



Interview with Dr. Saad Eddin Ibrahim

Daniel Benaim

In the weeks leading up to Egypt's Presidential election, I had the opportunity to interview Dr. Saad Eddin Ibrahim. Dr. Ibrahim is perhaps Egypt's best-known dissident intellectual and the Founder and Chairman of the [Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies](#) in Cairo, where I was a Summer Fellow in 2005. In June 2000, Dr. Ibrahim and two dozen of his associates were arrested and jailed on charges ranging from defrauding the European Union to disseminating information harmful to Egypt's interests. After a three-year ordeal during which Dr. Ibrahim (62 years old at the time) was sentenced to seven years of hard labor—all charges against him were dismissed by Egypt's highest court and he was released from prison in 2003. Sitting in his office in a beautiful Islamic villa in Cairo's Mokattam Heights, Dr. Ibrahim reflected on the prospects for democratization in Egypt and on his unique role in Egyptian politics.

People have said that one of the major problems with the United States' Middle East policy is a failure to predict and account for change. Are the US and Western governments ready to deal with the possibility of religious parties taking major roles across the region?

Religious parties have already taken control in Turkey, and I don't see any reason why they cannot do it here. We are telling policymakers to be ready. I am telling everybody to get ready, because if we don't open the process to religious parties, then we will be beholden to the autocrats. And if the autocrats continue, they will be the greatest help to the theocrats, who are their mirror image.

Is democracy in Egypt possible without the Muslim Brotherhood?

No. You can't have democracy without being inclusive of everybody, so long as people are respectful of the rules of the game.

One critic worried that you were describing the Islamists that you wish for, rather than those that you see. How would you integrate the Muslim Brotherhood into Egyptian politics while assuring that they play by the rules of the game? Isn't there a danger that the process would be irreversible?

The Egyptian Constitution includes all kinds of built-in safeguards. I suggested the armed forces and the constitution serve as the safeguards of pluralism, of civil government, and of regular old democratic aims. Should anyone tamper with them, Islamists or otherwise, these institutions should have the right to interfere and remove that obstacle or threat.

A Turkish model?

An improved Turkish model. I'm suggesting an armed and a civilian institution as guardians. To force things, you need physical force, but you also need the moral and legal authority of the Egyptian constitutions.

Should civil-military reform, then, take a backseat to other kinds of reform in Egypt? Some, like Steve Cook, see the military's role in politics as an essential bulwark of authoritarian rule across the Middle East.

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They already have a role in politics, but it is de facto. I want to make it explicit, transparent, and have demarcation lines instead of the diffuse influence they have now on the entire political life through the Presidency and the intelligence agencies.

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Is the military ready for a non-military president?

I think they could be made ready. After all, the top echelon of the military have had Western training in countries like the United States, England, and France, and they have seen models of a military under civilian control. If it is done with care, without removing their privileges, then it is possible. After all, that's the way it was before 1952.

Critics of your work have often argued that Egyptians simply aren't interested in democracy.

Well, I don't agree that Egyptians aren't interested. Without polling and scientific methods to electoral politics, it is very hard for anyone to make concrete claims about the interest of Egyptians in democracy or in anything else. But we have many proxy indicators—for example a ten-country survey from 1980 indicating that as many as sixteen percent of Egyptians put democracy as their highest priority. That's just one example, and admittedly it's a dated survey, but if some 25 years ago that many Egyptians indicated this sentiment, then surely more would think so now.

Where does the lack of political freedom fit into the overall constellation of problems faced by Egyptians today?

Twenty-five years ago, democracy came as fourth or fifth place in terms of what concerns people, in terms of what was really important to people. Today, I would assume that social and economic issues will still rank very high domestically. Regionally, the Palestinian question will still be number one, likely followed by Iraq and the Sudan in terms of Egyptians' concerns. But, by and large, the overwhelming majority of

Egyptians are indeed more concerned about social and economic issues. For example, they are very much interested in the issue of corruption, which is really beginning to impact their lives. And, whether the level of corruption is accurately perceived or exaggerated, it is definitely on their minds. Nowadays, there is a lot of political campaigning for the presidency and for parliament, where many of the candidates have focused on corruption as the number one issue in their campaigns.

Part of your role in Egyptian politics has been to act as a provocateur, raising difficult questions and getting under the regime's skin. Do you take a special pleasure in that?

