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Egypt's March Toward Democracy

Op-Ed by Ahmed H. Zewail

CAIRO — A few days ago, I watched a debate between Amr Moussa and Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh, two of the leading candidates among the 13 running for president of Egypt. This stunning debate went on for more than four hours and was watched by millions of Egyptians and other Arabs. Contrary to the perception around the world that Egypt is inexorably sinking into chaos and intolerance, this debate in many ways reflects the hope for a new Egypt following last year's revolution.



Amr Nabil, Associated Press

From the time of Ramses II, the strong pharaoh who ruled Egypt thousands of years ago, until last year when Hosni Mubarak's reign ended, Egyptians were never able to witness a debate over who should take over the democratic reins in the highest office of the land. Our new culture of debate, together with the election of the Parliament last December, are milestones in the history of the nation, paving a new, but rocky, path toward democracy.

Unlike in nearby Syria or earlier in Libya, the Egyptian Army has taken the high road and protected the revolution in its infancy. And it has been the guardian of these unprecedented transparent elections.

The challenges facing the country, of course, are still monumental.

Among the most serious problems are economic hardship, the uncertainty of the political climate and the deterioration of security — a feature that Egyptian society faces anew. These problems have been compounded over the past 15 months as each of the three main constituencies involved in the revolution — the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), which is in charge of the transition period; the politically liberal as well as Islamic-oriented parties; and the youth who triggered the uprising — have stumbled in one way or another.

Even some of the people most thirsty for transforming Mubarak's stagnant nation from a democracy-deficient to a democracy-rich society have, in despair, been yearning for the old stability.

True, there are chaotic symptoms — such as the conflicts among the different political parties and the occasional clashes between the SCAF, the Parliament and the government — but this is a form of the “creative chaos,” in the words of Condoleezza Rice, that is a consequence of revolutionary changes that ultimately will lead to a stable democracy.

The recent French election is a lesson for us in the peaceful, civilized transfer of power. Looking back, we know the French Revolution some two centuries ago, through a liberation movement not unlike ours, was accompanied by widespread bloodshed and ugly political conflicts for many years.

It is a hopeful sign indeed that we Egyptians are still marching forward toward democracy with relatively little bloodshed. All signs indicate that a counterrevolution is not in store for Egypt. We will not turn back to a totalitarian governing system.

Perhaps the most encouraging of all is the confidence of Egyptians in their future.

The governor of the central bank of Egypt, Farouk Al-Okda, recently informed me that the hard-currency revenues coming from expatriates are the highest ever. Even the many strikes for betterment of education, improvement of health care and increase in salaries can be read as acts of high expectations for the future.

A rise in violence between some Muslims and Christians is cause for concern. But its origin and intensity are exaggerated in the media.

Egypt's Christian history is part of the fabric of the society. Egypt does not have a ghetto for its minority population nor segregation of students at schools, but indeed has some solvable problems to address, including those of civic society issues and representation in governance.

Growing up in Egypt, I witnessed the harmony between the peoples of the two of faiths. Together we celebrated Eid al-Fitr, Easter and Christmas, and together we

lived in the same buildings and went to the same schools. The late Pope Shenouda III used to say: “We do not live in Egypt, but Egypt lives within us.”

The current grand imam and sheikh of Al-Azhar, Ahmed el-Tayeb, has signed on a new constitutional paper demanding unity and human rights for all Egyptians.

In the post-revolution period, some bad actors, including those from the previous regime, seek to fan inter-religious violence in order to destabilize our infant democracy. The fact that it hasn't taken a deep hold is yet another sign of hope.

Naturally, the role of religion in politics is now being debated, and in fact the recent debate is telling of this change.

Dr. Aboul Fotouh was a member of the Muslim Brotherhood group that was established in 1928, and suffered from political persecution. He calls himself a liberal Islamist.

Mr. Moussa, on the other hand, who was a foreign minister and secretary general of the Arab League during the Mubarak era, stresses his experience and paints his opponents as religious extremists.

The open debate between the secular and religious orientations of politics was unthinkable over the past 60 years. This new openness means the Egyptian body politic is maturing.

Citizens are taking responsibility for their own fate by insisting that diverse visions and ideologies compete. In the end, Egyptians know that, for the first time, they can choose their future. It won't be dictated or imposed by anyone.

From my involvement in Egypt, I am confident that the SCAF will hand over the power to the elected president. I, however, believe that the SCAF wishes to have a “respectable exit” and some guarantees regarding the status of the army in the constitution of the new Egypt.

My message to the Egyptian people, and especially to the politicians, is simple: For the sake of Egypt, unite together to complete the passage from fallen dictatorship to emergent democracy by focusing on charting the new constitution.

No matter who comes to power, the constitution will protect citizens against abuse of authority either by the legislative and executive branches. Luckily, Egypt still has a respected and robust judiciary system to complete the triad of democracy.

My concern is that the practice in Mubarak's era of “conflicts of trivialities” can cause the nation to drift away from the central issues of the constitution and economic

productivity. The more effective this unproductive course, the longer the transition time to democracy.

It is imperative that we do not give up hope. The world must support a democracy that has passed its pregnancy stage and is now in the gestation period, ready for a new birth.

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