

Egypt--The Revolution within the Revolution

By Paul-Gordon Chandler

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While the terms “uprising” and “the Arab world” seem almost synonymous these days, the revolution in Egypt has a distinctive character, differentiating it from the protests and demonstrations in Libya, Yemen, Tunisia, Algeria, and Bahrain. The uniqueness to Egypt is that unlike the other Middle Eastern countries experiencing uprisings, Egypt has a significant indigenous historic Christian presence, consisting of up to 10% of the population.

As the world looked on in wonder at the protests in Egypt that led to the ouster of the authoritarian president Hosni Mubarak, perhaps one of the greatest ramifications was the breaking of the stereotypes of the relationships between local Christians and Muslims within an Islamic majority context. Egypt’s religious divisions were set aside as Muslims and Christians joined together in a multi-faith movement, as perhaps never before, in the anti-government protests, leaving its fingerprint on the character of the nation. Hence, a revolution within a revolution took place in Egypt: “an interfaith revolution.”

Paradoxically, as Muslims and Christians joined together in the streets of Egypt’s cities demonstrating against the corruption and oppression of the Mubarak regime, the first week of February 2011 was also the first United Nations’ Interfaith Harmony Week. As the UN Resident Coordinator in Egypt, James Rawley, a member of our church in Cairo, wrote during the protests, “History is being made....God bless the people of Egypt.”

During the last two and half weeks of demonstrations the world witnessed an unprecedented coming together of Egyptian Muslims and Christians. Unlike characteristic interfaith dialogue events, that more often than not involve just religious leaders (often the same individuals), this was entirely a grassroots interfaith movement led by what might be considered a new generation. Through their uprising, many Egyptian people have re-discovered the truth found in the words of the early 20th century Arab Christian revolutionary writer and artist, Kahlil Gibran; “I love you when you bow in your mosque, kneel in your temple, pray in your church. For you and I are sons of one religion, and it is the Spirit.”

Currently in my eighth year in Cairo, I serve as the Rector of St. John’s Church, an international Episcopal Church that serves the diplomatic, NGO, academic and business communities. While an American and a US Episcopal priest, I grew up in the Muslim-majority country of Senegal and have spent most of my working life serving in Islamic contexts. I moved to Cairo, two years after 9/11, as long ago I observed the unique catalytic role that international churches throughout the Arab world can play toward building bridges between Christians and Muslims. While we have various programs in our church here in Cairo to help build understanding, respect and friendship between the two faiths, nothing could have prepared us for this recent lay driven interfaith movement.

“We are all one”

As historians begin to pen the account of this recent “revolution,” where Egyptian Christians and Muslims demonstrated an extraordinary camaraderie, they will no doubt observe that the groundwork was laid just weeks before, providing an underpinning for a united front. Last New Year's Eve, just after midnight, a bomb exploded outside a prominent Coptic church in Alexandria, Egypt just as worshipers were beginning to leave the service. 23 people were instantly killed and more than 90 were seriously wounded. While this act of terrorism was meant to bring increased sectarian tension, it instead led to a movement throughout Egypt of Muslims expressing their deep sorrow to Christians. Six days later, when the Coptic Christians across the country celebrated Eastern Christmas, thousands of Muslims attended the services with them to show their solidarity. In church after church, Muslims formed human chains of protection around the buildings so their Christian brothers and sisters could observe their Christmas Eve mass in safety. As a direct result of the bombing, an interfaith movement among the younger generation began to develop. Millions of Egyptians replaced their Facebook profile photos with the image of a cross within a crescent. In the streets, posters and bumper stickers were passed out all over Cairo and Alexandria, showing the cross and crescent next to each other, often the crescent embracing the cross, with the phrase, “We are all Egyptians.” For the first time in decades there was genuine religious unity among the people at the grassroots level, particularly among the youth.

