

Former diplomat early leader in Egyptian race

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An Egyptian woman walks past posters of presidential candidates in Cairo. Photo: Getty

What have a close colleague of Hosni Mubarak, a leading Muslim Brother, a former secretary-general of the Arab League and a 'liberal Islamist' loved by sheikhs and revolutionaries alike all have in common?

For one thing, their smiling faces beam from posters on every building along the chaotic streets of Cairo.

The final days of hectic campaigning in the first post-Hosni Mubarak presidential elections in Egypt are taking place on TV, radio and print. It also happens on the street, where clashes continued between anti-military protesters and security forces until last weekend.

The first round of voting takes place on May 23 and 24 and if no candidate reaches 50 per cent, as seems likely, a second round will take place in mid-June.

If opinion polls are to be believed (and in a country lacking a reliable history of polling, this is a serious 'if'), then the ex-head of the Arab League, Amr Moussa, will come closest to achieving half the votes in the first round.

The 75-year-old former diplomat is famous in Egypt and across the Arab world. Seen as experienced, moderate and trustworthy to many, his ten years as minister for foreign affairs in a Mubarak cabinet damns him as 'ancien régime' in the opinion of many revolutionaries.

A candidate who is almost as proud of his links to the old regime is Ahmed Shafiq, Mubarak's final prime minister and close ally of the ousted dictator. Essentially the candidate of the counter-revolution, he will win many votes from those who hanker after the 'stability' of the old dictatorship.

The irony, of course, is that a Shafiq victory would unquestionably prompt angry revolutionaries to pour back on to the streets.

The Muslim Brotherhood has its own engineering professor, Mohamed Mursi, whose campaign has yet to catch fire. Many Egyptians have concluded that control of both the upper and lower houses of parliament is enough for the Brotherhood for now.

But it seems that Moussa's strongest challenge is from a man who is, amazingly, winning support from both religious Salafists and young liberal revolutionaries. Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh is a phenomenon who could only exist in post-revolutionary Egypt. A former Muslim Brother, political prisoner and doctor, he has run the only campaign that has energised at least a section of the young generation who led the 2011 January revolution.

He has made an overt attempt to pitch himself in the political centre of a country that some fear is becoming increasingly divided.

His tolerant Islamic vision, a pledge to involve more young people in the running of the Egyptian state and a clear identification with the slogan of the revolution "bread, freedom, social justice", has seen him rise to second in recent opinion polls.

Some in the revolutionary movement remain unconvinced, but an increasing number seem to be concluding that Aboul Fotouh may be their best bet.

The army generals continue to rule Egypt and they have promised to hand over power to whichever candidate wins. However, critics say they have little intention of submitting to full civilian rule. The critics claim the military is intent on protecting its vast economic power and control over much of foreign policy, and will refuse to face legal questions over a series of violent incidents on the streets of Egypt over the past year - including the killings outside the Ministry of Defence earlier this month.

The future trajectory of the Egyptian revolution will be shaped in the coming month, with the military, revolutionary forces, presidential candidates and the religious movement all having an impact.