

Freedom is the Prerequisite for Bread

Interview with Ibrahim Awad



Ibrahim Awad

Dr. Ibrahim Awad is Professor at the Public Policy and Administration Department of the American University in Cairo. He has held positions with regional organizations and United Nations agencies in Argentina, Spain, Switzerland, Lebanon and Egypt. He was director of the International Migration Programme at the International Labour Organization (ILO) in Geneva, of the sub-regional office of the ILO for North Africa in Cairo, and Secretary of the Commission at the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) in Beirut. His recent publication is "La question de l'emploi entre la recherche arabe et les institutions financières internationales" (2010).

Perspectives: Dr. Awad, the fact that a large part of highly educated Arab youth are unable to find adequate jobs is often seen as a factor of social unrest. Mohamed Bouazizi, who set himself alight, ignited Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution. Was youth unemployment also one of the factors that triggered the Egyptian revolution?

AWAD: No revolution of such proportions has a single cause. Employment should be put in the socio-economic and political context. The past years in Egypt have witnessed numerous workers

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strikes. Strikes are an indicator that people actually do work, but that they are not satisfied with their terms and conditions of employment. Even with employment, huge gaps in income exist. Egypt reached a peak annual economic growth of around 7% in 2007. The question is how were the benefits of this growth distributed? One of the answers is that growth is translated into increased employment. But what happened in reality is that only a minority benefitted from economic growth and a few became extremely rich, while among the majority of the population a general deprivation took place and their living conditions were crushed. So it was not only the poor who became even poorer, but also the middle classes started losing ground. Income disparities became very visible. People learned

that growth occurred and concluded logically, that if they grew poorer, somebody else was getting the fruits of this growth of which they were not benefiting. In addition, prices were increasing, especially food prices.

Perspectives: Who then benefitted mainly from this economic growth?

AWAD: In order to know who benefitted, just take a look at the background of the members of the past cabinet. In 2004, Prime Minister Ahmad Nazif formed a government in which a number of successful businessmen held ministerial posts in the same sectors of their businesses. The Minister of Agriculture was an agricultural entrepreneur. The Minister of Health owned a hospital. The Minister of Housing Utilities and Urban Community owned a construction company. It is quite self-evident that these actors and the business circles close to political power reaped the fruits of growth. Economic and political power became concentrated in the hands of a few. This is the that reason economic growth did not create sufficient employment at decent terms and conditions.

Perspectives: Why is that?

AWAD: This is mainly because of wrong policies. These last days for example, the government announced that monthly work contracts were to be turned into a minimum of one-year contracts, and that there should be open-ended contracts for employees who have been working for several years. My question is that if it is possible to do this now, why was it not done before? The only answer is that our policy makers are, simply said, dealing with issues that are crucial for people's survival in an irresponsible way.

The problem may even be larger than that. The government of businessmen pursued what they called “reforms”, but which were essentially neo-liberal policies following the principles of trade liberalization, deregulation and privatization. One of the main objectives was to

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push the privatization of the public sector even further, a process that had already started in the 1990s. Other examples are the deregulation of the telecommunications sector and the decision to sell state-owned land. All these measures contributed to economic growth, but they did not create sufficient fresh employment. Quite to the contrary: Policies guided by the IMF and the WTO, which cut down on state subsidies and liberalized trade for example destroyed the local industries, especially the textile industry.

Perspectives: How does education play into the situation you just described?

AWAD: The quality of and access to education are, of course, also problems that need to be addressed. But the lack of education is not the main factor in unemployment. In Egypt, as in many countries of the region, it is rather the case that the better educated you are, the less likely you are to find a job. This might seem paradoxical at first sight, but it is not. Firstly, large-scale investment focuses on low technology, low value added industries that do not need experts, but rather request blue collar laborers who are paid very low salaries. Secondly, really qualified persons want to contribute and to participate according to their merits. But in Egypt they were left out of the political system at a time when Gamal Mubarak, the son of Hosni Mubarak, established a powerful committee in the ruling

party that formulated economic policies, which the government implemented. There was just a blatant absence of participation. In addition, a systematic destruction of trade unions and infiltration of political parties took place, so that the latter were degraded to nothing more than appendices to the system that didn't represent anyone. If the ruling party continuously wins overwhelming majorities that reached 93% of the votes in the November-December 2010 elections, what did you maintain a parliament for? Imagine that the law regulating the establishment and functioning of political parties gave the secretary of the ruling party the right to accept or reject the founding of new parties! And I don't even want to mention the control over civil society through another law, and the control over the media. Not to forget that average people were increasingly finding themselves at the mercy of the state security that grew steadily in numbers and finally took complete control of internal affairs. In such a system, how can education be valued and play an effective role?

Perspectives: Was the revolution started by these people who mostly suffered from the conditions you are mentioning?

AWAD: The revolution was initiated by young people deprived of effective political participation, who witnessed generalized corruption and experienced repression. They didn't want to participate in politics because they despised the existing political system. But it is actually their will to participate seriously and effectively that made them sustain the struggle. In the revolution also participated the large segments of the population whose living conditions had become dismal. It was joined by people who probably wouldn't have participated ten years ago. Past Tuesday, I was marching with university professors, and we asked people who were watching us from their balconies, to come down and join us. They clapped in support, but didn't join. I'm sure that as we are speaking now, they have joined the protests. The government somehow thought that time would

be on their side, but it was not. It rather played against them. The millions who suffered from the consequences of the neo-liberal economic policies progressively joined the protests. The government made a strategic mistake, which shows its incompetence and inability to analyze.

