



Written by [James Heiser](#) on May 6, 2012

New Violence Disrupts Egyptian Presidential Race

A little over two week after a committee overseeing Egypt's presidential election removed ten candidates from the race—including the three frontrunners—bloody fighting in the streets of Cairo has led to the arrest of hundreds of protesters. According to a [report from the Associated Press](#), 300 demonstrators are being held in detention for 15 days while the military conducts an investigation of the detainees, purportedly to determine what connection they have to the violence.



The election-associated violence may have become virtually inevitable when the Muslim Brotherhood, first, reneged on its promise to stay out of the presidential race, and, second, chose to run a candidate who had been convicted under the Mubarak government for money laundering and terrorism, [according to press reports](#). Although the charges against the Muslim Brotherhood's Khairat el-Shater were purportedly politically-motivated, they were also sufficient grounds for the committee overseeing the elections to remove him from the list of candidates. In place of el-Shater, the Muslim Brotherhood then placed a 60-year old engineer—Mohamed Mursi—on the ballot.

[According to the Chicago Tribune](#), Mursi quickly proved far less appealing to the Egyptian electorate, and a defeat at the polls seemed increasingly likely:

The available opinion polls show Mursi way behind others including ex-Arab League chief Amr Moussa and Abdel Moneim Abol Fotouh, an independent Islamist who parted ways with the Brotherhood last year to pursue his own presidential bid. The polls reflect the challenge facing the Brotherhood as it seeks to turn its success in legislative elections earlier this year - it won nearly half the seats in parliament - into executive power in the May 23-24 nationwide presidential vote. Some commentators believe the group has little chance, having fielded a candidate many say has limited appeal outside the Brotherhood faithful at a time when the movement is battling negative perceptions in the broader electorate. Criticized for stiff and sometimes meandering public addresses, Mursi has been described as a Brotherhood functionary rather than a visionary. His speeches are heavy on religious references that reflect his conservative credentials. But he failed to win the support of the Nour Party, the hardline Islamist party which has endorsed Abol Fotouh.

The rapid decline in the fortunes of the Muslim Brotherhood's bid to seize the presidency of Egypt had become so dramatic that Deutsche Welle led with April 30 headline, "[Egyptian race narrows down to two candidates](#)":

The poll conducted by the al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies put Moussa with 41 percent, comfortably ahead of Abol Fotouh with 27 percent. In third place with nearly 12 percent was former air force commander Ahmed Shafiq. He was the last prime minister to deposed former president Hosni Mubarak.

In short, Mursi did not even place in the top three candidates and thus had virtually no hope of being included in a runoff— if one becomes necessary—let alone winning the presidency outright.

Meanwhile, supporters of another Islamist eliminated from the race—Salafist Hazem Abou Ismail—took to the streets in protest. It was then that the race turned violent. [The Washington Times reports](#) that eleven were dead and 50 injured in the aftermath of the protests:

The Abbassya Square in North East Cairo was transformed into a battle field. Public hospitals were closed, making the situation even worse because injured protestors could not receive medical care. Earlier in the week, protestors had camped in Tahrir square demanding the military return to their barracks and hand



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power over to civilians. Protestors then marched to the main building of Defence Ministry, where they camped. Witnesses said the protesters were supporters of Hazem Abou Ismail, a Salafist-ultra conservative Islamist who was disqualified from the presidential race because his mother holds dual Egyptian/American citizenship. Under Egyptian electoral laws, both parents of an Egyptian presidential candidate must be Egyptian citizens.

With Islamists rioting in the streets, the Egyptian military has imposed a nighttime curfew in the immediate vicinity of their headquarters. Although the military's move is drawing the predictable ire of those who favor a more Islamist direction for the new government of Egypt, [an article for Reuters](#) quotes military sources which maintain that an orderly transfer of power to newly-elected leaders will still occur on schedule:

The military has dismissed those allegations, insisting it will stick to its timetable of handing over power to a new president by July 1, or even earlier in the unlikely event of an outright winner in the first round of voting this month. "Our mission ends with a successful handover of power, and we will not let anyone change the declared schedule," an army source told the website of the state-owned Al-Ahram daily.

With the political transition apparently still on schedule, it remains to be seen how Egyptians will vote on May 23. It also remains to be seen whether or not the Muslim Brotherhood will abide by a decision by a majority of the people to choose someone other than a radical Islamist to head their government. The ongoing violence seems unlikely to win the favor of the people; instead, as Reuters notes, many may move in the direction of more moderate candidates:

But many other Egyptians are equally frustrated at the protesters, accusing them of stirring up trouble on the streets and helping drive the economy to the brink of a balance of payments crisis. The nation's foreign reserves have plunged. "The army is our leader in this period and they said a million times that they don't want to stay in power. We have elections in a few days, so I don't understand what all yesterday's fuss and violence was all about," said Essam Mohamed, 51, a government office worker in the Abbasiya area.

The citizens of a post-Mubarak Egypt may be learning two of the hardest lessons in the electoral process: waiting for the votes to determine the outcome, and then living with the candidate chosen by the majority. Learning whether or not the Islamist parties are ready to accept these lesson may go a long way toward determining the future of Egypt.

Photo: Protesters run for cover during clashes outside of the Ministry of Defense in Cairo, Egypt, May 4, 2012. : AP Images



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