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Transcript

Winds of Change in the Middle East

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Ambassador Nabil Fahmy:

Thank you very much. I'm honoured to be here today and I'm quite flattered by the number of people we have in the audience. Just a minor correction: I was Ambassador-at-Large until January of this year. Starting January I am completely at large. So I say whatever I want. Actually, I've always said whatever I wanted. But in fact, so that there's no misunderstanding, I represent myself only. In as far as it's consistent with Egyptian policy, it's fine. Where it's not, they're not responsible for my comments.

But let me address the topic at hand, and I'm actually very happy and proud to address it. Everywhere I've been going, and it's been almost everywhere, frankly, since mid-February, I've been asked about the Arab Spring. And I keep telling people, 'We don't do spring in the Middle East. We have long summers.' I say this with all due respect to the metaphor, which I accept and I'm an optimist in terms of where we're going. So it's not that this is not going to work. It's that simply, it's going to work slowly.

And give us time before you make an assessment, because I don't know of any large number of revolutions that worked in three to four months, so don't expect it to happen in the Middle East either. I was asked to speak for about 30 minutes, and I asked whether these were Anglo-Saxon minutes or Middle East minutes. That's also a reflection of that.

So first of all, what happened in Tunisia and Egypt is going to happen in different ways and forms with different results throughout the Arab Middle East. What happened is the winds have changed. Now, how it changes and how frequently will differ, between whether it's a small country that has a population that is basically homogeneous, whether it is a larger country with different kinds of assets, with a non-homogeneous population, and there are many different forces pushing and pulling on it: what level of reform they've achieved, what level of reform they have not achieved, poverty and wealth. All of these issues will factor in.

The reason I say it will happen everywhere – change will happen everywhere – is demographics. 56 percent of our population in Egypt is 25 or younger. A quarter of the Middle East lives in Egypt. So in essence, the figure is about the same. 50 percent or 60 percent of Arab Middle Easterners are 25 years or younger. The youth bulge.

Secondly, everyone is connected one way or the other. People talk about Facebook and YouTube and Twitter, but I'd also add to that simple satellite television and the internet. In other words, people have the information. Now,

you can't give people the information and tell them, 'Don't think about it and don't have choices.'

Thirdly, we've had a problem of governance in the Arab world, of good governance in the Arab world. So a young population that knows the information. There is a problem of governance. For these reasons alone, I am quite confident that you're going to see a significant number of changes in the Arab world towards more reform, but the pace and the results will shift from one country to the other.

And to be able to evaluate whether we succeed or not is not going to be a function of the first election, frankly. It's going to be a function of whether we are able to put together the checks and balances in our societies that will make the ultimate result – politically, economically and socially – will make that result representative of the widespread aspirations of our people. And again, they will differ slightly from one Arab country to the other.

Now, what happened in Egypt and Tunisia, but mostly in Egypt? The logical reason behind what happened, one would have assumed to have been poverty and the lack of economic equity, if you want. I walked the streets during those 18 days and, frankly, I heard very little about poverty. If you applied the same criteria to Tunisia, yes, the major story was about Mohamed Bouazizi and his feeling of indignity and his search for basically to have a better style of life.

But per capita income in Tunisia is actually quite high, in comparison to other states in the region. So this was actually not initially about poverty. It was about good governance. It was about freedom. It was about dignity. Now, does the poverty issue play in here? Yes, it does. Does it lead to wider support? Yes, it does. But in fact, this was about good governance. It was not a bread riot, like we had in Egypt decades ago.

These were young professionals, leading a movement which was supported by a wide range of members in society. Because there was this concern about governance, because we were about to have an election for President in September 2011, had nothing else happened. And because frankly, the reactions of the existing government at the time to the demonstrations were a case study in what not to do and how not to handle demonstrators. So they ended up creating more support from society as a whole. This was a youth-led but not a youth-only project. And it ended up being a societal project.

