

Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood nominates presidential candidate

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Last Saturday, the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood (MB) announced it would run its deputy supreme guide, billionaire tycoon Khairat al-Shater, in the Egyptian presidential elections on May 23 and 24. The decision of the MB and its political arm, the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), is a turnaround by the group, which had previously said it would not field its own candidate.

Al-Shater's nomination follows weeks of mounting tensions between the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) military junta and the MB. The MB demanded several times the withdrawal of the interim government of Prime Minister Kamal al-Ganzouri, declaring that it had "failed to fulfill its duties."

The Islamists demand a strong government, to enforce the cuts demanded by international finance capital against the Egyptian working class, amidst a deepening economic crisis. "People are upset. They feel that the ones they elected cannot do anything for them", Amr Darrag, a leading member of the FJP, told *Egypt Independent*. He stressed the need for "a strong presidential candidate" to have "an executive arm to implement the reform agenda."

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) is currently in Egypt, negotiating conditions for a US\$3.2 billion loan to prevent Egypt from running out of foreign currency reserves. Reuters examined IMF proposals, which reportedly include plans for "austerity measures and new taxes."

Some days before the MB announced its decision to run a candidate, the group accused the SCAF of keeping the Ganzouri government in place to "abort the revolution or to orchestrate upcoming presidential elections". Media reports also discussed the possibility that the generals could challenge the constitutional legitimacy of the parliament, which is dominated by the

FJP.

The SCAF hit back at the criticisms with a statement describing them as "baseless slander." In a threatening tone, it asked "everyone to be aware of the lessons of history to avoid mistakes from a past we do not want to return to, and to look towards the future." This apparently referred to the events in 1954, when the Free Officers led by Gamal Abdel Nasser cracked down on the Brotherhood, after the MB allegedly tried to assassinate Nasser.

These criticisms mask a complex collaboration between the SCAF junta, its backers in Washington, and the MB in Egypt. Since the junta took power after the fall of President Hosni Mubarak on February 11 of last year, the generals and the Brotherhood have worked to strangle mass struggles by Egyptian workers and youth. The MB supported a law banning strikes and protests issued by the junta in March 2011, denounced mass protests on Tahrir Square in Cairo, and backed virtually all of the SCAF's decisions.

The MB, the biggest and best-organised political group in Egypt, controls the majority of the seats in the new parliament, which was elected on low turnout after mass protests against the military last November. To assuage concerns in the Egyptian military and in Washington that it could make a power grab and pursue a militant Islamist policy, the MB initially claimed it would not run a presidential candidate. It even expelled a longtime leading member, Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh, after he announced plans to run last year.

The present collaboration between the MB and the army, principally dictated by their common fear of the working class, does not preclude a re-emergence of bitter conflicts between the military and a party that it banned for decades prior to the toppling of Mubarak.

Only recently, one member of the council, General

Mahmoud Nasr, warned publicly that the generals would “fight to defend our projects”, a reference to the military’s vast business empire. Al-Shater, a businessmen and former banker, is seen as a potential threat to the army’s economic interests. He personally owns a huge business empire, and hopes to attract more foreign investment and promote further privatisation and liberalisation of the Egyptian economy.

Currently, however, reports suggest that al-Shater’s candidacy enjoys the support of both the army and its imperialist allies in the United States and Europe.

The military released al-Shater from prison last March. He had been arrested in 2006, along with other leading MB members, when the Mubarak regime cracked down on its big-business rivals in the MB. In 2007, he was sentenced by a military court, on charges including money laundering and supplying students with weapons and military training. He reportedly received the official pardon he needed from the junta in order to run only shortly before announcing his candidacy.

Sameh al-Barqy, a member of the moderate Islamist Egyptian Current Party and former MB member, told *Egypt Independent* that the group “would never nominate someone without the generals’ approval”. He argued that “Shater is the perfect candidate for the generals. He is a candidate of consensus par excellence. He expresses the economic interests of the West, would guarantee the interests of the military inside Egypt, and in the meantime, he has a beard.”

The US, the main sponsor of the military junta and which has also established close ties with the MB, “offered signs of tacit approval” for al-Shater’s nomination, according to the *New York Times*. State Department officials said they were “untroubled and even optimistic about the Brotherhood’s reversal of its pledge not to seek the presidency.” Al-Shater has reportedly been in contact with the US since 2005, when the Bush administration established closer ties with the Islamists; he has met with several top US officials, including US secretary of state Hillary Clinton.

The US is working closely with Sunni Islamist forces in the entire Middle East to pursue its strategic and economic interests. It has established close ties with the Ennahda government in Tunisia, backed Islamist groups in the NATO war against Libya, and is relying

on Al Qaeda-type terrorist forces to carry out regime change in Syria. The US’s main allies in preparations for war against Iran are the reactionary Sunni Islamist Gulf monarchies.

On issues of foreign policy, al-Shater has made clear he will not upset the interests of US imperialism in the region. He defends of the peace treaty with Israel as well as other international agreements, including agreements with Israel about oil and natural gas.

In bourgeois media and politics, the presidential elections in Egypt are presented as another step towards “democracy” in Egypt. The example of al-Shater shows they are nothing of the sort. Instead, they are an arena for competing factions of the Egyptian bourgeoisie to work with the US and Europe to try to strangle the Egyptian Revolution and bury the Egyptian working masses’ social and democratic demands.



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