

Program on Arab Reform and Democracy (ARD)
Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law

Speech delivered during the third ARD conference, April 27, 2012. Stanford University
by Prof. Mona Makram-Ebeid

Cairo is tense and polarized. Egypt's military is groping for solutions to the many political and economic problems that have beset the country since the fall of the old government.

Various political parties and groups are united in their opposition to military rule, despite being divided among themselves. The Muslim Brotherhood is intent on monopolizing everything.

This is all very depressing when you think of the extraordinary revolution that had the world transfixed by the courage and determination of these young Egyptians. What we are mainly confronted with today is the political monopoly which the Islamists are pursuing, thus undermining prospects for democracy in Egypt and threatening to intensify political instability.

What is at stake is the identity of the Egyptian state: a civil state that dates back to Mohammed Aly, the founder of modern Egypt, or a theocratic state as proposed by over-reaching Islamists. After ensuring its dominance over the legislature, the Muslim Brotherhood further alienated secularist parties by monopolizing the legislatively appointed, 100 member, Constituent Assembly which will write Egypt's next constitution, catalyzing a significant political crisis. When the Islamists took 72 of the seats, liberals withdrew and pitted their support behind the lawsuit that subsequently froze all activities of the Assembly. But freezing the Constitutional Assembly's activities means it is unlikely that there will be a constitution by the time the presidential elections are over. As for the presidential elections, the SCAF made it quite clear last week that it insists on

having the constitution drafted first with a referendum to follow, causing another uproar from the political parties.

However, Egypt cannot wait for long before holding presidential elections as the country is getting restive under military rule as shown by the latest demonstrations this last Friday – Egyptians’ desire for the SCAF to surrender power as quickly as possible is justified. After a year at the helm, the military failed to steer a quick and viable transition process or to tackle major policy issues. But the present path to quick presidential elections leaves no time for the adoption of a new constitution, let alone one adequately discussed and supported by a broad consensus.

Today, some Egyptians claim the country has good constitutions – 1923, 1954 and even 1971, which could be dusted off quickly. But none of those previous documents call for the parliamentary or mixed systems (like France, for example) both favored by the Freedom and Justice Party. (See Constitution). It is the 5th article of the Constitution which will cause controversial debates. [It] deals with the powers of the President, the structure of the political system, and the role of the military establishment.

For the Muslim Brotherhood, the constitution represents the legal blueprint for the post-Mubarak Egypt and the key to transforming its political project into an institutional reality – there is no need for it to rebuild the Egyptian state from the ground up in order to pursue its main goal which is its Islamizing agenda.

In a sense the biggest questions facing Egypt are whether the newly dominant Brotherhood and the SCAF turn to conflict or compromise, and how far and how fast the Brotherhood might push to make Egypt more Islamic. What is interesting also is to look at the new role of Al Azhar which tries to position itself as an arbiter between all the major political movements. The great Imam Ahmed el Tayyeb, an enlightened and incisive scholar, has issued two statements with a number of intellectuals of all hues and some Azhar ulemas to which I had the honor to participate as a member of the Beit el Eila, which is similar, in a sense, to the Bill of Rights and constitutes a guarantee of all

rights adopted as a core of the new constitution. This is what I keep on calling for in any of my interactions or TV interviews – that it should serve as a platform in the writing of the new constitution.

In affirming basic freedoms of belief, equal opportunity and preventing sectarian strife, the document is clearly aimed at promoting a moderate interpretation of Islam over more conservative interpretations such as by the Salafis who advocate a strict literalist reading of the Koran and Islamic jurisprudence. It also reflects a consensus, the only one, among a broad ideological spectrum of liberal, secular and Islamist political forces, and deals extensively with basic rights and liberties. If there is anything the US can do to help Egypt in this crucial period, it is to encourage the adoption of Al Azhar statements and encourage all political actors to realistically address the challenges that are facing it.