Three weeks later, young Muslims and Christians took to the streets in anti-government protests, starting in Cairo, Alexandria, Suez and then in cities throughout the country. As the world watched on in awe and trepidation, they observed the two faiths not only standing together against the corruption, oppression and lack of freedom in their country, but also protecting each other in the most beautiful and symbolic ways.

One of the most moving of images in the media was of the Coptic Church service that Muslims helped facilitate held in Tahrir Square to honor the “martyrs” of the uprising. Even the members of the conservative Muslim Brotherhood assisted as they protected the entrances of the square. It was striking to observe that the worship service was conducted in a way to be sensitive to both faiths in attendance. For example, Jesus was addressed as both “Yesua al-Masih” (Jesus the Messiah) and “Isa ibn Maryam” (Isa, the son of Mary; the preferred Islamic title). The Christian leaders conducting the service called on all to pray together, to love each other, highlighting that all Egyptians, regardless of creed, desire the abundant life Jesus spoke about and demonstrated. These proclamations led the Muslim protestors present to chant “*Eid Wahida, Eid Wahida*” meaning “One Hand, One Hand!” (emphasizing the unity between Muslims and Christians), and “*Allahu Akbar*” (the distinctive Muslim confession, “God is great!”). Even the Christians joined in chanting together *Allahu Akbar*, something not frequently done in Egypt by the Christian minority, even though the phrase at its core doesn't belong to a particular creed.

Similarly, Christians with hands clasped together encircled Muslims, so they could pray without harassment on Tahrir Square. These amazing images were broadcast to the world, as Christians protected their Muslims brothers and sisters bowed in prayer. My

last visit to Tahrir Square was breathtaking: people in harmony, selfless support for each other, Muslims and Christians....a very moving experience. And the sign of the crescent interwoven with the cross was all over the square, from a man wearing “cross and crescent” sunglasses to beautiful Arabic calligraphy on cardboard signs saying “We are all one.”

On a more personal note, having grown up in a Muslim country, I have often said that the only people I know who would give their lives for me, without even thinking twice, are my Muslim friends. Once again this was literally demonstrated during the disturbing days of looting that followed the disappearance of police in the streets and the opening of the prisons.

It was fascinating to watch Christian and Muslim neighbors throughout Egypt spontaneously come together as one to protect their neighborhoods by forming vigilante groups. On the night of January 29, our own apartment building, had mobs of armed looters come to it nine times and each time we were protected by our Muslim neighbors.

There are numerous beautiful stories to be told. During the chaos and sense of anarchy due to the lack of any law enforcement and security, not one single church or synagogue (which are normally protected by machine-gunned police) in the country was targeted. And Christians were in no way threatened. In contrast, there are remarkable accounts of how Muslims protected churches from the possibility of looting. A Muslim friend of ours takes great pride in his instrumental role in guarding the historic 5th century Hanging Church in Old Cairo, a sacred site to Coptic Christians.

One of the most encouraging symbolic images of what could be a “new Egypt” has been the spontaneous massive “clean up” campaign taking place around the country in which Christians and Muslims of every segment of society are participating on a volunteer basis, working together to clean up and rebuild their cities. In addition to the “new day of freedom” that has dawned on Egypt, a fundamental change of thinking regarding the “other” has come about as people discovered what they have in common through the necessity of defending their Egyptian way of life.

A Call to Wage Peace

As the majority of Egyptian Muslims and Christians begin to walk the long hard road ahead of working peacefully toward a balanced democracy which respects human rights for all, I see all Christians, including Westerners, having some critical roles to play.

Like the Egyptian youth that led the way through non-violence, more than ever Christians need to proactively work toward finding ways to wage peace on each other. And for Christians, the “other” means our Muslim brothers and sisters. For Western Christians, we need to counter the “Islamaphobia” that is all too pervasive in our countries, creating a culture of fear, where suspicion is the order of the day. For example, the Western Christian media has begun to “demonize” the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, a group that not only renounced violence many years ago, but that has advocated publicly for the rights of Egypt’s Christian minority (Muslim Brotherhood members were among those

Muslims who helped to facilitate the Coptic Church worship service at Tahrir Square). We need more than ever to be involved in an all-out effort to help Egyptians, regardless of their religion, by showering upon them our good will, trust, appreciation, love, solidarity and practical assistance. And this includes doing everything we can to break down the walls that create further alienation between Christians and Muslims, providing a bridge in the gap. For not only can the two faiths co-exist, having much in common as well as a Middle Eastern heritage, but they can enrich each other.

