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Egyptians Are Still Marching forward toward Democracy

Op-Ed by Ahmed H. Zewail

Contrary to the global perception that Egypt is sinking into chaos, presidential election debates reflect hope for a new Egypt. Open debate between secular and Islamist groups was unthinkable over the past 60 years. This openness means the Egyptian body politic is maturing.

CAIRO — A few days ago, I watched a debate between Amr Moussa and Abdel Moneim Aboul-fotoh, two of the leading candidates among the 13 running for president of Egypt. This stunning debate went on for more than four hours and was watched by millions of Egyptians and Arabs. Contrary to the perception around the world that Egypt is inexorably sinking into chaos and intolerance, this debate in many ways reflects the hope for a new Egypt following last year's January 25 revolution.

From the time of Ramses II, the strong pharaoh who ruled Egypt thousands of years ago, until last year, when Hosni Mubarak's reign ended, Egyptians were never able to



Egyptian presidential candidate Khaled Ali speaks at a news conference in Cairo May 21. Voting for Egypt's presidential election begins May 23. Op-ed contributor and Egyptian Nobel Prize winner Ahmed Zewail says 'a counter-revolution is not in store for Egypt' and though 'the challenges facing the country...are still monumental,' Egyptians are 'paving a new, but rocky, path toward democracy.'

Ammar Awad/Reuters

witness a debate over who should take over the democratic reins in the highest office of the land. This in itself, together with the election of the parliament last December – in which 60 percent of eligible voters participated – are milestones in the history of the nation, paving a new, but rocky, path toward democracy.

Unlike in nearby Syria or earlier in Libya, the Egyptian Army has, in my view, taken the high road and protected the revolution in its infancy. And it has been the guardian of these unprecedented transparent elections.

The challenges facing the country, of course, are still monumental. Among the most serious problems are economic hardship, the uncertainty of the political climate, and the deterioration of security – a feature that Egyptian society faces anew.

These problems have been compounded over the past 15 months as each of the three main constituencies involved in the revolution – the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), which is in charge of the transition period; the politically liberal as well as Islamic-oriented parties; and the youth who triggered the uprising – has stumbled in one way or another. Even some of the people most thirsty to transform Mr. Mubarak's stagnant nation from a democracy-deficient to a democracy-rich society have, in despair, yearned for the old stability.

True, there are chaotic symptoms – such as the conflicts among the different political parties and the occasional clashes between the SCAF, the parliament, and the government. But this is a form of the “creative chaos,” in the words of former US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, that is a consequence of revolutionary changes that ultimately will lead to a stable democracy.

This year's French presidential election in which François Hollande defeated Nicolas Sarkozy is a lesson for us in the peaceful, civilized transfer of power. But looking back, we know the French Revolution some two centuries ago, though a liberation movement not unlike ours, was accompanied by widespread bloodshed and ugly political conflicts for many years.

It is a hopeful sign indeed that we Egyptians are still marching forward toward democracy with relatively little bloodshed. All signs indicate that a counter-revolution is not in store for Egypt. We will not turn back to a totalitarian governing system.

Perhaps most encouraging of all is the confidence of Egyptians in their future. The governor of the Central Bank of Egypt, Farouk Al-Okda, recently informed me that the hard-currency revenues coming from expatriates to the central bank are the highest ever. Even the many strikes for betterment of education, improvement of health care, and increase in salaries can be read as acts of high expectations for the future.

A rise in violence between some Muslims and Christians is cause for concern. But its origin and intensity are exaggerated in the media.

Egypt's Christian history is in the fabric of the society.

Growing up in Egypt, I witnessed the harmony between the peoples of the two of faiths; together we celebrated Eid, Easter, and Christmas, and together we lived in the same building and went to the same school. The late Pope Shinoda III used to say: "We do not live in Musr, but Musr [Egypt] lives within us." The current grand imam and sheikh of Al-Azhar, Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, has signed a new constitutional paper demanding unity and human rights for all Egyptians.

In the post-revolution period, some bad actors, including those from the previous regime, seek to fan inter-religious violence in order to destabilize our infant democracy. The fact that it hasn't taken a deep hold is yet another sign of hope.

Naturally, the role of religion in politics is now being debated, and in fact the recent debate is telling of this change. Mr. Aboul-fotoh was a member of the Muslim Brotherhood group that was established in 1928 and had experienced political persecution ever since. He represents the "Al-Tayaar Al-Islami," or "The Islamic Party," in the broadest sense of the words.

Mr. Moussa, on the other hand, who was a foreign minister and secretary general of the Arab League during the Mubarak era, represents the "Al-Tayaar Al-Librali," or the "The Liberal Party."

The open debate between the secular and religious orientations of politics was unthinkable over the past 60 years. This new openness means the Egyptian body politic is maturing. Citizens are taking responsibility for their own fate by insisting that diverse visions and ideologies compete. In the end, Egyptians know that, for the first time, they can choose their future. It won't be dictated or imposed by anyone.

From my involvement in Egypt, I am confident that the SCAF will hand over power to the elected president. However, I believe that the SCAF wishes to have a "respectable exit" and some guarantees regarding the status of the Army in the constitution of the new Egypt.

My message to the Egyptian people, and especially to the politicians, is simple: For the sake of Egypt, unite together to complete the passage from fallen dictatorship to emergent democracy by focusing on charting the new constitution. No matter who comes to power, the constitution will protect citizens against abuse of authority either by the legislative or executive branch. Luckily, Egypt still has a respected and robust judiciary system to complete the triad of democracy.

My concern is that the practice in Mubarak's era of "Hizb Aada Al-Nagah," or the "Success-Enemy Party," would continue through "conflicts of trivialities," drifting the nation away from the central issues of the constitution and economic productivity. The more effective this unproductive course, the longer the transition time to democracy.

It is imperative that we do not give up hope. The world must support a democracy that has passed the stage of conception and is now in the gestation period, ready for a new birth.

Ahmed Zewail is the 1999 Nobel Prize winner in chemistry; he is playing an active role in Egypt's transformation to democracy.

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