
The moment of truth has arrived



By Sami Mahroum

The announcement of Mohammad Mursi as the next president of Egypt on June 24, 2012 was a historic moment for Egypt, the Arab world, and potentially for the rest of the world too. For Egypt, the election represents the first time Egyptians have freely elected their president. Mursi is also the first civilian Egyptian head of state since the military coup against the King in 1952. But for many, the election of Mursi, a senior member of the Muslim Brotherhood movement, this is the arrival of the “barbarians” at the gate.

The Muslim Brotherhoods have been the Arab world’s bogeyman for more than 80 years. Governments, secular parties, religious minority groups, women and others have feared, and forcefully resisted, the arrival of the Muslim Brothers to power. Now the “Brothers”, as they are commonly known on the Arab Street, have arrived via the ballot box in the largest and most important Arab country.

The “Brothers”, who see the election of Mursi as a culmination of more than 80 years of activism and struggle, now have the chance to prove that they are not “barbarians at the gates”. The whole world is watching, and their performance will have repercussions on the “Brothers” elsewhere in the Arab world and beyond. For many, therefore, this is the moment of truth: time for

the real Muslim Brotherhood to stand up.

This is also a moment of high fears and hopes globally. Many see the election of the “Brothers” to power in Egypt as an Arabic version of the rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey (a mild Islamist party led by the incumbent Turkish prime minister Recep Erdoğan); others fear that the continued strong role played by the Egypt’s Supreme Military Council mimics a Turkish military coup. Religious minorities, secular groups, and women’s organisations fear that their rights might be undercut under a “Brothers” rule; whereas hardliner Islamists fear that the “Brothers” in power might compromise too much on Islamic doctrines in order to stay in political power.

For the West, this is the moment of meeting the other face of Janus - the one facing the future. Janus, a mythical Roman god with two faces, one pointing to the past and the other pointing to the future. In the past, most Western governments looked at political Islam with suspicion and did not want to deal with Islamist movements such as those which rose to political prominence in Iran with the fall of the Shah in 1979. Secularist autocratic leaders have proved to be more palatable to the West (Hosni Mubarak, even Saddam Hussein for a time). The new face of the Muslim Brothers presents the West with an opportunity for rapprochement with political Islam.

The West, particularly Europe, as it deals with the new political leadership in the Arab region has to turn its other face too - the one that looks to the future. A successful rapprochement will inevitably spill over positively onto Euro-Mediterranean partnerships and help solve many of Europe’s internal problems, including immigration and integration issues. A rapprochement might also help reduce geopolitical tensions in the wider Middle East, from Palestine to Pakistan. As Turkey under AKP government has become a more effective bridge between the West and the larger Moslem world, Egypt under a moderate Islamist party might provide yet another bridge between the West and the Arab world.

A backward looking Janus, however, might still dominate the perceptions on all sides. The West might choose to approach the new Egypt with an agenda that results in more contention rather than in building trust. For Egypt, job creation, housing, health and education are matters of top priority no matter who is in power; however Europe, in particular, might choose to focus primarily on contentious cultural and security matters.

Arabs have shown themselves to be very sensitive about being told what to do. A defiant Egypt might stagnate and remain captive to current internal and regional power struggles that might begin to resemble more Pakistan than Turkey. Border skirmishes with Israel, militants and weapons smuggling from Libya, internal rivalry between various Islamist parties, greater radicalisation of the political spectrum - all are potential risks which, if compounded, will derail democracy and escalate the desire for military rule again. All of this suggests that Dr Mursi, the new Egyptian leader, and the region at large are heading into uncharted waters. The successful examples of Turkey, Malaysia and even Indonesia give reasons for hope while less successful examples give reasons for worry.

Over the past five hundred years, the thoughts, decisions and actions of Europeans have had major implications for the peoples of other parts of the world. The “Mursi moment” is a historic one because it is happening at a time of unprecedented world integration and inter-dependency. Today, as no other time before in modern history, the decisions and actions taken by the people of the Arab world matter much for the rest of the world.

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