

Program Summary (19 January 2012)

At 8:00 p.m., President Alexander alerted the membership that the evening's presentation would begin shortly. He also announced that two of our members, Mont Hoyt and Preston Bolton, had passed away.

At 8:10 p.m., Fields introduced the evening's speaker **Dr. Mahmoud El-Gamal**. Professor El-Gamal is Professor of Economics and Statistics, and holds the Chair in Islamic Economics. He is past chair of the Economics Department. The title of his talk is **Middle East: The Seeds of Revolution**. The membership warmly welcomed Professor El-Gamal to the podium.



Professor El-Gamal prefaced his remarks by recalling his childhood in Cairo and his time as a student at American University adjacent to Tahrir Square, where the demonstrations of 2011 were centered. Many of the children of his university and military contemporaries who have remained in Egypt participated in those events.

Dr. El-Gamal indicated his remarks would be focused on how Egypt arrived at its current situation, with ample time for questions about other topics, including the future. His talk surveyed the five historical forces that are still at work in modern Egypt.

The first significant event was the 1798-1801 campaign of Napoleon to conquer Egypt, with the goal of driving the British from India in concert with Tipu Sultan. The military campaign ultimately failed (see Horatio Nelson and the Battle of the Nile), but Napoleon's adventure had a lasting impact on Egypt. Of particular note is the work, *Description de l'Égypte*, published in 1809 and written by the 167 French scientists whom Napoleon brought to explore Egypt. This book is still in print. (The discovery of the Rosetta Stone occurred during this period.)



Of more significance were the ideas that Napoleon left with the Egyptians. The notions of social justice, fairness, and economic freedom were planted. Egyptians could envisage a transition from being “subjects” to being “citizens” of the State.

By 1803, the British had also left Alexandria, and Muhammad Ali of Macedonia (and a military officer from the Ottoman Empire) came to reoccupy Egypt. His lasting influence was the introduction of cotton and a focus on scholarship whereby many Egyptians were sent to Europe for their education. (The dynasty he established ruled Egypt until 1952.) Ali skillfully distanced himself from the weakening Ottoman Empire to consolidate his position in Egypt against the Mamluks, who had ruled Egypt for 600 years. Ali desired to create a modern European style country, but was frustrated by strict Islamic interpretation from the House of Saud. (Military campaigns eventually led to the defeat of the Saud’s but of course modern Saudi Arabia maintains a strict Islamic state.)



In 1881 France invaded Tunisia. Concurrently, Egyptian military officers revolted against a repressive leader. The following year, Great Britain defeated the Egyptian army. Both invasions were justified to protect European commercial interests. (The British occupied Egypt until 1952, when Egypt became a Republic.)

The fifth force emerged following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1928 with creation of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt by Hassan al-Banna, a Islamic scholar. (Its membership grew to two million within 20 years.) As a child, Dr. El-Gamal recalls his father joined the Brotherhood, which functioned in many respects like the Rotary Club. The Brotherhood gained favor by its extensive charity work coupled with political activism and criticism of the gross inequalities in Egyptian society. The MB's precise attitude toward the use of force has varied over time and geographically. But the MB was central in overthrowing the King in 1952. After the formation of the Egyptian Republic and the consolidation of power by Nasser, the Muslim Brotherhood attempted to assassinate the leader (either Nasser or his predecessor). From then on, the Muslim Brotherhood was actively suppressed in Egypt (as well as most Arab States). Dr. El-Gamal suggested the assassination attempt may have been staged.

These five forces were all in play during the final six years of the rule of Mubarak. In 2005, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice famously expressed

that the policy of the Bush White House supporting “Democracy in the Middle East” would be a good thing for long-term stability. She noted that if elections became more open, that Islamists would benefit in the short term with the likely result of “creative chaos.” However, such chaos would be both useful and necessary in a transition toward democracy, Rice opined.

Where did Egypt stand by 1980? It was essentially on par with South Korea. But thirty years later, South Korea had outstripped Egypt by factors as great as seven, depending upon the precise category. The frustration among the young boiled over early in 2011. The Muslim Brotherhood skillfully re-asserted itself and on February 11, Mubarak resigned and fled Cairo. The MB won more than 50% of the seats in the election of November 28. In somewhat of a surprise, a quarter of the seats went to the puritanical Saud’s, who historically had been apolitical. Many of these individuals had been planted in Egypt by Saudi Arabia, reflecting the continuing philosophical differences between the countries. Initially they had been strong supporters of Mubarak, but after 2/11 they became strong supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood. Dr. El-Gamal noted the significance of Secretary of State Clinton’s continuation of the Secretary Rice policy of “creative chaos” in the success of the uprising.

Dr. El-Gamal stepped directly into a discussion of religion. He suggested that sharia law (which literally means “the path to follow”) was quite similar to Jewish law in the sense that both are strongly rule-based. The demonstrators in Tahrir Square echoed the early nation-state promise of 200 years earlier.

Whether the new Egypt will express separation of church and state remains to be seen. Dr. El-Gamal reminded the audience that such separation should not mean taking religion out of politics, but rather an encouragement of “competition” among religions, with the State taking no action to endorse any one. This follows David Hume’s *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*. The lack of such competition is what stifles the growth of a nation.

Professor El-Gamal concluded his remarks with an open question: which direction will Egypt embrace over the next decade? He noted the French revolution was not concluded in a decade.

The membership peppered the speaker with a number of questions, to which lengthy and authoritative answers given in historical context were provided. About the place of Christians in Egypt Dr. El-Gamal worried that the tactic of staging attacks on Christians (Copts often) in order to work up

the West might expand. Mubarak himself may have encouraged this in his final days in power. The tactic might be employed by others as a means to move away from separation of church and state.

To the question of the status of the Egyptian-Israeli treaty, the suggestion was that it would remain intact but some specific provisions might be renegotiated. In particular, an increase of Egyptian military presence in the Sinai might counterbalance Hamas smuggling.

In response to another question, Dr. El-Gamal gave a brief description of the Güllen movement, which is primarily focused on Turkey. (M.F. Güllen is a 69 year old Sufi scholar living in Pennsylvania.)

Looking toward the new institutions evolving in Egypt, one can discern an emphasis on capitalism with a China twist (using creative Islamic finance techniques, which is one of the speaker's areas of expertise). With regards to democracy, the real question is how much power the new Parliament will wield. The 1952 constitution of the Republic was re-written by Sadat to strip Parliament's power, which had been considerable under the 1921 constitution. It is not clear how much power will reside in the new Parliament, Courts, and Press. The military could have a decisive role in this evolution.

There is now a window of real opportunity to recover from decades of lost growth. Mubarak represented a very stable economic path, but a path of slow decline. There is a significant chance of real growth (with Turkey as a model) but an equally significant chance of collapse (see Pakistan). So change will come.

Finally came a question of the status of the relationship between Egypt and the U.S. The perception of (undue) outside influence is a powerful force. There is a continuing suspicion that any funds the U.S. directs toward groups or the government in Egypt are in reality to support the interests of Israel. Of particular concern are very recent moves by the military decrying foreign funding and influence. These might be used as a pretext for several scenarios. Stay tuned.

The program concluded at 9:15 p.m.

David W. Scott
Recording Secretary