For many years Al Azhar has been overshadowed by the regime. Today, it does not want to be marginalized by the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafis, the two main beneficiaries of the revolution. Since Nasser's decision of 1961, the President of the Republic has appointed each great Imam of Al Azhar. Nevertheless, today several forces are pushing for a new mode of designation; i.e. by election. The election of Shaikh el Azhar would reinforce the legitimacy of the position and he would gain in credibility in the eyes of the population. Such a measure would also safeguard Al Azhar against any political pressure from the Muslim Brotherhood. However, although there is a surface consensus that Al Azhar must become more independent, there are sharply contrasting visions on the role it should play in Egyptian society and politics. Given Al Azhar's centrality, the outcome of the struggle among those visions will deeply shape the role of religion in Egyptian public life.

The current Sheikh al Azhar, Dr. el Tayyeb, has managed to position himself as an autonomous and credible voice. That is why there is today, on the liberal side, a clear interest in buttressing Al Azhar as a means of strengthening a religious counterweight to Islamist movements. As I mentioned earlier, we are pressing him to have a statement on women's rights. The question is: will the Islamists and the powerful Al Azhar

establishment accept a legal document that gives the military any formalized role in the political process? No doubt that competing visions for a reconfigured balance of power in the new political system will be confronting each other.

And now to sectarian conflicts.

In Egypt, the occurrence of sectarian clashes tends to increase when the political situation deteriorates. As a matter of fact these sectarian clashes have intensified over the past year. More generally, the Christians' situation has worsened over the past years. The increased segmentation of the Egyptian society and the newly acquired influence of the Salafi Muslims have led to the radicalization of segments of the Copt population which will most probably react to an Islamic presidential victory. Many Christians express a growing fear, and not just from the content of a new constitution; that is why a declaration of inalienable rights is perhaps the most positive step for assisting the full integration of the Coptic community into Egypt's political and social future. But for change to happen it must begin at the grassroots level – with the Coptic community itself. Copts cannot afford any more to insulate themselves with the turn toward conservatism in parliament, which will be a major impediment to creating a civil, egalitarian and democratic society, Rather, they must first push their own leaders to support representatives of the community and a unified civil identity, instead of the old confessionalism that has been the basis for so many of the sectarian issues of the past. No doubt that the result of the presidential elections will have an impact on the choice of the next Pope and the Church will need the military's support in a future bid for the papacy.

Pope Schenouda's death, though long anticipated, could scarcely have come at a worse moment. As Egypt's largely Islamist constituent assembly was elected to draft the state's post-Mubarak charter, the Coptic community comprising 10% of Egypt's population was leaderless, and among the 100 drafters of the constitution only six Copts were included. Notwithstanding the Pope's centralizing measures, as he came to be seen as the only legitimate voice of the community, the Coptic community today is more fragmented than it has been since the early 1960s.

To secure reforms they are pushing for, through the turbulent period of political transition that lies ahead, secularists and traditionalist Copts (the priests) will need to work together. Because although church leaders have more clout within the Coptic community, Coptic leftists and liberals are often better at connecting with Egyptian society writ large, particularly since many of them walked out of the constituent assembly on the basis that the assembly was insufficiently representative. That is why it is important to have an important Coptic minority voice at the table in order to make sure that Egypt's Christians will have legal protection.

What is interesting to watch today is the reaction of young Coptic activists who have been working to fundamentally change the way the community engages politically. They are now forming a new alliance of a majority of Coptic movements uniting under one umbrella. These youngsters, and not so young, are the product of Amba Moussa, the much loved prelate in charge of the youth, Osgofiat el Chabab, (Bishopric of Youth) and are disseminated all across country — and interestingly enough they have no qualms on coalescing with the Brotherhood youth movement. The church hierarchy's monopoly on Coptic political activity eroded during the last year of the Mubarak regime, largely as a result of an upsurge in anti-Coptic violence, and the feeling of regime complacency and unwillingness to curb sectarian violence and unfair laws governing church construction. Many Copts became convinced, particularly after the 2011 bombing of the Alexandrian Church of the Two Saints, that the security apparatus was complicit in the violence.

Church support for the former president continued throughout the 18-day uprising, opposing the protesters and even privately ordering them to stay home. The crisis of political authority ushered in by the fall of Mubarak opened new space for Coptic activists to operate outside of traditional hierarchies. The Maspero Youth Union was formed following the burning of several Coptic churches in the Cairo neighborhood of Imbaba – I was myself involved. This Union represented the first major challenge to the Church's political hegemony since the uprising, representing a new and direct challenge to the Church hierarchy. The other challenge was represented by Michael Mounir, a Copt from the diaspora, who founded Haya, a political party specifically geared towards Copts.

