

# REVIVING MIDDLE EASTERN LIBERALISM

*Saad Eddin Ibrahim*

*Saad Eddin Ibrahim* is chairman of the board of the Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies ([www.ibnkhaldun.org](http://www.ibnkhaldun.org)) in Cairo and a member of the International Advisory Committee of the Journal of Democracy. On 30 June 2000, Egyptian authorities charged him and a number of colleagues with crimes allegedly connected to his administration of the Ibn Khaldun Center, and closed the Center itself the next day. After a long legal fight and 15 months in prison, Dr. Ibrahim was cleared of all charges by the Court of Cassation, Egypt's highest civilian judicial body, on 18 March 2003. The Ibn Khaldun Center reopened on 30 June 2003, almost three years to the day after state-security forces sealed its offices. Details of the case, which became a cause célèbre to many concerned with freedom in the Arab world, may be found in both English and Arabic on Dr. Ibrahim's website at [www.democracy-egypt.org](http://www.democracy-egypt.org). The following essay is based on remarks that Dr. Ibrahim delivered at the National Endowment for Democracy in Washington, D.C., on 15 May 2003.

At times I thought this moment would never come, that I would never see the United States again. But it has come, and I am free, happy, and gratified. This, of course, is most immediately the case because the Court of Cassation—the highest body of civilian jurists in Egypt—overturned my conviction with an opinion that forcefully laid out the baseless character of the state's accusation against me and the Ibn Khaldun Center.<sup>1</sup> But I am also gratified because the Center's agenda—which the National Endowment for Democracy has consistently supported—has itself been vindicated, an agenda that is shared by the community of democracies the world over.

The world has changed forever in those three years that I was under attack in Egypt. Few can now doubt that democracy, peace, and development are interlinked and must be sought together, especially in my part of the world. This is what we at the Ibn Khaldun Center had been

saying for 15 years before the state prosecutor forced a hiatus on our activities three years ago. We have come in for our share of criticism, some of it defamatory, but we have never wavered from this message. I personally will promote and defend it as long as my health permits, because it is true and it badly needs to be heard as widely as possible.

I am now in my sixties, and am hoping that after me and my contemporaries will come a second and then a third generation of nonviolent freedom fighters—not only in Egypt, but throughout the larger Arab and Muslim worlds as well—who will speak this truth. Already some of these young people are on the scene, saying things that could not be said ten or even five years ago.

Our region is passing through troubled times, whose signs and symptoms are well known and have received ample publicity, especially since 9/11. There is a strong feeling of malaise and humiliation. Some of that stems from the aftermath of the war in Iraq, but there are longer-term causes as well. Among them are the stifling of debate and discussion and the way citizens find themselves cut off from fairly and fully presented information about the world. This is connected in turn to the lack of honest print and electronic media that will let Arabs and Muslims hear the truth about the problems that beset their countries, and about those who rule these countries.

Official restrictions on political discourse have burdened the Middle East for a long time. Part of the Ibn Khaldun Center's problem was its determination to speak out and to provide platforms for diverse points of view. The channels open to us were limited in number and scope, but we did our best to make the most of them. Despite the limits within which we worked, and despite the always peaceful character of everything we published, some of the powers that be decided that they could not tolerate us.

So they arrested me and closed the Center, and civil society in Egypt—hardly robust to begin with—took a severe beating. The Ibn Khaldun Center staff were muzzled and intimidated for a while, but thanks to the persistence of some very courageous people on staff and elsewhere in Egypt, plus supporters outside the country, a worldwide campaign to defend the Center and its work began to take shape. And eventually, with their help and that of organizations such as the National Endowment for Democracy, the Center emerged triumphant.

The Court of Cassation's March 18 opinion was not merely a victory for one wrongly accused man or institution; this was a victory for an agenda—the cause of democracy and the rule of law—that the world now realizes is the only real alternative to Saddam Hussein, Osama Bin Laden, and their ilk.

## **Free Government and Freedom from War**

Democracy is the way forward. It is the only sure way to keep the Middle East from going to the brink of war every few years. In an article

recently published in the *Washington Post*,<sup>2</sup> I counted the number of times that the United States or other Western powers have had to form military coalitions or use large-scale armed force in the region to avert or resolve a problem. From 1958, when President Dwight D. Eisenhower sent U.S. Marines to Lebanon, up through the Iraq War of 2003, the rate of military interventions has averaged one every seven years. God knows when the next one will be, but without democracy they are sure to continue, and that is no light matter. It is time for us as Arabs to put our own houses in order.

