Change of Wind in the Middle East and Egypt

By Nabil Fahmy *

There is a word "change of wind" in the title of my speech. The change is in two aspects, one is society, and another is politics and foreign policy. When we talk about the wind, there are first three problems in our mind: What happened in the Middle East? When and why did these things happen? And finally, where will the future road of the Middle East lead to?

1. What happened in the Middle East as a whole?

Based on my own experience, I will focus on Egypt. Although the Middle East countries may not have the same pace of development, they share similar situations. Most people in the Middle East want to change the status quo, hoping to play a part in building their future. At first, their protest was not aimed at any specific object, but only to find the opportunity to make their voice heard. Even during the Egypt Revolution of 2011, their initial appeal was nothing more than constitutional reform. The revolution was neither originally triggered by political reason, nor by the demand of change in government, but it developed surprisingly fast. At the end of January 2011, I and

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other 11 people recommended that President Mubarak start reform. Although the people were not satisfied with these proposals, they didn't reject them. 12 days later (on February 8, 2011), President Mubarak announced that he agreed with our reform proposals. But as more and more people were involved in, the demonstrators were no longer satisfied with such a goal. They didn't expect President to step down at first, but things gradually went out of control. When President Mubarak finally announced that he accepted the request of the mass movement and decided to resign as president, street politics had already taken everything with it. This example shows that the entire Egypt was actually mobilized "passively" at that time. No matter people cared about politics or not, they asked each other's political stance, even it was among family members. The government's lost of its functions also partly sparked the movement.

2. Three reasons for the change of wind

(1) The government is a bad and not effective government, or in other words, it is an inefficient government. I didn't use the word "democracy" here, because the concept of "democracy" often leads to misunderstanding. Model of democracy is assumed as a perfect model, but it may not apply to all countries. What I really want to talk about is the "efficient government". Whether the government is democratic is nothing to do with our discussion. According to a recent poll, the most popular government in the Middle East is the United Arab Emirates (the U.A.E.), and it's not a democratic country. Why the U.A.E? In a democratic country, the government is elected by the people, and as such a government has to coordinate all interested parties and groups, it is more or less inefficient. In contrast, in a country where people can't elect their government, as long as there are good dialogue and communication channels between the people and the government, the government can provide the people a platform for good services, too. This can be regarded as efficient governance. So I prefer to use the word "efficient government", not because I am against democracy, but because I don't want to use a concept or a term that requires too many notes.

2) Currently, young people below 25 years old make up 56% to 60% of the population of Egypt, while 50% to 55% of the population of the Arab world is with an average age of below 25 years old. Just like all of you, they have just started their career, and they might have some doubts about the future of their country: "How can I participate in the country's public affairs?" In my opinion, the power of young people is a very important and positive factor of stability, but not instability. It can bring massive productivity and vitality, as well as new opportunities for communication between the government and the people. However, under the governance of an inefficient government, economic demands of young people are not met, which gives young people no hope.

(3) New means of communication are making young people more powerful than our generation. Young people are more confident because of the new power the new communication technology brings about. For example, each of the young people is able to use computer and mobile phone. If you want to fix a computer or an electronic device, you go to a young man first. Even I need advice from my 11years old granddaughter on how to use a smartphone. What we need to think about is, in a family in an age like this, who has a higher social status and more power? Traditionally, we have old-man politics or paternalistic politics; but today, mastering new technology may mean more power of speech, which was not entitled to us when we were young. While elderly people are still respected, young people that hold the power may not have the patience to coordinate or seek a compromise on the social issues like the older generation did. Young people feel that they are more powerful, and therefore deserve more respect. But under an inefficient government, the difference becomes more pronounced and very dangerous. (This means that, thanks to the new communication technology, young people feel that they are more powerful. But because of the inefficient government, they are more disrespected. In contrast, elder people receive more respect. Therefore, conflicts between young people's psychological feeling and social reality are sharper.)

