's latest book, A Divided Paradise: An Irishman in the Holy Land, is published by New Island*