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Associated Press

Brotherhood claims lead as Egypt vote count begins

5/25/2012

The Muslim Brotherhood has quickly staked a claim for its candidate to advance to a runoff vote, saying its exit polls showed him leading in Egypt's landmark presidential election to succeed ousted leader Hosni Mubarak.

As vote-counting began on Thursday, exit polls by several Arab television stations also suggested the Brotherhood's Mohammed Morsi was ahead of the pack of 13 candidates. The reliability of the various exit surveys was not known, and a few hours after the end of two days of voting, only a tiny percentage of the ballots had been counted.

But the swiftness of the Brotherhood's claim showed its eagerness to plant its flag and establish in the public eye that Morsi had at least won entry into a second round vote. There are five prominent candidates, but none is expected to win outright in the first round. A run-off between the two leading contenders would be held June 16-17.

The first truly competitive presidential election in Egypt's history turned into a heated battle between Islamist candidates and secular figures rooted in Mubarak's old regime. The most polarizing figures in the race were Morsi and former air force commander and former prime minister Ahmed Shafiq, a veteran of Mubarak's rule.

The Brotherhood is hoping for a presidential victory to seal its political domination of Egypt, which would be a dramatic turnaround from the decades it was repressed under Mubarak. It already holds nearly half of parliament after victories in elections late last year.

The group has promised a "renaissance" of Egypt, not only reforming Mubarak-era corruption and reviving decrepit infrastructure, but also bringing a greater degree of rule by Islamic law. That prospect has alarmed more moderate Muslims, secular Egyptians and the Christian minority, who all fear restrictions on civil rights and worry that the Brotherhood shows similar domineering tendencies as Mubarak.

"I think we are on the verge of a new era. We trusted God, we trusted in the people, we trusted in our party," prominent Brotherhood figure Essam el-Erian said at a news conference at which the group claimed its lead.

Morsi's campaign spokesman, Murad Mohammed Ali, cited exit polls conducted by Brotherhood campaign workers nationwide, though he declined to give percentages for Morsi's lead.

Regional television channels, citing their own exit polls, also placed Morsi as the top finisher, with a tussle for second place between Shafiq, moderate Islamist Abdel-Moneim Abolfotoh and leftist Hamdeen Sabahi.

Across the country, election workers cracked open the transparent ballot boxes — sealed by serial-numbered plastic bands to ensure they had not been tampered with — and began working their way through the paper ballots. By 1 a.m. Friday, four hours after polls closed, results from about 5 percent of the 13,000 polling stations emerged, putting Morsi on top at 35 percent, followed by Shafiq with 22 percent and Abolfotoh with 16 percent.

Voter turnout appeared far lighter on Thursday than the opening day of balloting Wednesday. But those in line were still revved up on the fervor of choosing after decades of having no voice in deciding their leader.

"I like the personality of Shafiq. He is strong enough to lift the country," said Suheir Abdel-Mumin, one of several women standing in line waiting to vote in the Cairo district of el-Zawiya al-Hamra.

Somaiya Imam, still undecided on whom to choose, replied with a reference to Islamist candidates, saying: "Don't you think we should vote for the candidate who holds the Quran?"

"We voted for them before and they let us down," Abdel-Mumin responded, referring to the Brotherhood's victories in last year's parliamentary elections. "They want everything — the presidency, parliament and government. They are never satisfied."

A woman standing behind the two joined in: "But he (Shafiq) is a Mubarak associate."

The Brotherhood faced a backlash from many of the voters who supported it in the parliament election but later grew disillusioned. Some accused it of trying to overly monopolize power and breaking earlier promises not to run for president. Others felt it simply had not produced any accomplishments with its parliament dominance — though the ruling military has severely hampered the parliament.

Still, Morsi enjoyed the might of the Brotherhood's well-organized electoral machine, the nation's strongest.

"We need a president who gets rid of the former corrupt and oppressive system and brings Egypt back to the position it deserves economically and internationally," said Rizk Mohammed, a contractor voting with his family in Cairo — all for Morsi. He defended the Brotherhood against claims it was trying to monopolize all power, saying pro-Mubarak media were fomenting that idea.

Also, the anti-Islamist vote was divided. Shafiq and former foreign minister Amr Moussa and Shafiq split the votes of many who craved a familiar face that could bring stability. Sabahi, as well as Abolfotoh, siphoned votes of those who could not bear to vote for a "feloul" — or "remnant" of the old regime — or a hard-core Islamist.

Moussa, who had been leading in many pre-election polls, appeared to have suffered the most.

During the day Thursday, he blasted Shafiq in an interview on Al-Arabiya television, accusing him of planning to bring back Mubarak's regime and demanding he quit the race.

"The Shafiq campaign is calling for the re-creation of the past and it will take the country back to the time before the revolution," Moussa said, looking rattled with his hair unkempt.

He also made a last-minute appearance to reporters outside his Cairo campaign headquarters with a plea for supporters to vote — a suggestion his own exit polling showed him faltering.

"I call on all Egyptians, male and female, to go out in these last two hours and vote," he said.

Both Shafiq and the Brotherhood's Morsi have repeatedly spoken of the dangers, real or imaginary, of the other becoming president. Morsi has said there would be massive street protests if a "feloul" wins, arguing it could only be the result of rigging.

Shafiq, on his part, has said it would be "unacceptable" if an Islamist takes the presidential office, echoing the rhetoric of Mubarak, his longtime mentor who devoted much of his 29-year rule to fighting Islamists. Still, Shafiq's campaign has said it would accept the election's result.

Reports of voting violations seemed relatively limited. The Egyptian Association for Supporting Democratic Development reported fistfights between supporters of Morsi, Shafiq, Abolfotoh and Moussa, and some incidents of money being given to voters. It also reported some attempts to influence voters at the polls, including women wearing the all-covering veil campaigning for Morsi inside polling centers.