Conflicts will first appear in countries that don't have sufficient resources, especially oil and gas resources. Frankly, those countries indeed have slim hopes. Economic situation in Arab countries that have insufficient oil and gas resources is very difficult. In the Arab world, 65% of the population is under30years old. Young people often feel very frustrated; they are thinking about the future – "how will my country affect my life?" "What is my identification? An Egyptian, a Middle Eastern, a Shiite, a Sunnite, or a Salafist etc.?" The self-identification of the younger generation is not based on the level of the nation state, but is based on the level of religion and other things. However, the international system is built on the basis of nation states instead of on the basis of religion. Although religion is also a part of the international system, the international system is not built on the basis of religion. Therefore, the self-identification of young people of Arab countries has brought a great impact on the international system whose main body is a nation state. Therefore, the turmoil in the Middle East we have observed is not the same as the turmoil in the rest of the world. It comprises turmoil in economic, political, and religious and many other levels; it is a complex of conflicts. In addition to factors such as culture and governance of depravity, the turmoil in the Middle East is more rooted in the intricate and conflicting situation of economy and religion in the region.

3. Where will the future road of the Middle East lead to?

To answer this question, we need to first answer: "what changes in politics are taking place in the region?" Now the region has a cancer: extremism. Extremism originates in the misunderstanding of religion, but the misunderstanding is only part of the reasons that cause extremism. Extremism is a religious ideology; it is thought plus violence. In the countries and regions where the most violent conflicts are taking place across the Middle East – Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and the Gulf countries etc., the main problem lies between the government and the challengers, namely the extremists. Extremism have been linked with the identification issue.

Now, the extremist forces are a big trend in the Middle East. On

one hand, there are always ups and downs in the political history of humans. The Middle East has also experienced many forms of government. In case of my own experience, when I was in primary school in Cairo, my classmates were from families of various religious believes, such as Christianity, Buddhism and Islamism, and others people would not take the initiative to ask one's religious belief. In other words, at that time, the tag of "religious belief" was not important. But today, situations in Egypt have changed a lot: people will no longer say, "I am an Egyptian", but frequently mention their religious beliefs.

On the other hand, extremism is easily spread in a weak state structure. For example, Libya is a failed state. You don't know who to negotiate with in Libya. Libya was once represented by Gaddafi alone, but then there emerged two governments and two parliaments, and neither government or parliament is qualified to represent the entire country. Libya has completely become a "failed state". Meanwhile, it is Egypt's neighbor. As a state entity, Libya certainly poses no threat to Egypt, but a turbulent Libya would bring a lot of trouble, such as extremism, security problems and weapon dispersion etc. As weapons proliferating in Libya, price for smuggling weapons has dropped.

Now let's look at Egypt's history. In the past, Egypt was such a stable country that Egyptians had no idea what being "unsafe" was like. Even if there were problems, people believed that Allah would bestow a way to solve them. And Egypt's border hadn't been changed for years. Now we have experienced a major change. We are trying to rebuild the government; our primary goal is to find effective channels of communication between the ruler and the ruled from the remnants of government system. Egypt is a country that is in the flames of war and has a population with growth rate of 2.8%. It has a population of over 90 million, and we need to create 800,000 jobs every year – this absolute number is probably no big deal for China, who has a booming economy, but for Egypt, it is a heavy burden. It requires Egypt to at least maintain an average annual economic growth of 8% in the next decade, but the actual

growth rate is only 3% to 4%. Our biggest revenue no doubt comes from tourism, but tourism fluctuates greatly. Moreover, tourism has dried up now, we also have no foreign investment, and we are facing change of government, transformation of the state as well as unrest throughout the region – the border issue, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the issues of Libya and Syria.

Talking about Syria, it will be divided along the religious borders. And the situation in other countries is similar as in the Gulf. The Islamism has two major sects: Sunni and Shia. In Kuwait, the majority of the population is Shiite; in Bahrain, the majority is Shiite; in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, the majority is Shiite; in Iraq, the majority is Shiite; so is it in Lebanon. There are already conflicts between the two sects, and the distribution of oil is different from the distribution of sects. In addition to this, there are the ethnic issues, such as the issue of the Kurd people. If Arab countries are divided according to the borders of sects and ethnic groups, 6 or 7 countries will be split.