Now, what's actually happening? We are now discussing, debating and trying to decide on what kind of political system we're going to develop. I don't know. Presidential, parliamentary, but it's going to be more accountable. Mark

my words, it will be more accountable. Nobody will have the luxury of what occurred before. People simply won't accept it.

We're trying to decide on what is the social contract between Egyptians themselves and Egyptians and their own government. That's being debated quite strongly. We're trying to decide about what is the economic system. Nobody seriously is looking at going back into socialism. The discussion is all about variations on a market economy, but with stronger economic equity. The disparity between the rich and the poor and the level of corruption, both of these elements were elements that were flagrant and ultimately will need to be addressed.

As part of this debate, everybody in Egypt today is discussing politics. And let me just give you a figure that is a bit more tangible. Before 25 January, when we held elections, or referenda, in real terms, the participation level was in single digits, frankly. If it went beyond single digits, it was in the low teens. The referendum that we had just a couple of weeks ago, you had 44 percent participation in the referendum.

I'm an addictive voter. I've been voting since I was 21. And most of the time, there was not a problem to go in and vote. I stood for an hour and a half this time, even though I got there 15 minutes after it opened. And this went on right through the day and the evening.

My point here is that Egyptians are energised to participate in deciding their own future. It's a completely different political paradigm, and our future will be determined not only by what are the political trends that exist – that's important – but I think that the real force behind it, the determining force behind this, will actually be how many Egyptians go out and vote. Much more than what analysts will tell you today, at huge consultancy fees, about who will get what in the vote and it's all frankly hogwash.

And why do I say this? We've actually never had a paradigm like this before, so there's no empirical evidence to tell you who will get what percentage of the vote with 44 percent or 55 percent of the people voting? There's evidence of who will get what percentage of the vote at 10 percent, but not at 44 or 55. If we get 55 percent of the voters participating, you actually have 40 to 45 percent more than what you ever had before. And nobody knows where these votes will go.

I can tell you where the minimum could be for any particular political direction, be it the left-leaning Socialists, be it the Nasserists, be it the Muslim Brotherhood, be it those who used to be in the old majority party. But I can't tell you what the maximum will be for any of these, because we used to have

two, three million people voting, and now we're going to end up having well over 10, 15 or 20 million people voting.

These non-voters are the real challenge. The previous non-voters are the real challenge. If these non-voters participate, what you're going to see is very similar to what you saw on Tahrir Square or around Egypt at any point in time during demonstrations. A mixture of Egyptians where you have the religious trend, you have the upper middle class, you have the intellectuals, you have the activists. It will be a real reflection of what happens in society.

If, on the other hand, we don't continue to have this kind of participation, then you will have the traditional activists, the ideologues, and I put under that the religious ideologues, the political ideologues, those who are committed to a policy and a point of view and voted anyway all the time.

So the challenge therefore, is what do we do from now until the election process starts? It's not going to go back to where it was, no matter what happens, and I say this and I'll give you an anecdote which I say respectfully. I can tell you the day of the week in Egypt with my eyes closed. Just by listening to the political debate.

First request of the week comes up Saturday, maximum Sunday morning. First reaction from those in power is normally either silence or iffy. 'Well, we don't want to do that yet.' Wednesday you have the first counter-reaction from those making the demand raising the ante a little bit, and if it's a serious request, you will see a lot of support for the request. Thursday, you'll find those in power changing their position, responding to the request, if it is a serious request that has public support.

And I'm not joking, I can literally, I mean I've been travelling endlessly and I consequently lose track about weekends, but I can tell you exactly what day of the week it is by listening to where the discourse is. And that's good. It's not an anecdote in the negative sense, I'm happy to have Egyptians participating in this. I'm happy to have those in authority questioning the request and then ultimately responding to it if it's a serious one. Occasionally it is, occasionally it's not. And that's what's been happening.

