

## AWR Welcomes President Mursi's Appointment of Assistant Presidents

*Though challenges remain, move is step in right direction for inclusive government*



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By: Cornelis Hulsmann, Editor of *Arab West Report*, 29 August 2012

THE HAGUE, Netherlands (AWR) – I have recently received phone calls from Coptic friends who were jubilant about President Muhammad Mursi nominating the Copt Samir Marcos as assistant-president for democratic change. More phone calls later followed informing me about the nominations of Dr. Pakinam Sharqawi, an independent and female professor of political science at Cairo University, Dr. Essam el-Haddad, Muslim Brother, and Dr. Emad Abdel Ghaffour, associated with the el-Nur Party, also as assistant-presidents. They all will obtain an office in the presidential palace and all can form their own team.

All four assistant-presidents will have their own distinct responsibilities:

*Samir Marcos – democratic change*

*Pakinam Sharqawi - political affairs*

*Essam el-Haddad - foreign relations*

*Emad Abdel Ghaffour – integration (or unity) of society*

President Mursi wanted to give representation to “all strands of political opinion and all components of society,” his spokesman Yasser Ali said, announcing the appointments. “It is a diverse team, reflecting different currents of opinion, which is good,” [Sharqawi told AFP](#) after her appointment. “I don’t think that there will be conflicts within the team,” she added.

The nominations follow the earlier promise made by President Mursi to appoint the first ever female and Coptic vice presidents in a bid towards inclusiveness, [an advisor said](#) shortly after it was announced that Mursi had won the presidency in June. The promise brought an outcry from ultraconservative Islamists known as Salafis who said they would not accept a Christian or woman vice president, since they say neither is allowed to serve as head of state. Mursi was consequently forced into a compromise since he wanted to keep representatives from different currents on board. Mursi earlier appointed a senior judge, Mahmoud Mekki, as vice president. Nabil Abdel-Fatah, a scholar with Al Ahrum Center for Political and Strategic Studies, criticizes the compromise, saying, “The announcement of the new team has nothing to do with the promises Mursi made before. Those chosen will pose no challenge to the president ... this is only for cosmetic purposes.” Abdel-Fatah said the appointments suggest Mursi does not want to share powers with a vice president. “This is just another sign that we are heading to a deadlock with the Brotherhood insisting on monopolizing power,” [he said](#). Samir Marcos disagrees, telling [Sharq al-Awsat](#) that he and other assistant-presidents obtained substantial powers.

Apart from these four assistant-presidents, or vice-presidents, 17 consultants to the president have been nominated. From the 21 people advising the president 11 are Islamists; including six members of the Muslim Brotherhood’s Guidance Bureau, including Muslim Brotherhood leader Essam al-Aryan, three from al-Nur Party and one from the Gama’at al-Islamiya. The list of advisors includes [Rafiq Habib](#), son of the late head of the Egyptian Coptic Evangelical Church, and long term supporter of dialogue with Muslim Brothers. Political expert professor Seif al-Din Abdul Fattah of Cairo University and writer Sekina Fouad were included.

President Mursi earlier appointed generals Muhammad Tantawy and Samy Anan as advisors for military affairs and former NDP-stalwart Prime Minister Gamal al-Ganzoury as advisor for economic affairs. Their names are now, however, not mentioned in the list of 17 presidential advisors. This could suggest, as [Maggie Michael of AP writes](#), that their advisory appointments were largely symbolic.

Certain, however, is that with this team of advisors President Mursi wants to show that he desires to be a president for all Egyptians!

Egypt has seen lengthy struggles between different political and ideological factions in the country since President Mubarak resigned on February 11, 2011. Several of my articles for Arab-West Report have shown that difficult transition process. Such struggles are understandable, but are also delaying the process to rebuild the country economically. President Mursi shows with this team that unity and economy are two major concerns.

Egypt’s economy is in shambles. Tourism, a major source of income for millions of Egyptians, has suffered deeply. Egypt has also suffered from poor and unfair reporting about the changes it was going through.

In April 2012 the Dutch daily *De Telegraaf* suggested that a boycott of tourism to Egypt would help Christians. Nothing is further from the truth. I have argued this point strongly here: [“Why Boycotting Tourism to Egypt Doesn’t Help Christians.”](#) It is stupid to single out Christian suffering as many foreign media repeatedly do. All Egyptians have been suffering since the revolution and all Egyptians need an economic recovery.

