

Published: 5 October 2011 (NYT)
6 October 2011 (IHT)

As Elections Loom, Egyptians Must Unify

Op-Ed by Ahmed H. Zewail

CAIRO — “Where is Egypt going?” a driver named Mohamed asked me recently. It is the question on everyone’s mind as the Arab Spring of popular revolution gives way to the new season of free elections this autumn.

At this unique moment in history, there are two critical challenges that face this nation at the heart of the Arab world. The first is how to further catalyze and consolidate the democratic transition through re-establishing unity among all Egyptians. The second is the related issue of achieving a commitment to peace in the Middle East that is genuinely supported by the Egyptian public.

In the months since Hosni Mubarak’s ouster the road to democracy has been rocky, but the spirit of optimism is still high. I remember the thousands of people who lined up across Tahrir Square at the entrance to the American University in Cairo to witness the announcement of the National Project for Scientific Renaissance and the building of the new City of Science and Technology. At last, it was felt, Egypt would rejoin the future that had been blocked by dictatorship. My nationally televised speech on that occasion was entitled “*Musr al-Amal*” (“Egypt: The Hope”).

That optimism was shaken by an event that took place on the last Friday of July, when the world witnessed the largest demonstration since the “de-throning” of Mubarak. The Islamists who had gathered called for the new Egypt to be governed according to strict Shariah law. The display of Saudi-like flags among the crowd prompted headlines such as “Bin Laden is in Tahrir.” Then, in September, came the attack on the Israeli Embassy in Cairo in response to the killing of Egyptian servicemen by Israeli forces in Sinai. This caused great alarm, especially in the United States, about the security of Israel and the future of peace in the Middle East.

Despite these troubling events, I remain optimistic about Egypt's future. The Egyptians are no longer fearful of their rulers, they know how to demonstrate, and they are determined to change governance. But certain guiding tenets must now be followed.

First, Egyptian society must focus on its long-term goals. It is unconscionable for the media to continue with its shallow methods of the past. The country needs to have a constructive discourse on fundamental issues, such as establishing constitutional principles on religion and governance, revamping the education system and boosting the stalled economy.

Second, it would be a mistake to unjustly alienate all people who were associated with the fallen regime. They should be regarded as fellow citizens whose resources and energy should be redirected toward building the future. Egypt cannot afford to have the vital energy of its active intellectuals consumed by the past or its political leaders absorbed by concerns over what slice they will get from the cake of revolution.

Securing democracy will require that the significant divergence of ideologies and political alignments that have emerged in recent months be once again put aside to fulfill the common aim that first united the people: the fall of the system, or "*iskat al-nizam*."

Lastly, but most importantly, the army and the government must chart a clear road map for the weeks and months ahead.

The Egyptian public still highly respects the military, but people are wary of the fact that the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces remains the main political entity governing the transition to democracy. The fact that the Supreme Council is dragging its feet unsettles everyone who recalls how the machinations of the previous regime frustrated democratic aspirations.

The best cure for this suspicion is clarity and communication from the Supreme Council on a time table for the coming elections and its stance on a number of issues: the emergency law, the military courts and the voting of Egyptians abroad. The council must also specify how and when the new government will be put in place. The massive demonstrations in Tahrir Square are continuing. In order to push forward, the country needs stability and security.

One way to bridge the trust gap with the public might be through the establishment of a council of eminent citizens who can mediate between civil society and the governing regime as the transition takes place. Such a "roundtable" between Solidarity and the military rulers of Poland guided the transition to democracy there toward the end of the Cold War.

The present confusion and distrust threatens the advance of the economic revolution upon which success or failure of the democratic revolution ultimately rests. For this reason alone we must make the political transition properly and as soon as possible.

It would be a mistake to conclude that the current strain between Egypt and Israel will mean the end of the peace treaty between the two countries. During the height of the revolution there were no banners against Israel in Tahrir Square. The current Israeli ambassador has repeatedly said that before the recent riots at the embassy he was never mistreated by the people. What ignited the anger of the young people who attacked the embassy was the killing of the servicemen on Egyptian territory in Sinai and statements of support for Mubarak as “the best friend of Israel” by officials in the Netanyahu government.

Since the revolution, Egyptians feel that “we the people,” not the rulers, must decide what kind of relationship there will be with Israel.

Following Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, the whole Middle East is awakening. The spirit of the Arab Spring will extend to the Palestinians, who will demand the end of occupation just as Egyptians demanded the end of dictatorship.

The major powers should not position themselves against the current of history. Instead, they should commit to ending the Palestinian-Israeli conflict through the creation of a new state based on the pre-1967 borders. Such a course is in the best interests of the world community because it will shift the energies of the Arab people toward building their own states instead of perennially focusing on the conflict with Israel. At this decisive moment, whoever uses the Palestinian-Israeli conflict for political gain is guilty of a crime against hope.

The highest priority is to prevent the hopes and aspirations of the Arab Spring from being derailed by disunity or the manipulation of the heated emotions that have long swirled around the central issue of peace in the Middle East.

Ahmed Zewail is the 1999 Nobel Prize laureate in chemistry, and the first U.S. Envoy to the Middle East.

A version of this op-ed appeared in print on October 6, 2011, in The International Herald Tribune with the headline: As Elections Loom, Egyptians Must Unify.

© 2011 The New York Times Company