“The Emerging Political Landscape in Egypt - New Players and the Constitutional Debates”

Summary

Speaker: Mohamed Elagati, Director of the Arab Forum for Alternatives
Wednesday, November 14, 2012 | 3:30 - 5:00 pm | West Hall Auditorium A

Contributing to the present discourse on Arab uprisings in general and the dynamics of the Egyptian revolution specifically, the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) organized a talk entitled “The Emerging Political Landscape in Egypt - New Players and the Constitutional Debates”. This lecture was part of the Arab Uprisings Research Initiative, initiated by the Provost, Ahmad Dallal to use the university intellectual resources to study the current transformations in the region.

Mr. Elagati’s lecture on Egypt’s developing political landscape provided his on-the-ground analysis of the current constitutional process. While he recognizes the solid steps towards democracy that Egypt’s recent elections symbolized, he says the Muslim Brotherhood has not fulfilled the full potential of its reformative promises. He asserts that the Muslim Brotherhood has sought only to consolidate its power through creating superficial reforms. As a result, while democratic mechanisms have developed in Egypt since the revolution, democratic values have faltered in the constitutional process through its lack of multilateral participation.

Egypt’s political structure under the Muslim Brotherhood has forced the opposition to work “as if they are under an authoritarian regime,” Mr. Elagati believes this has created a state of polarization turning “social conflict to a conflict between believers and infidels,” a developing pattern in which, he argues where liberals and leftists will lose for sure. With regards to nominal economic reform, Mr. Elagati highlighted the government’s continued energy subsidies through its application for IMF loans and a mere two-percent increase in its “progressive” tax reform. He contends that while the structure of government has changed towards democratic institutions, many characteristics of Mubarak’s regime remain at the policy level.

According to Mr. Elagati, the challenges facing the democratic reforms of the Egyptian political system and constitution are great. Primarily, he highlights the challenge of reforming the “old-fashioned,” centrally-consolidated nature of power in current constitutional drafts as characterized by Article 134, which states that, the “President is the head of the executive authority and also the arbitrator between different authorities.” The second challenge is reforming “low quality” state institutions and developing their neutrality, contrary to their currently increasing
political affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood. The third challenge is protecting the rights of minority groups, especially women, which have faltered after the Muslim Brotherhood’s strategic concession of political space to the Salafists, in order to gain support for their more moderate Islamism. Mr. Elagati ultimately insists that the Muslim Brotherhood is perhaps focusing on the political process and consolidating its role within it, rather than prioritizing reforms with democratic values.

Mr. Elagati asserts that the opposition’s focus should be to encourage support for more significant, constitutional reform by connecting on-the-ground demands and constitutional reform. The opposition must contest the current patterns of power consolidation and social polarization under the Muslim Brotherhood, by advocating for the socioeconomic and civil rights benefits of a civil state. He warns that if the links between the civil state and its advantages are not made, the political landscape will stay on its current course.

Mr. Elagati argues that the upcoming elections will present an opportunity for opposition groups, including parties like the Popular Current and Strong Egypt, to form a coalition based on this platform. In conclusion, he forecasts that the opposition will support the reorientation towards democratic values in the constitution by changing Egypt’s political map in one of two ways during the upcoming elections: by either beating the Muslim Brotherhood altogether, or by pressuring the Muslim Brotherhood to return to their original, reformative platform they supported during the Egyptian revolution.

Written by Dale Kim