It is not easy to empty Egypt of its Christians; they have been here for as long as there has been Christianity in the world. Close to a millennium and a half of Muslim rule did not eradicate the nation's Christian community; rather it remained sufficiently strong and sufficiently vigorous to play a crucial role in shaping the national, political and cultural identity of modern Egypt.

Yet now, two centuries after the birth of the modern Egyptian nation state, and as we embark on the second decade of the 21st century, the previously unheard of seems no longer beyond imagination: what is called for by the radical brand of Islamists is a Christian-free Egypt, one where the cross will have slipped out of the crescent's embrace and off the flag symbolizing our modern national identity proclaimed loud and clear by Saad Zaghhoul, the father of independence, in 1919: Religion is for God and the Homeland is for all.

We had a government who thought that by outbidding the Islamists, through Islamicizing the society, it could also outflank them. We had state bodies who believed that by bolstering the Salafi trend they were undermining the Muslim Brotherhood, and who liked to occasionally play up to anti-Coptic sentiments, presumably as an excellent distraction from other more serious issues of government.

Relations with the US

The latest crisis in US-Egypt relations was precipitated by Egyptian outrage over the fact that American democracy promotion NGOs brazenly operated in Egypt although they were not officially registered. On the other hand, it was also a way for the SCAF to show its disapproval of the new contacts between the American administration and the Islamists. These contacts had been established without the army's mediation, as if the transition period under the authority of the army belonged to the past. A deterioration of the relations will serve nobody's interests. The new parliament is controlled by the Muslim Brotherhood, with whom Washington is just beginning to become acquainted, and by Salafis who are outright hostile to the US. Egypt is important to the US. It is the

largest country in the Middle East and has signed a peace treaty with Israel which of course is something the US wants to preserve. The military will not be running the country much longer – but it will remain a powerful player. And Egypt still needs the US. Both sides must keep in mind that the future of bilateral relations is much more important than the future of American NGOs. Egyptian and Washington policy makers should be aware that revoking financial aid would risk severing the tie that for three decades has bound the US, Egypt and Israel in an uneasy alliance that is the cornerstone of the American-backed regional order.

As Stephen Cook incisively suggested, the last thing that Egyptians – who had entirely on their own dislodged their dictator, renewing a sense of national pride and spirit – the last thing they wanted was a foreign power offering expertise and advice about how to manage their transition. Mubarak’s policies as a strategic ally of both the US and Israel ran directly against the grain of Egyptian public opinion which felt humiliated by this policy of dependency. Therefore, no Egyptian leader will make Mubarak’s mistake again.

What then do Egyptians expect from the Obama administration?

1. That the US should come to terms with the end of the strategic relationship;
2. Take a hands-off approach as Egyptians build a new political system on their own terms. This is what I emphasized to Ambassador Anne Patterson when she asked me what the US should do;
3. Praise and encourage the Al Azhar statements which underline inalienable rights, tolerance, pluralism etc., instead of pandering only to the Islamists.

Conclusion:

Egypt continues to live in the shadow of counter-revolution. Some of the most crucial of the revolution’s demands remain unfulfilled, while the makeshift character of concessions creates an anomalous situation that could well threaten not just the achievements of the revolution but also the very stability and political future of the nation. A great deal still needs to be done before the Egyptian revolution is realized, as it insists

it should be and as it has earned the right to be. Only a fully democratic Egypt is acceptable. Anything short of that goal simply will not do.

With all their blunders, the military have taken great strides toward the people, first by taking sides with the people and then in their decision to overthrow Mubarak. The millions who descended on Tahrir Square and poured onto streets across the country triggered a decisive shift within the ruling power structure, within which the military had become a predominant actor.

During the past year, notwithstanding all its mistakes, the military has taken great strides towards the people. It is time for them to traverse that crucial extra mile, for only then, as suggested by Hany Choucralla, will the Egyptian revolution have met with success and only then can we begin to undertake the most challenging and most satisfying of jobs: the job of rebuilding our nation.