

Promoting Political Reform in Egypt: Meeting with U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice

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The following is a transcript of remarks presented by liberal Egyptian political reformer Dr. Hala Mustafa to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice during the secretary's visit to Cairo.

"Elections have become the center of public discussion and debate regarding democracy, but today I want to go beyond elections to focus on some more specific items related to political reform that I think still have not received real and genuine consideration or attention.

"As we have seen practically, democratization has been reduced to the ballot box, and in Egypt, this has brought little change to the status quo or unfairly empowered just one political power-- the Islamists-- without an equal chance for other political trends to be represented because of the tight constraints the regime imposes on secular political trends. In particular, I would like to emphasize the need for a comprehensive liberal framework, without which a reform agenda will never be successfully implemented.

"I do believe that still, Egypt's political infrastructure is not receptive to a democratic transformation on many levels, including freedom of the press, recruitment for state positions, controlled partisan life, the status of women, and the increasing overlap between religion and politics, just to name a few indicators. In one word, the current political framework which has guided political life over the past decades is based on populism, pan-Arabism, socialism, and the 'one voice' of the state. As long as this remains, it will be hard to promote new ideas and values that could be more receptive to diversity and democratization.

"Here I would like to raise three vital issues:

"1) Revising the state controlled press "2) Empowering women "3) The role of individuals and reshaping the political elite."

Revising the State Controlled Press

"This is the first priority for a new, liberal framework since it has the largest impact on orienting public opinion and still echoes the populist, pan-Arabist, Islamic, and anti-American propaganda of the regime, while systematically excluding liberal and moderate voices or giving them little space.

"The media targets individuals who promote liberal or proreform ideas, and some of them have been recently subjected to a harsh campaign to harm them. It is enough to refer to the harsh criticism the governmental Rose al-

Yousef newspaper gave to figures of Egyptian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) who were expected to meet with Secretary Rice during her current visit to intimidate them.

"This phenomenon was explained before as the struggle between the 'old guard' and the 'new guard,' but as we have recently witnessed, while many of the old editors-in-chief were replaced by a new, younger generation, these new faces do not represent a real or genuine change due to the means of their recruitment, which is based on connections to the bureaucratic-security authority at the expense of merit, professionalism, political background, or experience. Furthermore, the former editors were allowed to retain permanent columns in the papers, while very little space is given to independent writers and editors who represent liberal views and ideas.

"So it is this sector that strongly defends the status quo and is considered a true taboo to change."

Empowering Women Politically

"Another vital issue is the need to empower women politically, which deserves special attention that it hasn't received until now in practice. As the annual Arab Strategic Report noted, Egypt ranks at the bottom of the list (seventy-fifth out of a total eighty-seven) for the political and social status of women, who are not represented at all in the political structures and decisionmaking circles. Just as one example, consider that in Egypt's parliament, only 1.6 percent of the representatives are female, as well as in all other political state institutions. This male-dominated and patriarchal politics feeds extremism.

"So, if democracy is meant to confront this reality, how can we explain that it has neglected the issue of the status of women? If we are faithful to the values of democracy, plurality, moderation, and freedom, and at the same time, confront extremism, this issue must be at the top of the list."

The Role of Independent Reformers

"The third and last point I would like to raise here is to highlight the role of individuals. While much emphasis has been given to the role of the NGOs and political parties, very little attention has been given to individual, independent reformers who are not affiliated with political parties, movements, or NGOs but have the real potential to push the reform process forward.

"It is enough to say that Egypt's contemporary life is a product of the contributions of individual writers and intellectuals, who were allowed to hold state positions and therefore turn their progressive ideas into reality. This leads me to raise the issue of Egypt's political elite. To deal with the challenge of political reform, we need to go beyond the old type of a merely bureaucratic elite to a new, politically aware, politicized one. We need to think out of the box and overcome the rigid division between the elite and individual political reformers. Including economic reformers in the elite was a strategy pursued by the United States and the regime for years, yet the same has not been done for political reformers." ❖

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