Perspectives: Was the revolution predictable?

AWAD: No, it was not at this particular time. But what was predictable was that the situation would somehow explode. The ongoing deprivation and the bad living conditions certainly could not have continued without growing protest. During the past years, I told myself, that once

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claims for the right to political participation and liberty would be combined with socio-economic protests, something major would happen. But I didn't know how exactly this would be triggered and when.

Perspectives: What created its momentum?

AWAD: Protests in Egypt are nothing new. Actually, the country has been rocked by protests for the past four years. Before, however, claims and demands had been rather specific: better working conditions, academic freedom, etc. While the workers fought out their strikes, the political protests were always somewhat removed from the broad public, and both never really connected. Now both clicked together, and this is what created the enormous momentum that stunned all of us. In our part of the world, the cause of democracy will only be advanced if it is connected to social justice. Otherwise it will remain a theoretical concept. Once people realize that the lack of democracy is one reason for their deteriorating living conditions, they will

join the cause.

Perspectives: Hasan Hanfi, the renowned Egyptian philosopher, recently gave a talk in Beirut. He mentioned that he had asked his students in Egypt the question "What are your main demands?" to which they answered "Bread and freedom". When he asked them "How are these two issues related?" they answered "They are not related at all." He concluded by stating that the relation between bread and freedom has to be rediscovered. Can you comment on this?

AWAD: Yes, but I would even go beyond this. Bread and freedom are not only related. Freedom is the prerequisite for bread. This is why those Arab governments that now distribute charity to their peoples are fundamentally wrong if they think this makes people shut up. They don't understand at all what these revolutions are about. We cannot anymore talk about developing the economy alone. In the same fashion, employment is not only about catering to the labor market. Countries are more than markets. Education is a value, and not only supposed to make young people fit for work. Education forms the citizens committed to their societies and countries.

Perspectives: There were observers, also in some media channels such as CNN, who argued that the protesters were the minority of the population, while the majority preferred stability and continuity, also for economic reasons. What do you think of that?

AWAD: I find this argument rather dull. I am trying to compare, but I can't recall any uprising of such a magnitude. The Iranian revolution started with student demonstrations that continued for almost nine months. In Egypt, millions were mobilized within two weeks. Tunisia of course was stunning, but Egypt was even more impressive in terms of numbers. And since when does a revolution bring everybody to the streets? Did all the French rise up in the French revolution? Doesn't every population have little children and elders that cannot demonstrate

in the streets? Revolutions are about a critical mass, and this mass was certainly reached in Egypt. And finally, it is not only about the mass of people. It is also about the critical composition.

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While previously demands had been put forward rather separately, this time students, workers, media professionals, bloggers, academics, the poor, the middle class, and the upper class people marched together. This combination was an important energy for the revolution.

Perspectives: What, in your view, has to be done in terms of economic reform?

AWAD: First of all, there need to be redistributive policies. This is not an easy task, given the political economy of Egypt and the concentration of power. But in case we are able to build a pluralistic system in which the leaders respect the citizens, then we will be able to formulate policies that improve conditions and meet the needs of the population. They would include social policies, such as public health, housing and education. Such policies will not improve the lives of everyone immediately, but if progress is made, then people will at least see that their leaders take their needs seriously. Secondly, we need to invest in sectors that provide employment. High youth unemployment is not only a problem in Egypt and the Arab world, but also on the European side of the Mediterranean, such as in Greece, Italy and Spain. Speaking of the Mediterranean, the economic policies that were so detrimental in Tunisia and Egypt were promoted by the EU among others. The a-process initiated by the EU turned out to be much ado about nothing. A lot was done, but nothing really had impact on the lives of people. Policies of cooperation at best maintained the status quo at a time when it was change and a healthy economic environment that were required, and which would have been in the

best interest of both Europe and the Arab world.

Perspectives: What is, in your view, the greatest achievement of the Egyptian revolution?

AWAD: Whatever happens from now on, those who are governing will have to reckon with the people and justify themselves before them. For now, that is the greatest accomplishment. The time of impunity is over.

Perspectives: How do you assess the decision to arrest ministers and business men and freeze their assets? Do you think that pursuing high profile economic crime will increase the belief in social/ economic justice efforts and demands for accountability? Is it a useful step or do these persons only serve as scapegoats?

AWAD: A number of ministers, who also happen to be businessmen, have been arrested and accused of corruption. Fighting corruption is always positive. However, reinforcing belief and adherence in change requires more than that. It is not logical to lay responsibility for the many ills of the regime on a few persons. Accusing everyone is not conducive to truth either. In contrast, it is striking that the most emblematic figures of the Mubarak regime, responsible for political corruption and strongly suspected of serious economic misconduct, are free. A systematic uncovering of cases of political and economic corruption is necessary. Individuals responsible for these cases should be submitted to justice. But they should enjoy fair trials. The democratic Egypt should abide by the lofty principles that inspired the revolution.

Interview by Layla Al-Zubaidi, 11 February 2011.