Now if... what we're debating now is do we do the constitution first? Or start elections for Parliament first and then the constitution? Then elections for President? When do we do all of this, starting September until the end of the year or later? According to the present schedule, it's elections for Parliament first, discussion and the constitutional reform second, and thirdly elections for President starting September.

I think that sequence will remain, even though personally I actually had a different preference. My preference would have been the constitution first, rather than an election first. But reading the tea leaves today in June, my sense is we will have elections for Parliament first, the discussion about the constitution second, and then elections third.

I can't give you a date for when this will actually happen, whether it will change or not in terms of the timing, but let me just throw two things at you. First thing is, if we don't announce a date for the first set of elections by the end of June, then this is going to be Egyptian time, rather than Anglo-Saxon time, because we won't have time to organise an election in September if you don't have the law out and all the procedures out by July.

So follow the next 10 days, if we're going to do it in September, a date will emerge in the next 10, 15 days at the latest. If we postpone, it will be incrementally. We will get this done by January, by spring or by June. The whole thing. I just don't see that happening beyond that for different reasons: people want the handover to civilians, the military wants to hand over, the candidates are out there. It would simply be extending it too long.

But the second point I wanted to make is, while personally, intellectually, I would always be pushing for civilian rule or get this done quickly, I actually think we needed some time to allow the younger parties to establish ground roots and the foundation to be able to compete so that the first elections for Parliament do represent the post-revolution Egypt rather than the previous situation, which will never go back completely. And that is my preference.

But we're 7,000 years old. So at the end of the day, two months here, two months there, it's not going to change the world for Egypt and frankly whether we finish in January or finish in June, it's not a fundamental difference. I would not support postponing for three years, for example. That raises a different issue. So my point to you is: we're going to determine these things within the next six to 12 months at the latest.

What in my mind will be the determining factor on whether we do this properly or not? First of all, we need to have a clear roadmap announced and starting to be followed pretty soon. You can't continue to have this debate – do we do this first or that first? – and prepare for elections and have those running for Presidential elections even after that all in the same time.

Secondly, we will have to decide among the many things that I mentioned in terms of the political system, the social system and the sort, where the role of religion is in our society. It will have a role. This is not going to be a secular system like Europe or the States. Religion has an important place in our

society and it will continue to have that. Whether we establish parties based on religion or not is not the issue. But there will be those who will push their politics based on their religious beliefs.

And we're having a very interesting debate now about these things. Almost everybody will tell you religion has a role, but don't make it a condition for others. It can't be an exclusive position. At the same time, we're not used to debating religion publicly. So in essence, if you're going to make the tenets of your politics based on religion, and I can't debate the tenets of your politics because I don't like to debate or question religion publicly, it raises a predicament here that becomes a bit difficult.

And you see the religious leaning parties becoming more active, more vocal politically because they're more confident now, and they do have a role to play. I'm not questioning that. But you also see, which is interesting, a significant push back as well when they overreach.

So this whole idea of where exactly is the balance between religion and politics is something we're going to be debating seriously. And you can look at all the models you want, people tell me the Turkish model, the Malaysian model, this, this and that. Well, we will talk about all these things. We'll ultimately find our way. But this is one issue.

The second issue, frankly, is what kind of Egypt do we want? And I would argue also that it will affect what happens in a lot of the Arab world. What kind of Egypt, in terms of do we want to have a presidential system? With the powers of the presidency much more restricted to matter what from what happened in the past? Do we want to have a parliamentary system? And if you do, what kind of parties do you have? And can you actually do all that before an election for Parliament in less than three months?

Do you want to have an Egypt that looks at itself as Egypt or Egypt as part of the Arab world, part of Africa, as an Islamic state? It is going to be all of that, by the way. I'm just saying that it's going to be all of that. So don't, these aren't choices. I'm just saying how it wants to look at itself, in fact it's going to be all of those things. And it will also be close to the West, by the way. It will also be close to the Mediterranean. It will also be forward looking because half of the population is younger than my son.