There are a thousand and one difficulties facing us as we work to institute democracy in the Arab world and the larger Middle East. And yet what choice do we have except to try once, twice, or as often as we must? Government by consent, respect for human rights, and support for the rule of law are the only things that can finally and securely protect our countries, our region, and the world against the threats of terrorism and of crises that compel outsiders to come and use military force on our shores.

How do I rate the prospects for democracy in the Middle East? I think that they are surprisingly good. I am well aware of those who marshal evidence to show that instituting democracies and open societies in the region, or perhaps even in the larger Muslim world, is difficult or impossible. The difficulties are well known and undeniable. But they can all be overcome. In previous decades, authoritative voices said that Germany, Japan, Slavic countries, and even the Catholic societies would never, could never, be democratic. I am not speaking of popular prejudices here, but of high-level scholarship and expert consensus. Batteries of learned naysayers honestly believed that there was something about German, Japanese, or Slavic culture, or about Catholicism, that was fundamentally and unchangeably hostile to democracy and democratic values.

Experience, of course, proved that these doubts were not as well founded as they seemed. At the Ibn Khaldun Center, we are convinced that similar doubts about the potential for democracy in Arab cultures, the Middle East, and the Muslim world will ultimately prove just as feebly grounded. Indeed, I am heartened by the instances of modest progress toward greater political openness that we are already seeing. The successes are limited, but real. The most prominent has come in Turkey, which recently witnessed an alternation in power following a free and vigorously contested election—with a party of self-avowed “Muslim democrats” now running the government. Less dramatic examples of increasing political competition can be found in Morocco, Bahrain, Jordan, and Kuwait. Movement forward has so far been tenuous and uneven, but these countries—and also Yemen—do appear to be making some headway, at least.

From this I take a renewed measure of hope and determination, as do the many people throughout the region who think like me. And make no mistake, there are quite a few of them. They are not all famous or high-

profile, but there are plenty of people who are interested in democracy and its possibilities. Those of us who have made a public and systematic commitment to open politics and free societies have an obligation to reach out to these people. We need to engage them and make them partners in the cause of liberty and self-government.

---

*Even while I was locked in that cell, I felt freer than my oppressors, and that is what gave me strength for three years.*

---

In this project, civil society is crucial. That is the title that we have given to the Ibn Khaldun Center's major periodical publication. We define civil society as a free space within which people can assemble, work together, express themselves, organize, and pursue shared interests in an open and peaceful manner. This is the sort of thing that the Center was founded to encourage. The space available for the work may vary—at times it

may shrink to the dimensions of a tiny prison cell, as it did in my case for a while. But even while I was locked in that cell, I felt freer than my oppressors, and that is what gave me strength for all of those three years.

Near the end of my time in prison, I heard about Professor Hashem Aghajari in Iran, a fellow intellectual who was arrested, tried, and condemned to death for blasphemy because he dared to criticize the rule of the mullahs over his country and to tell his fellow Iranians that they should not be blind followers.<sup>3</sup> I had never heard of him or read any of his writings—he is a historian who publishes in Persian—but I felt an instant bond with him and sensed that we had something deeply in common. Prisons are seldom comfortable places, but I understand that he had a particularly hard time of it: He is an amputee, having lost one of his legs fighting in Iran's war with Iraq in the 1980s, and in jail his stump became infected.

In the Middle Ages there used to be something called the Silk Road, which was an overland trade route that ran from the Atlantic shores of Morocco to the Great Wall of China. It was a famous path, steeped in lore and plied by picturesque caravans. When I heard of Professor Aghajari and then of dissidents in Tunisia also languishing in jail, another picture popped into my head: The romantic Silk Road of yesteryear has in our time become a kind of Despots' Alley or Tyrants' Row, with various sorts of unfree governments lying end-to-end on the map from Beijing right on through to North Africa.

