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Pillars of Change in Egypt

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expectations.**

Op-Ed by Ahmed H. Zewail



Egypt's election, like the revolution itself, is defying expectations.

Egyptians are going to the polls to elect a democratic parliament, an experience they have not had for over half a century. This is an extraordinary and exhilarating event.

What's remarkable about it, among other things, is that only a week before the plebiscite began, an on-schedule election was thought to be impossible. The media were predicting that a fair election could not be pulled off and that, if voting did occur, it would be bloody and violent. But Egyptians weren't daunted. They remembered how, 10 months ago when the uprising began, many pundits predicted that Hosni Mubarak's regime was too strong for the revolution to succeed. Egyptians were not the kind of people to rise against their leader, they said, and if they did, they would have no idea how to create a democracy.

The election, like the revolution itself, is defying expectations. So far, more than 70% of eligible voters have participated, turning out despite long lines. Peace has prevailed.

So why have Egyptians gone against expectations, and what does the future hold in the postelection era?

When I was growing up in Egypt, we used to ponder the influence of the Nile's eternal nature on the character of Egyptians, on their peaceful, jovial and easygoing ways, and in some sense on their passive attitude toward change. Renowned Egyptian

geographer Gamal Hemdan wrote of Egypt's character and its "genius of locus," the country's unique interplay between geography and culture. Egyptians, in general, have been tolerant and content, perhaps because time in their civilization has extended over millennia, and changes in mere tens of years would seem abrupt. But as we are seeing once again, Egyptians are capable of sweeping and rapid change once it has been collectively deemed appropriate.

Since the 1880s, Egyptians have revolted four times, about once every 40 years. For the last half a century, though, change did not result in democratic gains, which has caused some to question whether that outcome would be possible this time. I believe democracy will prevail.

Five years ago, at the zenith of Mubarak's rule, I wrote about four pillars of change that could transform Egypt into a knowledge-based society and a democratic state: reform of the constitution, respect for the rule of law (including a strong and independent judiciary), a renaissance in education and reform of the media.

Since January, significant changes to the constitution have been made, the most important of which was limiting the presidential term to four years, with a two-term maximum. Although the constitution will not be finalized until early next year, it is clear that the power of the presidency will be limited and that it will be checked by an elected parliament and an independent judiciary.

There is also cause for optimism about the second pillar of change. During the Mubarak era, Egypt's respected and professional judiciary system was weakened, and in some cases manipulated, but the totality of it remained robust and capable of enforcing justice in the country, and it has been reinvigorated by the year's events. This was evident in the first round of elections last week, which was conducted completely under the supervision of Egyptian judges, with impressive results. Ultimately, with the establishment of democratic institutions, I believe the new system of the rule of law in Egypt will ensure freedom of speech and the equal rights of all Egyptians.

The third pillar of change — education — has already been inaugurated. During the Mubarak regime, a renaissance in education, which I have long advocated, was impossible to implement. But since the January revolution, the government has made great strides, among them passing a decree to establish the Zewail City of Science and Technology for the purpose of modernizing science and technology education and advancing the level of productivity. We have already raised nearly \$200 million as the seed for an endowment to establish a campus in Zewail City that will be governed by a board of trustees made up of distinguished scholars, including the president of Caltech and six Nobel Prize winners. These steps are the beginning of a nationwide transformation.

The one pillar that has not yet been established is reform of Egyptian media. The media, both public and private, still lack depth and breadth in coverage. Media outlets tend to be partisan rather than objective, and some promote disunity. Because the media — especially television — have great influence on a population still plagued by illiteracy, it is important that journalism improve. It is inevitable that the influence of the first three pillars of change will ultimately lead to a new and healthier media for Egypt.

I believe Egypt's transformation is irreversible, that no force can ultimately deter the movement toward democracy. The "barrier of fear" has dissolved, and Egyptians know they can demand and institute change, and that the mind-set of Tahrir Square is lasting. Moreover, based on my personal meetings with the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, I am convinced that the army will transfer power to a national civilian government.

In the past 10 months, there have been mistakes made, but the ongoing, judicially supervised elections demonstrate not only good intentions but also the desire of a broad swath of Egyptian society to have a free and democratic state. The Western fear that Islamists will take over and hijack democracy is exaggerated. Egyptians since the time of Akhenaton have been a people of faith, which has been a force for their unity in society. Islamists may well dominate the new parliament, but in a true democracy their performance on behalf of the people will be the key to their staying power.

Egypt's future challenges go beyond the transition to democracy. The country must contend also with its poor systems of education and healthcare, and perhaps most critical, it must address the vast economic gap between rich and poor. Domestic security must be strengthened, so that investment and tourism can reach their potential, and other economic reforms must be instituted to bring the kind of prosperity that Egyptians expect in the post-revolution era. And Egyptians must also find a way to forgive, even if they can't forget, those who hobbled the country's past aspirations.

In the coming years, Egyptians must capitalize on their "genius of locus" in order to move forward, unfettered by the past.

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