

Egypt Brotherhood in crisis after leader quits

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Egypt Muslim Brotherhood leader Mahdi Akef

The leader of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, Mohammed Mahdi Akef, has quit in a row with conservatives sparking a crisis within the leading opposition group, reports said on Monday.

Akef, who had been due to stay on as the movement's supreme guide until next year, resigned on Sunday after conservatives blocked the appointment of a senior reformist to the politburo, leading Egyptian dailies said.

Akef was not immediately available for comment although one of his aides said he was in his office on Monday.

His deputy Mohammed Habib said he would issue a statement later in the day to clarify what happened in the stormy meeting at which Akef reportedly resigned.

In a statement on the Brotherhood's website, Akef neither confirmed nor denied he had quit, saying only that he had been surprised by the press reports.

He said they distracted attention from a continuing police crackdown against the movement, which remains an outlawed organisation in Egypt despite having members in parliament.

The crisis came after weeks of speculation that conservatives led by the Islamist group's secretary general, Mahmud Izzat, were blocking the appointment to its politburo of Essam al-Erian, a leading reformer who spent five years in jail for Brotherhood membership.

Erian refused to comment on the row.

Abdel Moneim Mahmud, a journalist associated with the reformers, told AFP that Akef's resignation would trigger a deep rift in the group.

"Akef is a balanced man. He tried to reconcile different points of view. Without him, there will be an explosion in the Brotherhood," he said.

Akef said earlier this year that he would step down when his term expires early next year. The 81-year-old was elected leader in 2004 and oversaw the Brotherhood's surprise parliamentary election gains a year later.

Fielding candidates as independents to get round the ban in force against it since 1954, the Brotherhood won a fifth of the seats in parliament.

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