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Fund Egypt's Future to Save the Arab Uprising

Op-Ed by Ahmed H. Zewail

As I was leaving Cairo after Hosni Mubarak stepped down, I asked Esraa, a young woman who was one of the leaders of the revolution: "What was your objective?" She said, "*taghier al nezam*", a change of the system. The Egyptians brought down the head of the system, but not the system itself. That is the challenge now.

Egypt's revolution, like Tunisia's, represents a model for change in the Middle East. These societies are not fragmented by tribal or sectarian conflicts. Despite differences of faith or even the occasional collisions between them, Egypt is united. In contrast, the second model for revolutions is that of Yemen, Libya and others in the making. In these cases, unfortunately, tribal and sectarian conflicts may lead to chaos and civil war, ultimately dragging the Middle East backward into conflict and fanaticism, not forward.

To avert this, the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia cannot be allowed to fail. Egypt is the key. With 85m people, it is the largest country in the region and the heart of the Arab world. Making sure it succeeds is essential for the spread of democracy and stability of the world's energy supply as well as for peace in the region. What can be done?

From my experience pushing for reform over two decades and as a negotiator with the youth and government leaders during the revolution, I know what in the long term is needed most — a decent education system. The so-called "children of Facebook" who fomented the revolution know Egypt was once ahead of South Korea in scientific research and development. They know that in the 30 years Mr Mubarak

sat in his palace and Egypt deteriorated, China has lifted hundreds of millions out of poverty, sent astronauts into space, built megacities and high-speed trains, and brought its students up to world standards. They ask why Egypt cannot do the same thing.

This will, of course, take time but it is imperative to begin now. Of Egypt's many problems the three most urgent to address are governance, economy and education. The army's Supreme Council, now the ruling political entity, has to ensure swift political changes. Egypt badly needs national unity and reconciliation. But to take the critical long-term steps to transform society it needs financial support. While Egyptians themselves must fashion the new nation, they need help in rebuilding sustainable institutions. The place to start is with the pivotal project, "renaissance in education and development", whose acronym is the first command of the Koran — read.

For years the west supported Mubarak and gave aid for what it hoped was stability — but was actually stagnation — in the Middle East. What Egypt needs now is a global partnership of private and government organisations to establish a fund to finance a revolution in education. This should be directed by a board of trustees from renowned Egyptians and world leaders in co-operation with the Egyptian government.

Such an effort would need an initial \$1bn from private and government sources. Further funds then could come from other nations and be deployed by the World Bank, the Arab Bank and the Islamic Development Fund. Repudiation of debt will redirect national resources to this and other vital projects. Egypt does not possess rich natural resources. Its agricultural area is relatively small — less than 10 per cent of the total land. Its growth relies on tourism, Suez Canal tariffs and foreign investment. Yet Egypt is rich with human capital. According to the United Nations, Egypt's population will grow to 114m before it stabilises in the year 2065.

The psychological influence of launching such a fund at this moment cannot be underestimated. Like Tunisia, Egypt today is in flux, as a range of interest groups contend over the direction of the future. By showing that effective, and youth-based, institutions can be built, this project would point Egypt in the right direction.

In Egypt, every family is suffering from the deteriorated schooling and university system of the Mubarak regime. What families want most of all is to secure a good education for their children.

It is in the best interests of everyone — the Chinese, the Americans, the Europeans and the other Arab states — who wants long-term stability in the Middle East that the peaceful democratic revolutions in Egypt and elsewhere succeed. Time is of the essence!

The writer was awarded the Nobel Prize for chemistry in 1999. Currently he is a professor at the California Institute of Technology, serves on President Barack Obama's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology, and is involved in Egypt's transition to democracy

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