

# Egypt: Muslim Brotherhood plans political party



Hussein Malla / AP  
Egyptian youth dance in a Faluka, traditional boats on the Nile river, during the Islamic holiday marking prophet Mohammed's birthday in Cairo, Egypt, Tuesday Feb. 15, 2011. Egypt's military is trying to push ahead quickly with a transition after Mubarak resigned Friday in the face of 18 days of popular protests. (AP Photo/Hussein Malla)

By HAMZA HENDAWI, LEE KEATH

**AP** Associated Press

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CAIRO— The long banned Muslim Brotherhood said Tuesday it will form a political party once democracy is established in Egypt but promised not to field a candidate for president, trying to allay fears at home and abroad that it seeks power. Still, the fundamentalist movement is poised to be a significant player in the new order.

Egypt's new military rulers gave a strong sign they recognize that the Brotherhood, which calls for creation of an Islamic state in the Arab world's most populous nation, can no longer be barred from politics after the mass uprising that forced out President Hosni Mubarak

with 18 days of protests.

The Armed Forces Supreme Council included a former Brotherhood lawmaker on an eight-member panel tasked with amending the constitution enough to allow democratic elections later this year.

The panel is comprised of legal experts of various ideologies, including secular liberal scholars and three judges from the current Supreme Constitutional Court, one of them a Christian, Maher Sami Youssef. The changes aim to open the field for **political parties**

to form, loosen restrictions on who can run for president and write in guarantees to prevent the rampant election rigging that ensured Mubarak's ruling party a lock on power.

The panel's head is Tareq el-Bishri, considered one of Egypt's top legal minds. A former judge, he was once a secular leftist but became a prominent thinker in the "moderate Islamic" political trend. He is respected on

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both sides as a bridge between the movements. Sobhi Saleh, the Brotherhood representative, was jailed for three days during the protests.

The military is pushing ahead with a quick transition. Generals on the council said the military wants to hand power to a government and elected president within six months, the firmest timetable yet outlined. The constitutional panel has 10 days to propose its changes to be put to a referendum.

In Washington, President Barack Obama praised Egypt's military council for working toward elections and a return of civilian control.

"Egypt's going to require help in building democratic institutions, for strengthening an economy that's taken a hit. So far, at least, we're seeing the right signals coming out of Egypt," Obama said.

The potential that the Brotherhood will emerge from Egypt's upheaval with greater influence has worried many Egyptians. It also raised alarms in neighboring Israel and among some in the United States, fearing a spread of Islamic militancy in the region. During his 29 years in power, Mubarak stoked such concerns at home and abroad, depicting his authoritarian grip as the only thing standing between Egypt and a Brotherhood takeover.

But many in Egypt contend the Brotherhood's strength is exaggerated. Police crackdowns on the group raised sympathy for it in some quarters. Government restrictions kept liberal opposition parties weak, meaning the Brotherhood was the only organized vehicle for action against the regime. Public apathy at

elections



made the more motivated pro-Brotherhood voters loom larger.

"If the freedom to create political parties is seriously allowed, the Muslim Brotherhood will be part of the scene, but just not all the scene as they were in the past regime," said Ammar Ali Hassan, an Egyptian expert on Islamic movements.

Last week, Obama played down the Brotherhood's power, calling it only "one faction in Egypt" that does not enjoy majority support.

The wave of protests that ousted Mubarak may have hurt the Brotherhood's popularity, as well.

The group initially balked at joining the demonstrations when they began Jan. 25, until its younger cadres forced its leadership to join, fearing they would be left behind. Hundreds of thousands from across the spectrum of Egyptian society joined the protests. Brotherhood youth were a major source of manpower and organizational experience, but they never became the majority.

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Those crowds are now energized to participate in Egyptian politics, said Diaa Rashwan, a political analyst with Al-Ahram Center for Strategic and Political Studies.

"Egypt before Jan. 25 is completely different from an post-Jan. 25 Egypt," he said. "The Muslim Brotherhood is in a state of shock because they have discovered that the developments happening around them in society aren't what they had imagined."

"In the upcoming elections, we are expecting huge numbers of people to show up to vote, a new generation. No one knows where it's going to go, and I don't expect it to go to the Muslim Brotherhood," he said.

