



PROJECT *on* Middle East Democracy

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“Voice of Freedom: A Conversation with Dissidents”

Foreign Policy Initiative Forum: Advancing and Defending Democracy

The W Hotel, 515 15th Street NW

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As part of the Foreign Policy Initiative Forum on “Advancing and Defending Democracy,” Egyptian dissident **Saad Eddin Ibrahim** and Iranian activist **Ali Afshari** shared their experiences of fighting for democratic reform in their respective countries. **Jeff Gedmin** of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty moderated the extended question-and-answer panel.

Ibrahim fielded many questions from Gedmin and the audience. When asked how the situation in Egypt differs from prior historical precedents, Ibrahim explained that the cause in Egypt is the same as elsewhere: to spread human rights, freedom, and democracy. Yet the method of aiding democratic reform in Egypt must be “particularized” to its unique situation, just like in any other country. Egypt’s case presents special difficulty given the friendship between the **Mubarak** regime and the United States. That friendship, however, is merely an expedient for Mubarak who cares for nothing but himself.

To the question of how to support dissidents, Ibrahim simply answered to ask the dissidents what they need. Personally, Ibrahim called for moral support and the implementation of creative conditionality to enforce accountability on the regime for political reform, citing the precedent of the Helsinki Accords and the USSR. Additionally, the inherent favorable bias of the State Department and Pentagon toward autocratic regimes must be addressed. These institutions seek to maintain the status quo, even when elected leaders strive for more enlightened foreign policy. Unfortunately, the bureaucracy always outlives the elected official.

In response to why the U.S. should support democracy given its other valid interests in Egypt, Ibrahim rejected the notion that friendship with Mubarak has yielded any benefits. Not since **Anwar Sadat** has Egypt made any progress with the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. In fact, the regime uses its claims of cooperation with the U.S. to keep democratic pressure off its back. Furthermore, Mubarak has skillfully manipulated America’s “pathological fear of Islamists” to dampen any proposal of political reform in the country.

According to Ibrahim, this fear is largely unfounded. During the 2005 election, 77% of Egyptians abstained because they liked neither the autocratic National Democratic Party and its allies nor the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood. That majority of abstentions form the “democrat constituency” who would support reformers like himself or his colleague, **Ayman Nour**. From a more ideological perspective, the U.S. should not fear the Islamists as one among many voices in Egypt’s pluralistic society. The “essence of democracy” calls for allowing all parties to speak so long as “they respect the rules of the game.” Besides, there are several examples of moderate Islamists who have responsibly served in government, such as the case in Turkey.

Finally, Ibrahim addressed the question of who will succeed President Mubarak. Clearly, President Mubarak seeks to emulate the North Korean example and install his son, **Gamal Mubarak**, as his successor. However, others believe that the army might intervene and install one of their own. But Ibrahim hopes for a national front scenario that will prepare the country for true democratic governance. Contrary to popular belief, Egyptian society is fully compatible with democracy. After all, they elected their first parliament in 1866, before both Germany and Italy.

Afshari also answered several questions during the panel. The discussion first turned to how can the West support Iranian democracy given the diversity of opinions and ideologies different dissidents groups support. Afshari contended there is currently no ideological struggle within Iran as all the protestors have come together to support freedom and human rights. Even the diaspora, which has historically remained separate from Iranians within the country, has recently increased ties with the indigenous movement. Afshari rejected the notion that dissidents become tainted if they receive too much assistance from the West. That excuse is employed by the regime regardless of the level of support. For example, **Mir-Hossein Mousavi** has been declared a foreign agent despite a complete paucity of evidence to validate the regime's accusation.

The conversation then turned to the recent democratic protests in Iran. According to Afshari, most people before the election merely disliked **President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad**. But now, they desire more radical change. Some protestors seek reform within the regime itself while others seek more fundamental change that would overthrow the regime in its entirety. Clearly, the regime has completely lost its legitimacy since the election and only can maintain power through its intelligence and military services. But such strong-arm tactics cannot work in the long-term. Even the clergy has split from the regime. In one telling example, many high clergy members have blatantly disregarded **Supreme Leader Khamenei's** declaration of the start of Eid al-Fitr, offering their own date instead.

Finally, Afshari minimized the importance of the nuclear issue as a short-term concern compared to the long-term benefits of Iranian democracy. After all, if Iran has a democratically-elected, rational government, then the nuclear issue would no longer present a problem. In the meantime, military action would be a disaster, especially if launched by Israel. Sanctions, if harsh enough, may alter the regime's course, but that is highly unlikely. When questioned how the sanctions would affect the democratic movement, Afshari admitted it is difficult to predict. Some opposition members would likely return to the regime as a sign of solidarity, while others may be emboldened by such strong Western action against the regime. What is clear, however, is that sanctions must not harm the average Iranian citizen.

Gedmin concluded the panel by debunking two damaging myths. First, contrary to popular belief, authoritarian regimes are not inherently stable. Second, no country or society is inherently incompatible with democracy.