Therefore, we must not split nation states according to religious sects. Compared with division criteria like religion, ethnicity and ideology, nation state is much better. Egypt's parliamentary system is always better than the Islamic theocratic system. In Syria, in contrast, two things may happen due to the intervention of the U.S. and Russia: having serious negotiations, or each party doing its best to strengthen power of the side it supports. Under the latter circumstance, Syria will be artificially split into many groups. If Russia and the U.S. can make the forces they support sit down and talk, it may help – but it is very difficult to realize. So, as an Egyptian and an Arab nationalist, I'm very worried about Syria's situation. I'm also very concerned about the linkage effect between ethnicity and religion. For example, Yemen is now falling apart. Its problems were originally not related to ethnic and religious issues, but merely arose from the conflicts caused by the rivalry for interests of different domestic political forces in Yemen. But as foreign forces intervened, some domestic political forces got help from Iran, and some got help from Saudi Arabia, Yemen started to collapse.

The most fundamental challenge is, the Arab world needs to

build a social and political system that is able to adapt to the 21 century. We need to build our own national system to better integrate with the modern world. The building process should be done as soon as possible, and if we can't finish the building, we will face consequences like continuing conflicts and social disintegration. Egypt is a big importer of energy and food; its only source of freshwater, Nile, has its sources abroad; its main arms flow is also not controlled in its hands. Realistically, we are not able to cut ourselves off from external world and survive independently. Therefore, I believe that the Arab world needs to modernize and improve itself. It also needs to build an efficient political system, and no matter what form such a system takes, such as monarchy, capitalism or socialism, the system must respond to the demands of its people.

I would like to add a few more points: The Middle East countries have been over dependent on external forces. Nasser first took the side of the West, and then the side of the Soviet Union. Sadat was against the Soviet Union, and he took the side of the U.S. So was it in the Mubarak era, Egypt was totally dependent on the U.S. on security issues. When the U.S. didn't respond to Egypt's demand, Egypt found it was already too late to turn to Russia. What I mean is not that Egypt should isolate itself, but Egypt should reassess the fate of the region, regional powers and regional partners.

Frankly, every country should have more powerful security forces of its own and cooperate with other countries at the same time, because, after all, security is a country's own business rather than foreign countries' business. We can come to this conclusion from the history of arms control in Egypt and Israel. I am an expert on arms control issues. Let's look at the six-party negotiations on the nuclear program of Iran. Technically speaking, there are no problems in the final joint action plan. But Israel possesses nuclear weapons; it should also be included in the negotiations of the nuclear non-proliferation. Another problem is, why Germany, not being a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council, can join six-party negotiations, while Arab countries can't? If the criteria for

joining are the size of gross domestic product, why Japan can't join the negotiations? In addition, progress of the negotiations was not informed to Arab countries at all, but why? It is because Arab countries are too dependent on Western countries in security issues; there is no need for Western countries to discuss security issues with Arab countries at all. Therefore, on the nuclear issue of Iran, the problem of Arab countries is being too dependent on the West. It is no use to isolate Iran, what we should do is to cooperate with Iran. It's different from cooperation with Israel, because when cooperating with Iran, Arab countries will not face the problem of lack of legitimacy they face when cooperating with Israel: most of the Arab countries recognize Iran and have embassies in Iran. Egypt also has embassy in Iran, except that it doesn't send an ambassador there. Moreover, Arab countries should conduct one-to-one bilateral cooperation with Iran, rather than cooperating with Iran with all Arab countries as a whole. Arab countries should carry out exchanges and dialogues with Iran, and seek the final solution of the problem.

Finally, all comes to the fundamental issue, namely: if Arab countries can't solve their domestic problems and achieve transformation of the state, and make foreign policy serves for their national position instead of at the pleasure of foreign countries and resolve the problem of over relying on the West in diplomacy, all the good ideas may eventually be a mere talk.

(Translated into Chinese by Chen Yuhui, revised by Yu Tiejun and Wu Bingbing)