

Published: 4 January 2013

Islam Is Not the Problem in Egypt

Many conclude that religion is causing turmoil in Egypt. Islam is not the problem. The turmoil comes from the gap between expectations of speedy change by those who made the 2011 revolution and the slow process of dismantling the old way of life while building a new society.

Op-Ed by Ahmed H. Zewail



Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi addresses the newly convened upper house of parliament in Cairo Dec. 29. Op-ed contributor Ahmed Zewail says 'theocracy won't work in Egypt any more than secularism. What will work is governance that is guided by the Islamic values of the majority with protection of the minority's rights.' This is similar to the United States, 'whose values are guided by the Christian faith.'

Egyptian Presidency/AP

Cairo — The political theater in Egypt is now full of drama. Everyone is asking the million-dollar question: “Where is Egypt going?”

Many so-called experts have concluded that religion is the source of current turmoil. It is not.

The source of turmoil is the gap between expectations of speedy change by those who made the January 2011 people’s revolution and the slow process of dismantling the old way of life while building an entirely new society.

Throughout my life I have never seen Egyptians expressing such an intense feeling of national ownership. This is one of the most important rewards of the revolution. The

people of Egypt are thirsty for real democracy after the revolution empowered them to seek their rights. They may have been patient for 30 years of Hosni Mubarak's reign, yet they are impatient with the progress made so far precisely because it is their own expectations they must live up to.

The liberals and protesters are fearful of a return to dictatorship. The Islamists who have suffered for decades from jailing, torture, and underground struggle now have the above-ground legitimacy to govern and do not wish to go back to their unfavorable status. Besides this political divide, there exists the silent majority, the so-called *Kanaba* Party, or the couch party, which is sitting and waiting – and will vote when the opportunity arises – for the return of normal life.

Ahmed Mostafa, a middle-class Muslim Egyptian, said to me, “A president from the Muslim Brotherhood is fine with me, but he should rule guided by our Islamic values and not in line with his *Gamaa* ideology.” *Al-Gamaa al-Islamiyya*, or Islamic Group, is one of Egypt's largest extremist organizations.

“Only when he changes his mind from being a *Gamaa* Brother to a nation leader would we have real progress in Egypt,” Mostafa said, adding, “for now, achieving the desired change, we must shape the iron when it is hot. We are no longer fearful of our government.”

After the presidential election in June of last year, which resulted in a near split of votes between the Islamists and civil liberals, President Mohamed Morsi received the support of many Egyptians, including many who did not vote for him, in the hope of putting the country on the right track to development. Egyptians wanted their elected president to succeed in addressing the real and numerous issues facing the nation, including the stagnant state of the economy and the reforms needed in sectors such as education and health care. If religion had been the dividing force, this support for the president would not have materialized.

However, after his decrees on the speedy ratification of the Constitution and on limits to judicial rulings, opposition escalated all over the country. Islamist supporters of the president demonstrated their influence by holding rallies with hundreds of thousands.

The organization of the Egyptian population along these major lines – an Islamist constituency, civil liberals, and the silent majority – is not much different from what exists in established democracies. What is new and different for Egyptians is that the fear has disappeared and has been replaced with a sense of the power to shape their collective destiny.

What might be the path forward in the new year?

First, and most important, we need inclusive national partnership among the different parties through dialogue. This unity will come about when the population feels protected by the Constitution and feels secure about the independence of the judiciary. When this is achieved through good governance, violence will subside and the focus will turn to economic growth.

Second, the people of Egypt are in dire need of progress. The government must select some major projects of reform that fulfill Mr. Morsi's promises to revitalize the economy. I believe it is crucial to begin a serious effort to increase productivity, and this can only be achieved in the modern world by improving education and building a knowledge-based economy.

Third, everyone must accept that Egyptians are a religious people. But theocracy won't work in Egypt any more than secularism. What will work is governance that is guided by the Islamic values of the majority with protection of the minority's rights. In a different form, this structure, with a well-accepted constitution based on the principles of human rights and religious freedom for all, would not be too different from the situation in the United States, whose values are guided by the Christian faith.

Egypt has great potential because of the latent power of its human capital. We need to grab hold of the future now. This should be Egypt's New Year's resolution!

Ahmed Zewail was awarded the Nobel Prize in chemistry in 1999.

© 2013 Global Viewpoint Network/Tribune Media Services.