It's going to be more global than it was in the past, and we Egyptians have to accept that. When I argue or debate or discuss with my colleagues and find myself falling back on history so frequently, on the one hand it's natural for an Egyptian with such a long history, on the other hand, from a very prominent

member of... well, anyway, somebody very close to me once was invited to join one of the major parties we had in Egypt.

And he was offered a wonderful position in the party, and he went over, had the meeting, came back and told us about how great it was, and then I asked him, 'Well what are you going to do? Are you going to join?' He said, 'No. It went so well, why aren't you going to join?' 'Because they're talking about history, not the future.'

We as Egyptians have to start debating what kind of Egypt we want to have in the future. What kind of role we want to play. Egypt's value added always has been, in our intellectual value added, we have been the trendsetters intellectually. Be that in the political system, in the social systems, in economic system. And when I say trendsetter, I mean both positive and negative. Big successes also have big mistakes. But we have never really been a donor country. But it is because the thought process started in Egypt that we led the curve, we were ahead of the curve and people looked at us to serve, the move the region forward.

And that's a responsibility which we have on our shoulders today. If we fail... and I am confident we will not fail, we will stumble, but we will not fail. I'm pretty sure we will make some mistakes. I'm pretty sure we will have to rebalance, recalibrate ourselves because this is a process by trial and error, but if I can continue to see 50 percent, 55 percent of our population engaged in this process, I am confident we will ultimately succeed. If we fail, it will have repercussions throughout the Middle East, the Arab Middle East at least, and that's a very heavy responsibility that we carry.

I want to make two points and I will close. First thing is that as we do our part of the work, one of the things that is going to be a challenge is the economic situation in Egypt. We had an economy with a strong potential. We, however, have had a revolution which is very valuable and needless to say has cost us some money and some expense, but it's a worthy investment.

I would like to see the ballot boxes being open, or people going to the ballot boxes with some hope in the future economically. Because when they look at that, then they then balance the political arguments of the different parties rationally, not emotionally positively or negatively. So trying to restart the economy is an important point in this process, and I argue that irrespective of our long-term projections, we will need economic support in the short term to lead to that.

My last point is foreign policy, and then I really will stop. I'm going to leave most of this to the question and answer period. But since I said that our value

added historically, and I believe in the future, including our mistakes, is in our intellectual contribution and our pioneering posture in this regard in the Middle East and the Arab world in particular, our foreign policy will be more of an activist foreign policy in the future. It will be still constructive, still pragmatic, but much more forthcoming, much more clear, much more consistent.

As we develop a more democratic system, our government will be accountable not only in the long-term on foreign policy issues, but also in the short-term. So while, for example, we will continue to be committed to Arab-Israeli peace in the Middle East, I see no reason under any party to change from that: a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace, with ending Israeli occupation of Arab territories and security for all states in the region, including Israel. I don't see that changing. I do see a more proactive reaction to irregularities, violations of international law, expansion of settlements, and so on and so forth.

We will be consistent strategically and change tactically, because as the more democratic system, we are more accountable in the short term to our own constituency. And believe me, as a former diplomat, I have volumes of records as to when I was told, well, other countries, Israel included or America for that matter, couldn't take this step because Congress, or this because of the Knesset... well, we're going to have an active congress and an active parliament and all of these things we'll be engaged in.

But you will see a foreign policy that I believe, and there are indications already, will be more responsive, more consistent with our public, but also responsible enough to lead the public while remaining consistent with it, not attempting to simply have a populist foreign policy, although I'm not necessarily against that.

Let me conclude with those remarks, and I'm of course happy to answer any questions, including on issues that I did not mention, only because of the time factor here. Thank you.

Jon Marks:

Thank you very much, Ambassador Fahmy. Before I open up to questions, could I ask you a question or two myself? Coming back to the economy, because as you say, politics is dripping out of every pore of the Egyptian public at the moment. I was lucky enough to be in Tahrir Square actually the day before the referendum, and the number of different factions from Salafists to extreme liberals, generations, as you say, its youth and its other

generations, gender-wise as well. A great diversity. And following this very exhilarating thing, I walked up and went into a shop where I actually bought this shirt. I thought I'd wear it today. It should have been ironed better. And I think it cost me about three dollars in the sale, reflecting the fact that there really is a significant post-25 January economic collapse.