These roles are usually thrust on people. Rarely do public figures or public intellectuals choose their roles. They may choose their mission or they may know their objective, but as an actor in public life, often it's a convergence of events, biography, and environment. These three together usually determine your position and trajectory in public life. That is basically what has happened with me. The fact that I have spent the 1960s in America, in the heyday of activism—the antiwar movement, the civil rights movement, the women's movement, the environmental

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movement—all of these great movements of the 1960s and early 1970s were part of my upbringing and my youth. And of course I was also very active student, both in American politics and in Arab politics. I was President of the Arab students of North America and these are roles that, again, I found not by design but by the thrust of events and by interest. Being a social scientist, being young and in America at the time, I became interested. All of this has much to do with my agenda in Egypt and what I came to be here, both in my own perception and in other people's perception. I don't necessarily try to be a provocateur. What I do is raise issues that nobody else would raise, not to be provocative but to be a conscience for my society, for my country, for my time. If people consider that to be provocative—and sometimes my family shares this view—I don't. These things come to me very spontaneously and without design.

You recently withdrew your candidacy for Egyptian president, along with a few other reform-minded candidates, because you didn't consider it a fair contest. Do such protest boycotts represent an effective strategy of opposition?

As a matter of principle I'm against boycotts. But if there's a boycott, it has to be active. You declare it, and then you make sure it will achieve something. That's what I'm trying to do. I withdrew, and then I made a case. Even though I withdrew and made my case, and others did the same thing, we are still going to monitor the elections. If there is a low turnout, then that will be grounds for challenging the legitimacy of whomever is elected and calling for another election within a year or two.

Across the region, groups are sitting out elections and urging supporters to boycott. Is this a wise strategy? If so, when? Does it detract from long-term political health?

It doesn't help. I like people to be engaged. However, if your engagement is used as window-dressing for a sham, for a black comedy, then you should declare that and withdraw. Explain the ploy, and then withdraw and monitor. That is an active boycott. It is not withdrawal or retreat or surrender. It is loud. Therefore, I hope that the people who are going to boycott will organize demonstrations before the elections, as

they did before the May 25th referendum [on multi-candidate Presidential elections].

Do you plan to vote in the Presidential election?

Yes, I'll be voting for [recently jailed al-Ghad party candidate] Dr. Ayman Nour.

Over the years, your relationship with the regime has transformed. At a certain point, you even advised President Hosni Mubarak, whose regime later jailed you. What, for you, were the signposts along the road to becoming a political dissident?

Well, you give anybody the benefit of the doubt. And I did. I had also met with and advised President Sadat, including a trip to his house a few weeks before his death. I was actually performing a mission abroad for him when he was assassinated. With Mubarak, I had known him when he was Vice President [1975-1981] through his wife, Suzanne, who was my student. She did her M.A. with me. And frequently as Vice President, he would ask for memos and things to help him understand certain issues, which I gladly gave to him. I was flattered that he asked, and it was the same with his wife. The relationship started on a cordial note. I met with him as Vice President several times. I also met with him soon after he became President. He asked for new ideas and I was appreciative of what he did initially. He stabilized the country and defused the situation, which was then very tense after Sadat's death. He restored Egypt's relations with its neighbors, with Arab countries, and with the rest of the world. These were all positives.

Then he was challenged by Islamic militants, radical Islamists, and again he asked for help. He asked me to have a talk show for young people in Egypt. I did that for five years on prime time, right after the news. Every night in the early- to mid-1990s we did these talk shows, called "The Enlightenment Programs." Every opportunity I had to help, I did so. So long as he was responsive, I was gratified. However, after having helped him in his first two Presidential terms, in his third campaign he promised to change things and then didn't. I began to be critical. When he continued to ignore my recommendations, I realized his real motives.

Was there a single meeting or interaction that marked the end of your relationship with President Mubarak?

When I wrote an article suggesting that the Muslim Brotherhood be incorporated into the government ministries, that offended him. And that was the turning point. He did not appreciate what I wrote, even though it was just my opinion.