Unfortunately, we see too many interest groups, both in the West and in Egypt, who treat absolutely everything the Muslim-Brotherhood does as being necessarily wrong. Nothing they do can be good, in their minds. This results in allegations that are not only biased but fully untrue, such as the AWR newsletter yesterday featuring a [report of Jayson Casper](#) showing that the crucifixion hoax that appeared in various Islamophobic outlets cannot be backed up with substantial facts.

I believe we must give President Mursi a chance, and the current nominations certainly show an intention to bring unity in Egypt.

Interestingly, I know three of the four assistant-presidents personally.

Samir Marcos was associate secretary-general of the Middle East Council of Churches in the 1990s, but he left the council voluntarily in order for him and his wife Vivian Fouad to devote time to Muslim-Christian dialogue. In 2004, Samir Marcos and Vivian Fouad won the [first annual prize of the Norwegian Academy for Arts and Freedom of Expression](#) in recognition for their distinguished efforts in promoting understanding between Muslims and Christians in Egypt. In 2008, Samir Marcos and I were asked to speak at the Evangelical Academy in Hofgeismar about Muslim-Christian relations in Egypt. I made a [presentation about the conflict around the Monastery of Abu Fana](#), showing that this was a land conflict in

which religion had entered. Samir Marcos made a presentation that he later presented to Arab-West Report with the title "[Religious Tension: Exceeding Safe Levels.](#)"



This showed his concern about the increasing reports about religious tensions. Prior to Sadat, one hardly heard of religious tensions. Those were days of unity. This changed with Sadat and continued with ups and downs during Hosni Mubarak.

Samir Marcos is closely associated to Coptic Orthodox Bishop Musa, who probably is one of the church's most diplomatic bishops, always in favor of dialogue with Muslims and always stressing that Muslims and Christians need to address Egypt's problems together. Samir Marcos was also close to the late Coptic Orthodox Metropolitan Athanasius (1923-2000) and Coptic thinker and legal counselor William Qilada (1924-1999), who stressed the need of dialogue and who also encouraged us in the mid-nineties to start with the Religious News Service from the Arab World that in 2003 turned into Arab-West Report.

Samir Marcos has always been closely associated with the church, but he has always remained independent. That is why at a certain moment he left the Middle East Council of Churches in order to be able to operate independently from the church. In 2009, I asked him to become director of our Center for Intercultural Dialogue and Translation - an offer which he, unfortunately, declined since he wanted to remain focused on his own project on dialogue.

Samir Marcos is a liberal and has been critical of the Muslim Brotherhood. But at the same time, he has always been open for discussions with Muslim Brothers, and in the days of Mubarak this was generally not done.

In 2011 he was asked to become the first Christian deputy-governor of Cairo.

Samir Marcos [told Sharq al-Awsat](#) on August 28 that these nominations are the fruits of the revolution. He sees his job as changing the presidency from a pharaonic system (the Egyptian way of describing an autocratic system) to a democratic system whereby the president is surrounded by advisors who are also taken seriously. He says Egyptians have to realize that the political influence of the Muslim Brotherhood on the country is a fact. I would underline that also non-Egyptians need to realize this and thus need to engage in dialogue and not confrontation. Egypt, Marcos says, does not consist of one color. There are many different political and ideological convictions in the country and they need to live together. They should not let them be played against each other as has happened in the days of Mubarak. Samir Marcos does not want to be focused on specific Christian issues but on issues that are important to all Egyptians. He rejects a quota system for Christians, a fixed number of Christians in parliament and in positions of influence, since that would divide the country along religious lines instead of looking at where people are most qualified, regardless of the religion or conviction they adhere to. Samir Marcos told Sharq al-Awsat that he wants to focus on freedom and democracy. Of course, Samir Marcos has a specific concern for Muslim-Christian relations and says the first issues Egypt needs to work on in this regard is security, citizenship, and justice for all, not for Christians only, but for all Egyptians.

Dutch Copt Ragaie Sinout has been working with Coptic Orthodox Bishop Musa and supports the nomination of Samir Marcos, whom he knows well. He also knows that Coptic supporters of Nasserist leader Hamdin el-Sabahi, presidential candidate in May 2012, are deeply distrustful of Muslim Brothers and see nothing positive in what Mursi tries to do. They are as skeptical as Nabil Abdel-Fatah, but Sinout is convinced that Samir Marcos will make all efforts to give content to his position and disagrees with Copts who are negative from the outset without wanting to give this construction a chance.