As you say, without economic hope, how can people rationally vote? And it would seem to me that as you rightly point out, that the issues that got rid of Hosni Mubarak came down to governance, but there was an economic undertone. Since then we've seen strikes all over the place and people looking for a better life, whereas in fact the economy is going down. So possibly a couple of views on how the economy could revive itself.

And the second question is that everyone said, well, the Egyptian revolution is absolutely wonderful at the G8 summit and coming up in November presumably at the G20. We've seen amazing headline figures, \$20 billion for Tunisia and Egypt was given. But in fact, as far as we know, as of last week there was a \$500 million emergency facility from the African Development Bank. I understand that from contacts in the Central Bank in Cairo that Saudi Arabia's commitment to \$500 million budget support to come through, and the IMF has got a three billion policy in the works.

And people are talking but essentially the sort of huge figures that we've seen in the international commitments that we've seen, actually have been rather slow. A situation where in the end of December Egypt had \$39 billion worth of reserves, and now you have about \$26-27 billion.

So on those two points, how can you see in the short term the economy can revive to give the hope to people at the ballot box? And secondly, for all the headlines, do you feel uncomfortable with the actual way, the commitments from the international community may come through, that the transitional government and then the incoming government are going to need, quite frankly, to keep the economy afloat.

Ambassador Nabil Fahmy:

Thank you for that. Let me start by saying what happened economically in many respects reminds me of the financial crisis in the US a year or so ago. It happened. You dug a huge black hole for yourself there. Won't debate why it happened. When it happened, you did not stand on principle of the correct tenets of market economics. You decided to plug the hole and then handle it.

We had a revolution. Revolution provides tremendous political dividend, but it was costly economically for the reasons you mentioned. To deal with it, we need to deal with very similar to what happened with the financial crisis. We need a huge amount of immediate cash to plug the hole and then slowly you have to follow the right economic policies to increase domestic and foreign investment to create many more jobs.

So it's a two tier approach. If I was to tell you just give us cash, that won't help us long term. I used to tell you, give us foreign investment, well that won't help you short term. So we have two different issues here. One is the immediate one. We have to create more money, but I would argue that anybody who has an interest in the Middle East would be doing himself a good investment by helping us get over that hurdle until we can get to the process where the international support system which is more investment oriented rather than cash oriented kicks in.

For that, I would completely understand that people would want to see the right economic policies laid out so that they're not investing in something that's not concrete. The Saudis have been generous. If I'm not mistaken, the Qataris, the Emiratis, I also heard the Kuwaitis. I haven't been following it in detail, but yes I agree with you. What I hear is that not enough money has come in, at least not commensurate with the amount of money that has been talked about.

But that being said, I'm not an economist, I'm actually a physicist by education. But I don't, with all due respect to *The Economist*, I don't bother myself too much on long reports. I walk the streets and watch and look around. And I can tell you, commerce has restarted in Cairo at least. A lot of the small cars and buses and trucks are moving around. Goods and services have resumed.

That will help in the short term. It won't plug the hole, but it will help in the short term. It's starting to pick up. It won't help in the long term, which requires investment. So that's why I say again, yes, we have a challenge. But if we didn't have this revolution now, you were going to have a confrontation by spring or summer because of the elections, or it could have happened six or seven months after the elections.

It was going to happen one way or the other, not necessarily in this form. But the call for change was going to happen. I think the political momentum behind this process, if you can get over the short term problem, will provide investors a much more solid atmosphere to invest. If you're worrying about corruption, this should be a much less corrupt situation. If you're looking at

transparency, this should be a much more transparent situation. So for the investors, this is actually quite a positive development. But we do need help in the short term.

