From Tahrir Square to a New Republic: The Challenges of Promoting Democratic Constitutionalism in Egypt Today

The Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut held a public policy briefing and discussion on June 2nd, 2011 by Abdul Rahman Hamdy Jad, under the title "From Tahrir Square to a New Republic: The Challenges of Promoting Democratic Constitutionalism in Egypt Today".

PRESENTATION

Abdul Rahman Hamdy Jad, Member of the Executive Office of the Coordination Committee for the Popular Supporters of the Revolution, Coordinator of the Coalition of Independent Academics and Development Workers in Egypt.

Abdul Rahman Jad presented a testimony of his experience during the Egyptian revolution. He was engaged in pre-revolution action and explained that the main challenge faced by activists was the impossibility of change, given the high political stagnation in Egypt. He described three historic incidents that sparked the spirit of revolution. The first was the murder of Khaled Said, a young Egyptian man killed by Security Forces. A subsequent Facebook group was created, "We Are All Khaled Said," which called for silent demonstrations along the shores of Alexandria, and later the Nile. These peaceful protests gained ground as more Egyptians were moved by Khaled's death; the non-violent nature of the silent stands encouraged mass participation.

At that time, Jad recalled the discussions held amongst activists around the different modes of struggle; armed, political-constitutional, and supra-constitutional. He explained that the latter was a civilian non-violent struggle aimed at changing the existing regime. The challenge was engaging non-politically affiliated civilians, which required a national symbol that touches all Egyptians alike. Khaled Said quickly became the symbol that mobilized all social, economic, and political sectors of Egyptian society in non-violent stands condemning his death. The second milestone in the lead-up to the revolution was the January 1st bombing of the Qeddeesin Church, where the absence of security measures prior to the explosion infuriated people. On January 7th, a commemorative mourning ceremony was organized for the victims of that explosion, where expressions of frustration evolved into vocal demonstration. The final tipping point was the success of the Tunisian revolution in toppling Zein El Abedine Ben Ali's regime. The Tunisian revolution taught Egyptians that autocratic regimes are not everlasting and can be changed by the strong will of the people. The Khaled Said Facebook Group then called for a "Day of Rage" on January 25th; this call was adopted by several other activist and opposition groups.

The violent repression of peaceful demonstrations on January 25th mobilized Egyptians to take further action. Jad narrated the events of the days that followed as violent escalations by pro-government groups provoked even wider participation, until rallies eventually took over the streets of Egypt. At this point demonstrations in general, and Tahrir Square in particular, contained all segments of the Egyptian community, who mobilized to reject humiliation and murder. Jad described the joyful and inspiring environment of Tahrir Square, portraying it as a place where dreams come true. He depicted it as a utopia of
unlimited opportunity and a free public space that responded to no higher authority. He described the sense of solidarity among the demonstrators, and the situation where the spirit of initiative was the invisible force behind people's creative endeavors. The events of Tahrir Square allowed for spontaneous organization between otherwise confrontational sections of Egyptian life. There was an atmosphere of altruism, cooperation and respect among people of varying political and religious affiliations—they all had faith in a single higher aim, and were moved by a human call for action.

He went on to explain the crucial moment when public awareness shifted from apathy and disconnectedness towards the Egyptian political process to active participation in it. After the Security Forces pulled out of the streets, the prevailing security vacuum left people to take responsibility for organizing their affairs and safeguarding their security. For the first time, people assumed ownership of the streets and took on an active public role they would not retreat from. Jad explained that it is this symbolic ownership, as opposed to mere legal citizenship, that creates a nation. He concluded that the human revolutionary spirit was the driving force behind moving Egyptians from passive observers, sitting on the margins, to active participants shaping their destinies.

DISCUSSION

A member of the audience asked if there was a point when the youth felt their revolution was going to fail; another inquired about the extent of youth participation in post-revolutionary change.

In response to the first question, Jad explained that Mubarak's second speech discouraged a number of demonstrators; but they quickly regained ground as the continuation of oppression further discredited Mubarak's promises of reform. For the second question, he highlighted the misconception of portraying the revolution as being youth led—he clarified that it was maintained by the entire Egyptian people who were overcome by a youthful spirit.

A member of the audience asked Jad to comment on the refusal of the Egyptian youth in early June to engage in a process of dialogue with the Higher Military Council.

Jad explained there was no objection to such a dialogue in principle. Rather, they opposed the unrepresentative and superficial mechanism proposed by the Council. He clarified that the same approach was adopted in the National Dialogue process. He added that discussions should be held on issues that are relevant to the everyday concerns of the people, and not just constitutional reforms and the final form of the state.

A member of the audience asked about the manner in which Egyptian youth responded to accusations of creating chaos; another inquired about attempts of archiving the stories of the revolution, and whether or not the Egyptians were conscious about avoiding the Iraqi model of chaos after the fall of the regime.

In response to the first question, Jad explained that many of the demonstrators' families opposed their activism; they sometimes defended the Mubarak regime and tried to convince them to halt their action. However, the youth could not be stopped, especially after witnessing their fellow demonstrators getting injured or killed. As for archiving, he explained that there are extensive efforts for documenting the revolution. However, it will be difficult to capture all its aspects as there were around tens of millions of people directly involved. As to comparisons with the Iraqi model, Jad explained that the peaceful nature of the revolution negated the possibility of civil conflict. The people insisted on civil and peaceful resistance, emphasizing the human nature of the struggle.