



PROJECT *on* Middle East Democracy

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Voices for a Democratic Egypt

“Human Rights in Egypt: Persisting Problems, New Opportunities”

Thursday December 11th, 2008

Rayburn House Office Building, Room 2255

On Thursday December 11th, Voices for a Democratic Egypt held a panel discussion entitled, "Human Rights in Egypt: Persisting Problems, New Opportunities." Panelists included **Saad Eddin Ibrahim**, Founding Chair, Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies; **Larry Diamond**, Senior Fellow, Hoover Institution; **Neil Hicks**, International Policy Advisor, Human Rights First. The event was moderated by **Dina Guirguis**, Executive Director, Voices for a Democratic Egypt.

Dina Guirguis gave an extensive overview of the many problems in Egypt including issues related to Ayman Nour, Saad Eddin Ibrahim, Coptic Christians, and human rights suppression.

Saad Eddin Ibrahim dedicated the event to Ayman Nour “for daring to challenge Mubarak.” He then said there were only two rulers of Egypt who have ruled longer than him: Ramses II (42 years), and Muhammad Ali (40). **At 28 years of rule, nearly 65% of all Egyptians know no other president.** With the prospect of Gamal Mubarak waiting to succeed his father, Ibrahim says Hosni Mubarak wants to equate Egypt with the Mubarak family.

On the anniversary of the UN declaration of Human Rights, Ibrahim noticed that two Arabs were involved in the drafting of the document: Mahmoud Azmi and Charles Malik. He asked the audience to contrast that reality with Egypt 60 years later. **Under the rule of King Farouk there was the rule of law, and respect for treaties. What came after was “much, much worse.”** Now we have rule by one man where “absolute power corrupts absolutely.” And, **“Mubarak and his family rule Egypt as a fiefdom.”**

He then asked, “What makes Mubarak so brutal now?” The American primaries/election has given him the opportunity to settle scores from gains made by the **Bush Freedom Agenda between 2005 and 2008.** He highlighted the plight of Rida Rahman, a “Qur’anist” who was taken away from his village and tortured for a month. Only after an international outcry did anyone even know where he was.

In closing he said that Mubarak created Islamic extremists, and he is “not a man of peace.” He wants to use Islamic extremism to legitimize his rule indefinitely.

Neil Hicks said Egypt is a trendsetter in the Arab world, and therefore is critical for which way the pendulum swings between freedom and authoritarianism in the region. Bush followed the ‘stability first’ mantra that labeled Egypt as a “moderate” country because of the

November 5th elections that brought the Muslim Brotherhood 88 seats, and the HAMAS victory in January 06. These events made the administration wary of democracy promotion in the region.

There are three possible responses to the Muslim Brotherhood Hicks says: 1) oppose religion-based movements altogether; 2) permit their existence, but undermine them if they win; 3) permit them if they accept Human Rights standards. The first option has been the standard, but has also been a significant contribution to terrorism. The second option as seen in Algeria and with HAMAS has been “catastrophic.” **The third option has challenges but is the only viable option. He recommends the U.S. have criteria for condemning violence, and should open a dialogue with the Muslim Brotherhood so as to explain their position as well as listen and learn of the Brotherhood’s intentions as well.**

The U.S. should push hard for free and fair elections in Egypt in 2011, and thereafter propose a 2-term limit of office after that. He said independent election monitoring should be a priority.

Larry Diamond said our position on Egypt is similar to that of pre-revolutionary Iran. He did not want to imply that an Islamic revolution is imminent in Egypt, but he wanted to highlight our desire to cling to the status quo. He said we are “headed for challenging times ahead.” “Egypt lacks a commitment to a national project.” Moreover, “corruption has reached Pharonic levels.”

He touched on the anger of the Egyptian people at the idea of dynastic succession. Pointing to the Mahallah Kubra incident, Diamond said we do not want confrontation, but we have come to a point where **we need to take some risks: 1) there has to be a plan for the release of political prisoners (even for the ones we don’t like); 2) Egypt must have judicial independence and commit to the rule of law; 3) expand civic freedoms including freedom of the press and freedom of association; 4) civic education for the period of transition to a new government; 5) building a viable opposition during the transition period.**

What should the U.S. do? 1) We need a more humble and critical approach: close Guantanamo Bay and ban torture; 2) we can’t single out Egypt; instead we need a broad Human Rights and political agenda for the Middle East; 3) renew our commitment to Israel/Palestine peace; 4) generate strategy of dual track diplomacy; take inspiration from George Schultz; 5) increase assistance to Egyptian civil society; and tell the Egyptian government there will be consequences if it interferes; 6) promote Egyptian economic reform; 7) use leverage; if Egypt is corrupt as we say it is, there must be massive amounts of foreign assets stashed somewhere; seize them; 8)engage the Muslim Brotherhood; even if he has concerns about their denouncement of violence, or commitment to democracy.