Question 1:

Ambassador, you talked about the need for a clear roadmap to be announced before elections, probably. Now, usually after revolutions you've got referendums rather than suddenly elections. Do you foresee a possibility of having a referendum on a roadmap prior to elections taking place? Thank you.

Ambassador Nabil Fahmy:

No. My opinion, among others, was we should have a national debate about what we want to do. We should then develop a roadmap and it should start with drafting the constitution first and then the election process. That's not been the direction things have taken, including the referendum we had. Actually there was support of having an election, so I don't see that, I don't see us going back.

All I see, and again this is my assessment, not by way of facts, is we will either start in September, late September and finish by January, or we will be delayed a couple of months but we will definitely finish by spring or summer.

Question 2:

Do you see the Egypt of the future as having a presidential political system or a parliamentary system? Or will in fact the army continue to hold the real power?

Ambassador Nabil Fahmy

We're still discussing that. There's no decision being taken. We have about 32 parties now already established, 15 different candidates for president, and we haven't even announced the date for either of the two elections. Everybody has an opinion on what kind of system we should do. Some have suggested, 'let's do both.' Do a system where, similar to the French system or the German system, it's all up in the air for discussion.

My expectations... let me put it this way, the first elections will be based on a presidential system. If the constitutional committee then decides to change the system, we'll have another election. But presently we are going to vote based on a presidential system.

Question 3:

The West, I think, in general was friends with Mubarak and Gaddafi and a number of the autocratic figures in the region. And I suppose arguably some of the governance issues that you talk about could be traced back to the West's influence in the region historically as well. So to what extent do you feel there are current incursions and interventions, be they strikes in Tripoli, drone strikes in southern Yemen, or even development aid such that it is, are useful and in the best interests of the region?

Ambassador Nabil Fahmy:

Let me respond as a former diplomat. You've dealt with a lot of autocrats all over the world, not only in the Middle East. And you will continue to do that. One, because you're always looking for short-term gain rather than strategic gain. But secondly, because it's not your choice. If you have interests, you deal with those in power. Where you made the mistake, frankly, is that you dealt only with those in power, rather than with those... I have no problem with your dealing with those in power. Having worked in the West very frequently, that's what you always do.

But you had no respect for the Arab street. You wouldn't even recognise that there was an Arab street. And many, many times, I would raise this issue in negotiations and at most, when I raised it, I get a snicker. As if there was any response whatsoever. So that was your real mistake.

Secondly, what's happening now in Libya, well it's a tragedy on both sides. Frankly, to use military force against your own people is disgraceful. And as an Arab I'm going to say that openly, I have no problem saying that. The Arab League agreement on a No Fly Zone was essentially meant to safeguard civilians in the process. It wasn't meant, at least wasn't envisaged to be a full-fledged operation as it is now with the exception of boots on the ground.

If this isn't resolved soon, it will raise major concerns among the population in the Arab world about what your real intentions are. I would not recommend the increased expansion of use of force in other parts of the Arab world. That's not how it should be solved.

But let me make a point again as an Arab. We live in a region that is full of conspiracy theory. Having seen a couple of cases, some of it is true. Not all of it. But conspiracy theory only works where there are problems. So we have to get our own act in order. Whether the West likes it or not, whether it serves the West's interests or not, should not be my priority. If we get our act in order, the West, East, North and South, will deal with us more respectfully and will deal with us more as partners or competitors rather than targets for conspiracy.

So I'm concerned about the use of force, but I have to say I was first of all concerned about what was happening in Libya from the Libyan Government, per se. Don't expand the use of force beyond what you're doing, but the Arabs have work to do on their own societies.

Question 4:

Ambassador, thank you very much for your presentation. I understand that you prefer to form the constitution before the elections and apparently there's a serious debate going on on whether the elections should take place before the constitution is written. In order to form a constitution before the elections, I presume there should be a constitutional assembly. Of course, if there is not an election, you have to choose people into this constitutional assembly.

