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Egypt's Next Steps

By AHMED ZEWAIL

CAIRO — The revolt that has erupted across Egypt is in many ways historic and should take the nation into a hopeful future. What's unexpected, even by the Egyptians themselves, is that this intifada is led by youth, the so-called Facebook children, with no religious or ideological agenda other than a better future for Egypt and its people.

In this difficult time, the military has earned the expected respect of the masses by acting professionally to maintain safety and stability as the guardian of the Egyptian people. By reclaiming the future while maintaining stability, these two forces of the youth and the military offer great hope for an orderly transition to a new Egypt.

Clearly, it is time for fundamental change in Egypt, not just cosmetic alterations. There are several reasons for the current uprising that must be borne in mind in order to figure out where to go from here. The people of Egypt have finally lost patience with power games among those surrounding the president over succession to his son, Gamal Mubarak; the lack of transparency among those who held power; and the phony elections that led in the last Parliament to a majority by Mubarak's party, effectively with no opposition.

Though Egypt has seen some economic progress in recent years, the masses of the poor have been left behind, and the middle class has actually gone backward. Only the small elite at the top has benefited lavishly by exploiting its influence with the government. The corruption resulting from this marriage and the constant demands for bribes by officials has further exhausted the tolerance of the people.

Finally, the education system, which is central to every Egyptian household's hopes of progress, has deteriorated into a sad state that is far below Egypt's standing in the world. The system failed in a big way, especially when I compare it with the one I personally experienced as a student in Alexandria in the 1960s. Moreover, scientific research in Egypt, which was ahead of South Korea, has now fallen to the tail of global rankings over the 30 years of the regime's governance.

Where do we go from here?

There are four important steps that must be taken to resolve the current crisis:

First, a council of wise men and women should be assembled to map out a new national vision and draft a new constitution based on liberty, human rights and the orderly transfer of power.

Second, the independence of the judiciary must be guaranteed.

Third, free and fair elections must be conducted for the upper and lower houses of Parliament and for the presidency, overseen by the independent judiciary;

Fourth, a new transitional government of national unity must be formed as soon as possible.

Egypt is in a transition, and it is important that the Egyptian people realize that in the coming days solidarity will be a key force for a successful outcome. The role of the military must be to maintain order and to protect the people from looting and crimes, and not to interfere in the formation of the unity government. Longstanding political parties and organizations should for now put aside their own agendas and place their priorities on building a stable bridge to Egypt's democratic future.

In order for this plan to succeed, President Hosni Mubarak must step down now. Mubarak came to power as a hero who fought bravely in Egypt's wars and headed the nation's air force. He can act heroically again if he leaves power immediately so that the transition to a new Egypt can take place in an orderly and peaceful manner.

Dr. Ahmed Zewail was awarded the Nobel Prize for chemistry in 1999. Currently he is a professor at the California Institute of Technology, serves on President Obama's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology, and is the president's special envoy for science to the Middle East.

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