Part of your strategy of nonviolent protest has been to mobilize people by evoking and

I don't see red lines. I speak my mind against anything, on any subject. I will not say anything I do not believe, and anything I believe, I'll express. And in that sense, I don't have any red lines. It would be a form of surrender

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exposing the ugliest parts of the regime. Even a nonviolent mission can provoke a brutal and even violent reaction. In the case of the Ibn Khaldun Center, twenty-seven of your colleagues went to jail alongside you. Do you feel responsible?

I feel very responsible. And if there's anything that saddens me about the ordeal that I and the [Ibn Khaldun] Center went through, it was what happened to my family and young colleagues. Although I was willing to pay the price myself for what I was doing, I regretted that the government made others pay who were completely innocent, and who had nothing to do except being my aide, being my associate. If we were in a respectful, law-abiding society, then none of that would have happened. Many of my 27 associates who were jailed, you can't imagine why the government pronounced them guilty.

Now that you are free, do you feel you have to moderate yourself? Are there still red lines for you that you can't cross?

My wife tells people, Saad is a colorblind man. I don't see red lines. I speak my mind against anything, on any subject. I will not say anything I do not believe, and anything I believe, I'll express.

It was a field day for me as a sociologist. If there is any consolation to being a prisoner, it is having this human laboratory. You see a part of the Egyptian body politic that you can't see outside

And in that sense, I don't have any red lines. It would be a form of surrender. The Mubarak regime tried to make a deal with me three times while I was in prison. In return for closing my mouth and leaving the country, they would have closed my file and taken me out of prison. I said, "I will still speak my mind. I'd rather serve the seven years than make a deal. And if I am freed, I would

like it to be by a court ruling." So I waited until the court ruled. It took three years, but at least it was a high court ruling—and a ruling on the books is much more satisfying to me than any secret deal.

Why does the Mubarak regime see you as such a threat?

All of the major issues raised that have been thorns in the side of the regime were started by me. The ones who start something get skinned for it at the beginning. Many people disavow us, criticize us, only to discover within six months to a year that

we were right and everyone else was wrong. This was the case with my views on [Arab leaders] grooming their sons [to replace them]. When we talked about it six years ago, nobody had ever paid attention. Now everyone talks about it. It was the same thing with minority rights in Egypt, the same thing with monitoring elections, the same thing with the call for freedom of political and religious information. These are taboos. Nobody talks about these things until we do. The regime, of course, is always scared of what we do because they know that, in due time, despite the smearing and defamation and attacks, that it will catch up with them. It will become part of the public discourse. And that is a role that I'm very proud of.

Egyptian intellectuals are looking for the perfect martyr. A friend of mine jokes that even Jesus Christ might not get the support of the Egyptian intelligentsia against the regime

What has your time in prison and your troubles with the regime taught you about the experience of living in a semi-authoritarian regime like Egypt's, where most people enjoy partial freedom most of the time?

It taught me a great deal about Egyptian intellectuals and pressure from the regime, but it also taught me a lot about myself and my fellow prisoners. I saw firsthand how, at certain times, so many members of the elite ended up in prison. Through them, through the Islamists, I saw two sides of the same thing. I had about three or four cabinet members with me, people who served very closely with Hosni Mubarak, not to mention those who had worked for previous presidents. There were two gentlemen who went to military academy with him, two gentlemen, not to mention a few regional governors. It was quite an educational experience. It was a field day for me as a sociologist. If there is any consolation to being a prisoner, it is having this human laboratory. You see a part of the Egyptian body politic that you can't see outside.

I also learned how easily Egyptian intellectuals could be cowed and intimidated. Out of the thousand or so intellectuals here that really deserve to be in that category—having really produced new knowledge and valuable opinions—out of those thousand, who knew me well, only about 250 spoke up. It started with one, then 50, then 250, in three waves. The other 750 were cowed. Some probably took delight in my

predicament, who knows? But that was quite revealing to me.

And when the same thing happened to others, I found even more intimidation. That was the case with Ayman Nour. I was the only one who dared to speak out in the beginning, and only when I started to campaign for him in Western capitals did others begin reluctantly to fall in line. You'll find all kinds of excuses for not supporting this or that, to the point where a friend of ours, [European MP] Emma Bonino, had a famous diagnosis of the Egyptian intelligentsia: They are looking for the perfect martyr. Just know that even

martyrs are not perfect. They want a perfect martyr before they will endorse, support, or declare their solidarity. Even Jesus Christ—she doubts if he would have the support of the Egyptian intelligentsia against the regime.

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