Along this line, our church in Cairo, St. John's Church, proactively focuses on the Arts, as our experience in Egypt has shown that the Arts can serve as one of the most effective mediums to build bridges of friendship and sharing between Christians and Muslims. In fact, our 2011 interfaith *Caravan Festival of the Arts* (www.oncaravan.org), which was to be the UN World Interfaith Harmony Week's Egypt event, was scheduled for the first week of February, bringing together 45 premier Muslim and Christian artists around the theme of "My Neighbor". Its goal is to build bridges between Muslims and Christians through visual art, as well as with literature, film and music. While the arts festival obviously had to be postponed due to the uprising, many of the participating artists joined the protests in Tahrir Square, including Mohamed Abla, the country's premier contemporary artist, and the actor Khalid Abdalla, the star of the film *The Kite Runner*, who courageously remained on the square for all 18 days. Other scheduled artists, such as the Iranian-American *New York Times* best-selling writer Reza Aslan, focused his attention on the US media (CNN, etc) to advocate for the truth of what was happening on the ground, as Muslims and Christians united together.

A Call to Prayer

Also, as Western Christians, it is critical that we pray for the Christian leaders in Egypt to courageously participate in the coalitions that are being formed between the faith communities that are seeking ways to increase solidarity, to bring greater peace to the nation and to ensure full citizenship be applied to all Egyptians. Ezzet Boules, a Coptic Orthodox activist, believes that if the Egyptian Christians are reticent to participate at this moment in time, it will lead only to their further isolation from society.

One area of disappointment to many Egyptian laity during the weeks of protests was the role of the church leadership. As opposed to the boldness of the anti-government demonstrators, both Muslims and Christians, church leaders were cautious and guarded in their statements, with some even coming out in support of the oppressive regime. Early in February, during the protests, the Coptic Pope, Shenouda III, came out with an endorsement of President Mubarak, and publicly forbid Coptic Christians from participating in the protests. "The things that are happening now are against God's will" he said on national television. Perhaps wanting to end up on the winning side, much of the Coptic Church leadership hedged their bets on Mubarak, as they didn't want to fall on the wrong side of the state. And some official Coptic Orthodox representation was visible in the "pro-Mubarak" rallies organized on behalf of the government. However, it was a profound miscalculation, as thousands upon thousands of young Copts disregarded their Pope's comments and went out *en masse* to protest with their Muslim brothers and sisters. Some Coptic bishops publicly condemned the "spirit of insurgency" within the

Coptic youth. And yet, as descendants of the Pharonic era, one remembers the role of Moses, or Moussa (in Arabic), who stood up courageously to the Pharaohs of his day and said, "Let my people go". Certainly the heroes from the Christian camp in this whole uprising, the true Moses, were those who stood out there with their fellow Egyptians, Muslims and Christians, side by side, and literally risk their lives for their rights and freedom.

Religious Freedom and the Muslim Brotherhood

Many leaders have learned to live in a culture of fear. Hence, some Egyptian church authorities have publicly expressed their concerns about the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and its possible increasing influence in shaping the "new Egypt". The fear of many Egyptian Christians is that they will be marginalized in the end, and that the objectives of the revolution, started by the youth, will be hijacked by the Muslim Brotherhood. Some Christian leaders have begun to refer publicly to the fear of Egypt becoming an Islamic state like Iran, and they are speaking of preparing to suffer possible martyrdom.