But then I reflected some more and thought, in all these storied lands there are people who are working for the same things that I am working for. Whatever might happen—whether prison or even death might await us—we could all feel that we were part of a larger freedom struggle whose value and significance humbled us even while they lifted us up. I've never believed anything more strongly in my life. This is not just

about Egypt, or the Middle East, or the Arab peoples—this is a global struggle, a battle for the world. Those who are carrying it on in countries and regions such as mine need the help of citizens in mature democracies. Reach out to us, engage us in dialogue, give us a hand if and when you can, and let our message be heard in the West so our culture and our religion will not be unjustly condemned as intrinsically against freedom and democracy, because they are not.

People everywhere aspire to freedom and democracy. They might not always articulate their hopes in a lucid manner that would find a fair hearing here in the West, but they are there, believe me. They need opportunities to organize and to do the work that needs to be done. In Egypt, despite all our ups and downs, we have had a civil society sector for more than a century and a half. In 1840, Greek émigrés who had settled in Egypt founded the first group that you might call a modern nongovernmental organization; by 1900, there were more than two hundred such local groups. Great hospitals, relief organizations, and our first secular university all began as the works of civil society organizations. Likewise, Egypt could boast a vibrant multiparty parliamentary democracy, an independent judiciary, and one of the earliest movements for female emancipation anywhere in the world.

## The Liberal Age

For about a century, then, from around 1850 until about the time of the Free Officers' coup that toppled the monarchy and brought Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser to power in 1952, there flourished in Egypt a Liberal Age that is all too often unjustly forgotten in discussions of Arab politics today. Leading thinkers and writers such as Taha Hussein and the Nobel Prize-winning novelist Naghib Mahfouz characterize that period, but there were literally hundreds of others. This was also a time of relative sectarian peace and tolerance. The great Oxford historian Albert Hourani's *History of the Arab Peoples* is a good primer on this and other aspects of political development in that period.<sup>4</sup>

The Liberal Age came to an end after the Arab defeat at the hands of Israel in the 1948 war and the subsequent rise of military regimes across the Arab world. With ideological roots in populist nationalism, these governments soon became entrenched autocracies. Civil society groups, political parties, trade unions, and the independent judiciary were among their early victims.

When we founded the Ibn Khaldun Center and as we guided its work throughout the late 1980s and 1990s, we had the Liberal Age very much in mind. We saw ourselves not as builders from scratch, but as revivers of a great (but not perfect) tradition that had existed not only in our country but also in Syria, Iraq, Iran, Morocco, and elsewhere. We were and we remain determined that this liberal tradition—and the Egyptian

Court of Cassation, as witnessed in our legal case, is part of this legacy—will not be forgotten. We believe that if these ideas receive the exposure they deserve, the memory of this tradition and, more importantly, the still-living relevance of its core teachings on rights, freedom, transparency, and justice, can play a large role in showing that democracy does indeed have a reasonable chance of putting down roots and growing in the Middle East.

Instead of the “paralysis by analysis” that comes from cataloguing all the familiar reasons why our peoples will “never” be ready for democracy, we choose to remind ourselves of the liberal options that were once open and can be open again. This relies on careful research as well as skillful public outreach, and yet it is obviously not mainly a historical exercise. Our attempted retrieval of the achievements and aspirations of the Liberal Age is something done for the sake of the future. It gives us, and all the freedom-loving people who want to join us, something to build on and something to fight for—in spite of censorship, police repression, and extremism. Our determination is high, and I for one think that our chances are good. I hope that you will help us.

#### NOTES

1. The Court of Cassation’s opinion can be read at [www.democracy-egypt.org/acquittal/ReasonsofAcquittalJudgment.doc](http://www.democracy-egypt.org/acquittal/ReasonsofAcquittalJudgment.doc). See also Saad Eddin Ibrahim and Naiem A. Sherbiny, “A Reply to My Accusers,” *Journal of Democracy* 11 (October 2000): 58–63.

2. Saad Eddin Ibrahim, “Broaden the Road Map,” *Washington Post*, 12 May 2003, A19.

3. The death sentence imposed on Aghajari in November 2002 aroused widespread protest in Iran, especially among student groups. Shi’ite cleric Ali Khamenei, the “supreme guide of the Revolution,” intervened to order the courts to review the sentence, while simultaneously warning the protestors to back off. Aghajari’s sentence was reduced to a term of imprisonment, and then suspended, so as of this writing in August 2003 he is not incarcerated.

4. Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).