

# The New York Times

Published: 3 January 2013

## Egypt's New Year Resolution

Op-Ed by Ahmed H. Zewail

CAIRO — Egypt is in turmoil, and many so-called experts have concluded that religion is the cause. It is not.



*Tyler Hicks/The New York Times*

The source of turmoil is the gap between expectations of speedy change by those who made the people's revolution two years ago and the slow process of 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 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 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 jailings, 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.

One middle-class Egyptian Muslim, Ahmed Mostafa, told 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 national leader can we have real progress in Egypt,” Mostafa said, adding: “For now, to achieve the desired change we must shape the iron while it is hot. We are no longer fearful of our government.”

After the presidential election in June of last year, 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, numerous issues facing the nation, including the stagnant economy and the reforms needed in 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 a speedy ratification of the constitution and on limits to judicial rulings, opposition escalated. Islamist supporters of the president responded by organizing rallies of hundreds of thousands.

The organization of society along the lines of Islamists, liberals and a 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 dialogue among the different parties. This will come about when the population feels that it is protected by the constitution and an independent judiciary.

Second, the government must select some major projects that would fulfill Morsi’s campaign promises to revitalize the economy. I believe it is crucial to increase productivity, and this can only be achieved by improving education and a knowledge-based economy.

Third, everyone must accept that Egyptians are a religious people. Secularism will not work in Egypt any more than theocracy. What will work is governance that is guided by the Islamic values of the majority with protection of the minority rights.

In a different form, this structure, with a well-accepted constitution based on the

principles of human rights and religious freedom, 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 resolution.

*Ahmed Zewail, a professor of chemistry and physics at the California Institute of Technology, was awarded the 1999 Nobel Prize in Chemistry.*

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