And if there is not the correct parameters for choosing all these people, there can always be a criticism about whether the constituent assembly for the constitution has been democratic or representative or not. And that's the reason why perhaps the other argument prevails, if you had elections then after the elections, then it is the duty of the parliament to deal with the constitution with the participation of all segments of society and having a greater debate.

Can you justify your version why you prefer to write the constitution before the elections take place, and how do you think a methodology could guarantee it to be as democratic and as representative as possible?

Ambassador Nabil Fahmy:

Sure. Let me explain the two options. But before I do that, my version is not going to carry the day. What I said was that was my preference. I think we're beyond that already, although not formally. My perception is we're going to have elections for parliament first, then a constitutional assembly, and then for president.

But what of the two alternatives? Well, everything you said, Ambassador, is correct. If you do the constitution first, the issue is who does it and how do you put them together. You can elect them, if you want. Somebody, in this case it would be the military commission, in consultations with the parties would develop the parameters for this process. But there is a risk involved, and people will argue why these rather than these.

The other option is if you have the parliament first. Well if you do the elections for parliament before everybody is ready, you're going to get a parliament which has a left-leaning, right-leaning direction to it. And if they choose the members of the constitutional assembly, then ultimately, that is also not really reflective of what's new society in Egypt, although it is reflective of the democratic process itself.

So my preference was to do this slowly. It's not going to happen the way I suggested. I think we're going to do it the other way, as a safeguard to deal with this predicament of what happens if the parliament is not truly inclusive of society. There's a discussion now occurring in Egypt about trying to develop a basic law with 18 provisions which you could call a bill of right or whatever, that would be adopted in one form or the other and any parliament established, any constitutional committee established, in drafting the constitution could not violate these 18, 20 provisions.

So we're having that debate to bridge the gap between the two arguments, because they're both valid.

Question 5:

Democracy brings peace and stability. Given the experience of democracy in the region, namely in Gaza, Lebanon and Iraq, would you not think that Egypt may follow suit?

Ambassador Nabil Fahmy:

Actually, no. But let me answer. In terms of, again I think if you look at the three examples, and I'll take you even beyond the three examples, anywhere in the world, democratic processes don't always give you the right results, don't always give you pleasant results. But the value of these processes is that they can correct themselves. In other words if you do it wrong one time, you do it right most of the time. And when you do it wrong, you can re-elect or correct yourselves.

When I was in the States, I would often joke with my American friends that they don't have an ideal democracy. The pervasion of money in the process is crazy. But the good thing about the democracy is: they don't think it's perfect either. So they want to continuously correct.

The examples you gave, we don't have a factionalised society as exists in Iraq or the tensions that exist there don't really exist in Egypt. We have our tensions, but not to the same level. Lebanon is a completely different package, although the Lebanese have done well for themselves when they're not fighting. I actually am quite amazed by how successful this country has been, given how complex the society is.

Gaza is a completely different situation, so I just don't see the analogy between the two, but yes, occasionally we will end up with a result that people aren't happy with. The most important thing is whether we're happy with it or not and whether we can live with it or correct it. And that's why I'm really insistent on ensuring that whatever the results of the election, we have the right checks and balances there so they can be corrected. The majority has to respect that the minority has equal rights, even if the minority loses. And the minority has to accept the result of the majority, even though they may have a different opinion. I'm talking about the minority and majority in the voting process, not in terms of the constituencies.

Question 6:

I just want to know your personal opinion regarding the role of the army right now in the country with reference to all the challenges that you mentioned. The second point is that what the slogan or the statement I mentioned right now, that the Egyptians don't know exact what they want to, but they know we don't want X and Y. But we don't know about the future even. All those challenges you mentioned, like the foreign policy, we don't know whether it's Egypt first or it's Palestine, whether it's the Arab world. We don't know whether it's... even the nature of the country itself became debatable.