Dr. Pakinam Sharqawi was professor of Political science at the Faculty of Economics and Political Science at Cairo University. She also has been the first successor to Dr. Nadia Mustafa as head of the Program for Civilization Studies and Dialogue of Cultures at Cairo University, one of the main partners for cooperation of our Center for Intercultural Dialogue and Translation. Here we organized in 2006 a lecture for former Dutch Prime Minister Andreas van Agt. Dr. Pakinam Sharqawi [went with us to Amman to launch with HRH Prince Hassan the Electronic Network for Arab-West Understanding on June 5, 2008.](#)

In June 2009, I was asked to lecture at Cairo University about the work of Arab-West Report. In 2009, Dr. Pakinam Sharqawi became a board member of our Center for Arab-West Understanding. She resigned shortly after for lack of time, but her brief membership clearly shows her sympathy for the work of Arab-West Report. Dr. Pakinam Sharqawi referred several of her students to work as student interns with Arab-West Report. She strongly believes in involving youth in dialogue. I have met with her in 2011 at a meeting at the Egyptian Moral Rearmament Association where we spoke about a presentation in Cairo about Jerusalem as a city for all faiths, whereby also Israelis active in dialogue could be invited. She is not a member of any Islamist organization and thus should be seen as an independent.



Dr. Essam el-Haddad was the secretary for international relations of both the Muslim Brotherhood and the Freedom and Justice Party. I was first introduced to him in April this year by Dr. Usama Farid, an Egyptian businessman with good connections in the Brotherhood. And [Dr. Usama Farid](#), in turn, was introduced to our board member Mr. Cherif Esmat Abdel Meguid. In April, I proposed a visit for an Egyptian parliamentary delegation to both the Dutch and European Parliaments, not only consisting of members of the Freedom and Justice Party but also of other political parties because that would signify that representatives of different Egyptian political orientations together want to work towards a new Egypt. Dr. Essam el-Haddad was in full favor of this concept which, I hope, soon will be realized with preparations that are now taking place to visit the Netherlands and the European Parliament.

Dr. Essam el-Haddad is also a businessman and has a clear vision of how to develop Egypt economically, which he has explained on various occasions. He wants to fight corruption and attract foreign investors, and he knows that political stability is a major prerequisite for foreign investors. [See here an interview with him.](#)

Unlike the previous three assistant-presidents, I have never met with Emad Abdel Ghaffour, chairman of the Salafist el-Nur Party. But I have met in the past months with several prominent members of the Nur Party and they may be strict in their religious beliefs, but at the same time many prominent al-Nur Party members show a willingness to cooperate with Christians. Sheikh Hamdy Abdel Fatah from Qufada is an example of such a prominent Nur Party member, as I have also highlighted in [my speech about Muslim-Christian relations in the European Parliament on May 9 this year.](#) Emad Abdel Ghaffour is highly critical of Israel but is also clear that: "When it comes to all the agreements that Egypt has signed, we have to respect them and demand their activation. There are many articles in the peace treaty that have not been activated, such as solving the Palestinian issue, giving Palestinians the right to self-determination, self-rule, and the establishment of a Palestinian state on the Palestinian land. These are many articles which, if activated, will make the Palestinian people feel they benefited from the peaceful process." On December 21, 2011 he provided an [interview to al-Jazeera TV](#) that shows a good insight into his convictions.

I am well aware of statements attributed to Muslim Brotherhood and al-Nur members that do not show much respect and acceptance for people with different beliefs. Jihad Watch, MEMRI and other Islamophobic outlets tend to highlight such statements. These statements do exist, but one then also needs to ask for the positions of people making such statements. Do they occupy a position of responsibility? Do they speak on behalf of their party? As in all large movements, also among Muslim Brothers, el-Nur members, liberals, and Christians, one finds people who advocate dialogue and others who are extremely confrontational. We should see both aspects of Egypt and encourage those who are advocating dialogue, mutual understanding, security, citizenship, justice and economic progress for all Egyptians. I therefore believe President Mursi should be complemented for establishing such a team of people around him.

Certainly we have to see what they will be able to do and achieve. It won't be an easy task, but let's give this team a chance!