Still, the Brotherhood, founded in the 1920s, would enter as a strong contender in a multiparty democracy, if that's the ultimate result of Egypt's turmoil. The Brotherhood has long been the most organized opposition movement.

Though banned since 1954, the Brotherhood ran candidates for parliament as independents. In 2005, it made a strong showing, winning 20 percent of parliament. But it was pushed out completely in the November and December elections, largely because of widespread vote-rigging.

The group is eager to have a legitimate role after decades of suppression under Mubarak, whose regime arrested thousands of its members in regular crackdowns.

The Brotherhood said Tuesday it would form a party once promised freer laws are in place.

"The Muslim Brotherhood group believes in the freedom of the formation of political parties. They are eager to have a political

party," spokesman Mohammed Mursi said in a statement on the Brotherhood's website.

Essam el-Erian, a senior leader in the Brotherhood, said the movement would not run any candidate for upcoming presidential elections, acknowledging that such a move would be too controversial.

"We are also not targeting to have a majority in the upcoming parliament. This is a time for solidarity, unity, we need a national consensus," he told Associated Press Television News.

He said the Brotherhood's top leadership, the Shoura Council, had decided on the creation of a party. "Now it is time to organize ourselves and for others to have the opportunity to organize themselves in political parties," he said.

The Brotherhood advocates implementing Islamic Shariah law in Egypt, though it is far less radical than Afghanistan's former Taliban rulers and less restrictive and puritanical than the Wahhabi school of Islam that reigns in U.S. ally Saudi Arabia. Some in Egypt fear it would take steps like imposing the Islamic headscarf

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on women — already almost universal among Egyptian Muslims — or banning alcohol.

The Brotherhood renounced violence in the 1970s, but supports its Palestinian offshoot Hamas in its "resistance" against Israel. The group is staunchly anti-Israel, but Brotherhood leaders say they don't seek the breaking of Egypt's 1979 peace deal with Israel.

Al-Qaida, which includes Egyptian Ayman el-Zawahri among its leadership, despises the Brotherhood, accusing it of compromising by renouncing violence and running in elections.

Since his fall, Mubarak has been hidden away at one of his palaces in the Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh, some 250 miles from Cairo, reportedly in worsening health. Two Cairo newspapers said Mubarak was refusing to take medication, depressed and repeatedly passing out. There was no immediate confirmation of the reports. Mubarak had surgery in Germany last year to remove his gallbladder.

Mubarak's stranglehold on Egyptian politics went beyond suppressing the Brotherhood.

Any opposition parties had to be approved by a commission run by his ruling National Democratic Party. The constitution stiffly restricts who can run for president, preventing a real challenger. It also lifted judicial supervision of elections, making vote-rigging easier. As a result, the existing political parties are hollow shells, with little public following.

The constitutional panel is limited to changing or annulling the six articles that consecrate those rules, "along with changes to any connected articles that the committee deems

necessary," according to the military's order to its members. The [constitution](#)



has been suspended by the military council.

Protest organizers and many other pro-democracy activists want far wider changes, demanding the constitution be thrown out completely and rewritten to loosen the heavily presidential system that put vast powers in the hands of Mubarak. Many advocate a more parliamentary system.

Under the military's plans, any deeper changes would have to be made by a new, elected parliament.

"After the transition to a democratic life and freedoms, parties and political forces can get together and work on a complete constitution," said Saleh, the Brotherhood member on the panel.

Meanwhile, the military urged an end to the labor strikes spreading wildly across the country since last week and hitting many government offices and industries. The strikes, though they eased Tuesday because of

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an Islamic holiday, have further damaged Egypt's economy.

In a move likely to deepen the economic crisis, state TV said the Central Bank of Egypt ordered banks to remain closed Wednesday and Thursday, the last two days of the business week. The stock market has been closed for three weeks and there is no word on when it will reopen. It lost about 17 percent of its value in two sessions after protests began.

The Supreme Council warned that continuing strikes and protests would be "disastrous," the state news agency MENA reported.

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AP correspondent Hadeel al-Shalchi contributed to this report.

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