

Published: 08 December 2011

Pillars of Change in a New Egypt

Constitutional, judicial and media reforms along with better education and health care are the next challenges in the quest to build a democratic state.

Op-Ed by Ahmed H. Zewail, The Los Angeles Times

Egyptians are voting 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 predicted that a fair election could not be pulled off and that, if voting did take place, 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 per cent of eligible voters have participated. Peace has prevailed. So why have Egyptians gone against expectations, and what will the post-election era be like?



A woman shows her ink-stained finger after voting at a polling station in the Manial neighborhood of Cairo. (Image credit: AFP)

Renowned Egyptian geographer Jamal Hamdan 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 their civilisation has extended over millennia, and changes in mere decades 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.

Transformation

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 the 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 finalised until early next year, it is clear that the power of the presidency will be limited.

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.

Investing in growth

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 modernising science and technology education and advancing the level of productivity.

The one pillar that has not yet been established is media reforms. 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. The 'barrier of fear' has dissolved, and Egyptians know they can demand and institute change, and that the mindset of Tahrir Square is lasting.

The western fear that Islamists will take over and hijack democracy is exaggerated. 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 health care, and perhaps most critical, it must address the vast economic gap between the 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 capitalise on their 'genius of locus' in order to move forward, unfettered by the past.

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