Democracy in Egypt – Theory and Reality*

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EGYPT SINCE JANUARY 2011: RECLAIMING NATIONAL IDENTITY

Until the uprising in 2011, any 'equality' claimed between Muslims and Christians in Egypt was superficial. While there were concerted attempts to maintain deep and strong ties with one another at the personal and pastoral level, Christians did not enjoy real equality at the institutional or constitutional level. Christians occupied at most one percent of public service, management, or ministerial positions, and those holding positions in government did so only because there was a presidential requirement to fulfil a quota. Christians experienced institutional and systemic marginalisation despite warm personal and social relations with Muslims.

The uprisings brought an incredible sense of hope to all Egyptians. I remember the incredible sense of pride I felt as an Egyptian, believing that Egyptians had finally reclaimed their sense of national identity. Those looking at the protesters in Tahrir Square could not distinguish many Christians from Muslims, though some wore distinctive clothing. They were there waving Egyptian flags in a manner that had not been seen for decades. Suddenly, people–some for the first time–thought of themselves not just as Christians or as Muslims, but as Egyptians.

Things have since deteriorated. As Khaled El-Gindy writes:

Two years after launching the historic revolution, Egyptians are more divided than ever. Violence has become the rule rather than the exception of Egyptian protests. Beneath the surface of the ever-present split between Islamists and non-Islamists that has dominated for much of the two years lie a number of other deep and growing fissures in Egyptian society along generational, class, and sectarian lines.

PROBLEMS IN TRANSITION

Unfortunately, while the uprising was spirited, it had no leader. There was no element of representation, and no attempt to bring people into dialogue. This was, however, through no fault of the public. Over the preceding 30 years, the past regime systematically destroyed its political opposition.

Tragically there is no one with the experience, knowledge, and charisma able to lead these people.

For its part, the West celebrated the collapse of the despotic regimes, but it gave no thought to what would follow them. A Western-style democracy will not work in the Egyptian environment, a region with thousands of years of history. The idea of exporting Western democracy to Egypt is naïve, hence the failure in Iraq and Algeria. Why was Egypt going to be an exception?

It is not surprising that many Egyptians are now turning away from politics. Despite great enthusiasm early on, voter apathy has steadily increased over the past two years. Each round of voting has witnessed successively lower voter turnout, with only 32 percent of eligible voters turning out for the constitutional referendum in December 2012, compared with 67 percent of voters at the peak of voter enthusiasm. In fact, President Morsi assumed office with a mandate of only 12 percent of the population. Turnout for the constitutional referendum was even worse. Democracy must be owned by the whole of the population. What some people are calling democracy is really majority rule.

If one looks at Muslim-Christian relations in Egypt today, we unfortunately see not a Muslim agenda, but an extreme Islamist one. This agenda, I believe, actually marginalises very good, faithful, mainstream Muslims. After the uprisings, the first Islamist attack was not on a Christian site, but on Sufi Muslim shrines. However, Christians have experienced a tenfold increase in attacks on churches as well as on their persons.[1] In two years, we have had more deaths than in the preceding ten years combined.

TOWARD DEMOCRACY

Democracy does not just happen. Democracy requires education and the eradication of poverty. Those living in poverty can be manipulated financially, while those living in ignorance can be manipulated ideologically. How does one expect those who are poor and/or illiterate to vote? Further, remember that this is the first time that Egyptians

have voted. Previous 'elections' had been referenda on the re-election of President Mubarak, who typically garnered about 97 percent of the vote.

True democracy in the Middle East needs leadership from above. Unfortunately, what we find now is that Egypt is not led by the government but, rather, from the street: protest can and does overturn decisions. The current leadership also excludes rather than includes anyone who does not share its agenda, as we witnessed with the debate surrounding the constitution, the single most important legal document for the foundation of the new Egypt.

The government needs to build a sense of national identity and citizenship. This is exactly what we saw in Tahrir Square in 2011, but this powerful sense of national belonging was not capitalised on. Currently, there is no sense of civil society. What we have is a government that caters to the interests of a certain sector of society. If we want democracy, we must seek democracy. Let us not call it anything else; because if the aim is to monopolise power, and secure every leadership position in the country, or to redefine Egypt for a certain sector of society, let us call it that. But if we are going to speak about having a democracy, let us actually *do* democracy.

As I have said before, Muslims and Christians in Egypt have forged good relationships with one another for over 1,400 years, but the goodwill will wear thin if people do not work to maintain it. Radicalisation, marginalisation, and polarisation are increasing. If we do not work to bring people together, we will not have democracy. If we want civil liberties, human rights, and equality, they must be respected by all and given to all. We must all work for a nation state in which all are responsible and accountable to one another, and before which all are protected and respected.

Reference
1. US Commission on International Freedom

*Excerpts from Transcript