So who will take the decision by the end of the day? Is it like, every time we have to do a referendum to ask the people? Or is it the military people, the armed forces? Or is it the next parliament? Or like this debate, what is first, what is second?

Ambassador Nabil Fahmy:

In terms of the role of the army, one has to give the army credit. In very difficult situations, they remained disciplined, remained if not in between the people and the government, they remained consistent to their honour code that they would not shoot an Egyptian civilian intentionally. Had that not been the determining factor in their position, this revolution would not have worked. So to their credit, they have acted very, very wisely.

Now, post- the demonstrations, they have a predicament. They're asked to engage and monitor and manage the political process when that's not what they do for a living. That's not what they were trained for; that's not what they like to do; that's not what their mandate is. So they are managing something, that they never asked to manage first of all, and they haven't actually done before.

So will there be mistakes? Even if you ask the army, they will say yes, there have been mistakes. Or we've taken certain decisions and changed them because other civilians came and talked to us about what's preferable one way or the other. The army by nature will tend to move towards stability, tend to move towards a clear plan with a timeline, and that's why you see immediately that they said, 'We will hand over to civilians within six months and we'll do that by the end of the year.'

So I honestly believe that they will do this, and if they're late, they will be late a month or two upon popular request, not because they want to stay a longer period of time. The other question, again, could the debate have been more transparent, more open? Well, I suppose they could be, but that's not the nature of the system and we haven't done this before.

On the issue of what Egyptians want, I actually believe not knowing is healthy. Discussing this is healthy. Whether a decision is taken... I mentioned to you anecdotally, but I'm not joking, this is true. I can tell you what day of the week it is with my eyes closed by listening to the debate. And that involves a young youth group making a demand, the Prime Minister's cabinet saying 'no', and then ultimately negotiating with the groups. And the same thing applies with the military.

All of the questions you raised will be the subject of debate, and I can tell you they won't be resolved in the first election. This is going to be a process over time. Many of my Western friends and others, by the way, keep wanting to draw a conclusion of whether we've succeeded or not. It's only been a couple of months, and the result is not going to be when we finish the elections. It's actually going to be when we hold the second election.

Question 7:

My question is: do you think that what happened in the Arab world may happen in Turkey and Iran, considering that men who were in power in Arab countries like Egypt, Syria, stayed in power for decades. While in Turkey and Iran, presidential elections take in time?

Ambassador Nabil Fahmy:

My answer is the following. Egypt ten years from now is going to be different is going to be different from Egypt today. Turkey ten years from now is going to be different from Turkey today. Change will happen. And the same thing applies to Iran. Change will happen in all these countries. It doesn't necessarily mean that you're going to have political tensions between governments and the people, or if there is, what kind of tensions will actually occur. Each country has its own composition, own challenges, own successes. So I shy away repeatedly from attempts to generalise.

Where there is bad governance – I'm not saying that exists in these countries – where there is bad governance, you will see challenges to authority worldwide, because of the fact that everybody is networked internationally. Where you have good governance, this evolution and change will come normally and in a positive constructive fashion rather than a negative one.

Just one point. I find this exercise by Egyptians engaging in politics exhilarating. I honestly do. And I see the debate, you mentioned the Copts... There was a new party that was established by a very successful businessman, and he made the point that for every Copt joined the party, I want two [inaudible]. You wouldn't have actually had that comment in the past, people would have been sensitive about that.

We're debating everything. Where religion applies in politics, the minorities, the majority, the powers of the president, what kind of government we're supposed to have. And if I have a concern... let me be serious here. Everything is on the table. Give us time to make our decisions. Give us time to correct ourselves. But this is going to be an energetic Egypt where its actions will have consequences. Some good and some bad. And I will not promise you we will do everything right. I am sure we will be an activist country, and since we're an activist country, we will make our mistakes as well as have our successes. That's really what I find fascinating.

But I don't have an answer to all of your questions, because the most fascinating thing about all of this is we haven't decided. Thank you.