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The National

Egypt recognises new Muslim Brotherhood political party

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After nearly six decades of often brutal government repression, the Arab world's oldest and most influential Islamist movement has a legal political party in the land of its birth.

The Freedom and Justice Party, established by the Muslim Brotherhood three months ago, was officially recognised yesterday by the interim military government that has ruled Egypt since the [revolution](#) in February that forced Hosni Mubarak from power.

The Brotherhood, banned since 1954 after an attempt to assassinate the president, Gamal Abdel Nasser, is now set to play a key and fully legal political role in shaping post-Mubarak Egypt, starting with parliamentary elections scheduled for September. It was the first party to be recognised by the government since the military took interim control.

Essam el Erian, a long-time spokesman for the Muslim Brotherhood, who stepped down from the group to become deputy chairman of the Freedom and Justice Party, said: "We and others were outlawed for a long time. It is now a free country for all political factions and all civil society. It means that we are starting a new era for [multi-party elections in Egypt](#)."

In the dizzying political landscape of post-revolution Egypt, the establishment of a political party that is the Muslim Brotherhood in all but name has concerned some of the youth protest groups and secularist political movements.

The threat, they say, is that the Freedom and Justice Party has a strategic advantage over newly formed groups because it is backed by the vast social welfare network that the Brotherhood has developed since it was founded in 1928 by the Islamic scholar and schoolteacher Hassan al Banna.

To allay such worries, Mr el Erian said the Freedom and Justice Party would contest only 50 per cent of the parliamentary seats in the elections.

The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, which has been running the country since February, dissolved the parliament in one of its first acts.

Support for the Muslim Brotherhood is among the highest of any organisation in the country, according to three separate surveys of the Egyptian population released last week.

The Abu Dhabi Gallup Centre poll of 1,000 Egyptians found that 15 per cent supported the Brotherhood, with Mr Mubarak's National Democratic Party the next most popular group at 10 per cent. The Pew Research Centre found 17 per cent of Egyptians supported the Muslim Brotherhood, and the International Republican Institute found 15 per cent of respondents supporting the group, though 65 per cent said they did not know whom they would support.

While the Brotherhood is far from commanding the support of a majority of Egypt's 82 million people, some western officials and secularist groups have cautioned that it would try to use the temporary power vacuum to take control of the government. Analysts said yesterday, however, that the group had long since evolved from the hard-core ideology of its early decades.

Barbara Zollner, a professor at Birkbeck College in the United Kingdom and author of a book about the group, said: "There is an argument that the Muslim Brotherhood is not what it appears to be, but I don't agree with it. The most important thing to realise is they do not want to jeopardise their position in Egypt or internationally. They are not going to impose the veil or something equally radical."

When she asked members of the group last year what they would do if they were allowed to re-enter politics as a recognised party, they said the most important point was that they would not want to follow the path of Hamas in Gaza, or Iran.

"The last thing they want is for the US to start sanctioning them or finding Egypt marginalised within Middle East power politics," Dr Zollner said. "They want to build themselves up as a democratic party."

Already, the group has displayed a canny understanding of political positioning. While Egyptian law requires that parties be open to all religions, which prevented the Muslim Brotherhood from simply becoming a political party itself, the Freedom and Justice Party has gone above and beyond the rules to open its ranks.

Officials have said they would aim for at least 30 per cent of its members to be women. Rafiq Habib, a Coptic Christian intellectual, joined as its second vice-president, effectively making him third-in-command. Another 93 Copts signed on to the party with him.

This came a week after 12 people were killed and dozens more injured in clashes between Muslims and Christians in the Imbaba area of Cairo.

Dr Habib, who has studied Islamist movements since the 1980s, said: "I think joining the party is for the benefit of Christians in Egypt. If we don't overcome the gap between Christians and Islamic movements, especially moderate ones, we have a problem. And I think joining one of the biggest parties will help that."

The task ahead for the Freedom and Justice party, as with all of Egypt's new political parties, is to establish policies, find candidates and gain recognition among citizens. While the Muslim Brotherhood is widely known through its community centres and charitable works, the political party is relatively unknown, said Gamal Soltan, head of the Centre for Political and Strategic Studies at Al Ahram in Cairo.

"There needs to be a clear distinction between the party on one hand and the religious movement on the other," he said. "This is important because Egyptians need to know who are the political actors, what are their plans."

"They cannot keep up this obscure relationship without defining how it will work. This is a challenge for all of Egypt now, and the new reality."