Many feel, however, this is unnecessary overreaction. It is important to remember that the Muslim Brotherhood is not militant as some have tried to portray them, but rather a group that not only renounced violence many years ago (hence it has been denounced by Al Qaeda), but that it has advocated publicly for the rights of Egypt's Christian minority. The Muslim Brotherhood is known in Egypt for its pleas for reform, promoting an independent judiciary, and for political, civil and religious liberties. During the protests on Tahrir Square, while some of the Islamic sheiks present that were associated with the Muslim Brotherhood called for the implementation of *sharia*, (the Islamic interpretation of "God's law"), they at the same time declared that God's law grants freedom to Muslims and Christian alike.

During the recent "Day of Celebration" on February 18 at Tahrir Square, the one-week anniversary celebration of the ouster of President Hosni Mubarak, something very significant took place. Sheik Yusuf al-Qaradawi, an prominent Egyptian Sunni cleric who has been exiled from Egypt since 1961, delivered his first public sermon in Egypt in 50 years. Sheik Qaradawi, a popular television cleric whose program reaches an audience of tens of millions worldwide, is an intellectual and spiritual inspiration to the Muslim Brotherhood. At the age of 84, following Mubarak's ouster, he returned to Egypt and spoke to a crowd of more than a million Egyptians gathered in the square.

In his sermon at Tahrir he addressed the topics of tolerance, freedom and religious coexistence, themes he has increasingly highlighted to his work in recent years. However, most interestingly, he began his sermon by saying that he was discarding the customary opening "Oh Muslims," in favor of "Oh Muslims and Copts," referring to Egypt's Coptic Christian minority. He honored the two faiths, Muslims and Christians, for standing together in Egypt's revolution, and emphasized how Christians protected their fellow Muslims while they prayed in Tahrir Square. He even complimented the Coptic Christian "martyrs" who once fought the Romans and Byzantines. "I invite you to bow down in prayer together," he said. The pluralistic emphasis in his sermon highlights the new interfaith worldview of the young audience standing before him.

To date, the progress made seems encouraging. The Supreme Military Council appointed a ten-member constitutional reform panel. Desiring to be inclusive and representational they included both a representative from the Muslim Brotherhood, a lawyer named Sobhi Saleh, and a Coptic Christian, the prominent judge, Maher Samy Youssef.

Egypt is considered one of the most religious countries in the world, of which the dominant religion is Islam, and everyone's prayer at this time is that as the country is reshaped there will hopefully end up being much more freedom of religious expression through a more democratic governing structure. There has never been a time when the church in Egypt needs to focus more on reaching across the religious divide to work with their Muslim countrymen and women for a new Egypt.

Looking to the "New Egypt"

Among the many changes that have taken place in Egypt over the last month, I profoundly believe that the change with the greatest potential for good is this new youth inter-religious movement of Egyptian Christians and Muslims working together side by side to re-shape their amazing country. This is beautifully reflected in the present motto of the country, "Let's Build Egypt Together." The necessary cancellation of the various activities planned in Egypt for the UN Interfaith Harmony Week were replaced by a revolution with the same intended outcome but on a far larger scale. Regardless of the uncertainty and unpredictability of Egypt's future, there has been a parallel revolution in the minds of people about their value to each other...all made in God's image, regardless of creed.

As we look to Egypt's future, and indeed the new futures of many Arab countries, there has never been a time when our assistance and prayers are more important. The words of the Arab writer Kahlil Gibran once again come to mind. There are words that the late president John F. Kennedy quoted in his inaugural address: words first penned by Kahlil Gibran in an article he wrote titled *The New Frontier*, "Are you ...asking what your country can do for you or...what you can do for your country? If you are...the second, then you are an oasis in a desert."

One way to be an "oasis in the desert" is to stand in solidarity with our Egyptian Christians and Muslims during this time of transition and focus our efforts on building bridges of peace, understanding and friendship between both faiths. Let us all do everything we can to encourage this unity forged in struggle so that it will have deep and permanent ramifications for the future of Egypt, seen by many as "the heart of the Middle East".

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