A Politics of Inclusion: An Interview with Saad Eddin Ibrahim

Saad Eddin Ibrahim is Professor of Political Sociology at the American University in Cairo. He founded the Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies and is one of the Arab world's most prominent spokesmen for democracy and human rights. Author, co-author, or editor of more than thirty-five books in Arabic and English, including Egypt, Islam and Democracy: Critical Essays (1996), he was arrested by the Mubarak regime in 2000 and sentenced to seven years' hard labour for 'tarnishing' Egypt's image. After an international outcry, Egypt's High Court cleared him of all charges in 2003.

In this interview he explores the fateful encounter of Islam and the Arab world with modernity and democracy, and assesses the prospects for Islamic reformation and Arab democratisation. He examines the symbiotic relationship between the region's autocrats and theocrats, before turning to the prospects for progress in Iraq. The interview was conducted on 11 February 2007.

Part 1: Personal and intellectual background

Alan Johnson: Who and what have been the most important personal and intellectual influences in your life?

Saad Eddin Ibrahim: As a youngster I was influenced by leaders from our national history and from the 'third world' – Gandhi, Nehru, Mao, Che and Nasser (whom I met at an early age but who later stripped me of my nationality and declared me persona non grata when I was in my twenties). These people shaped me positively and negatively – some became negative reference points. And my family was very influential. My uncles adhered to different political traditions, from Communism to the Muslim Brotherhood. In the 1940s and 1950s each sought to win me to his point of view. I found that fascinating!

I arrived in America in 1963 to attend University and became involved in the revolutions of that period. Herbert Marcuse, Martin Luther King, C. Wright Mills, Frantz Fanon – these were all influences. I became an activist along with my generation – the antiwar movement, the civil rights movement, and the second wave

women's movement were extremely important events for me. I owe my activism to that period in the United States.

I became President of the Egyptian Students, then President of the Arab Students, and in that capacity I toured North America and Europe. These years truly impacted on my life and I can trace back some of the things I am doing now, towards the end of my sixties, to those years in my twenties and thirties.

I supported the Palestinians but the defeat of the Six-Day War of 1967 convinced me that democracy was the missing piece of the jigsaw. Until then democracy did not take up much of my attention as an Arab. Democracy was always present in my work in America, where I was living in an open and democratic society, and benefiting from that, but it took 1967 for me to realise that so long as there is no transparency or accountability then we Arabs would suffer defeats. That was an eye-opener. The defeat agonised my generation. It caused us sleepless nights for so many years, actually until 1973. These were years that scarred our dignity, our psyche, our hearts, but also years of rethinking and self-criticism. I began to study the causes of the defeat and my first book was called *The Sociology of the Arab-Israeli Conflict*. We began to question some sacred cows, and that created problems for me back home. My activist and intellectual lives have intertwined and influenced one another ever since.

Arrest, Trial, Imprisonment

Alan Johnson: Your home was raided in the middle of the night of June 30, 2000. You were arrested, imprisoned, vilified in the state press, and tried three times on the same charges, before Egypt's highest High Court of Cassation eventually acquitted you and your associates of all charges on March 18, 2003. Why do you think you were arrested in 2000?

Saad Eddin Ibrahim: They said I had accepted a grant from the EU without state permission; that I was using this grant for voter registration, again without authorisation; that I had defamed Egypt in my writings; and that I embezzled this grant. But as a sociologist and political analyst I know that stated reasons at best overlap with real reasons.

I think the real reason for my arrest was my challenge to the Mubarak family. On the day of my arrest I had published an article in Al-Majalla, a London-based magazine

distributed across the Arab world. Let me tell you how that article came about. An Arab satellite station, Orbit, asked me to be an expert commentator during the funeral of the Syrian President, Hafez al-Assad, on June 13 2000. The funeral was a protracted affair lasting several hours and I was live on air taking questions from callers. Two or three questions concerned the political future of Syria and who would succeed Assad. I began to develop an ad hoc theory about political succession in non-democratic regimes. I pointed out that it was easy to predict the future as we could see on our screens that Bashar al-Assad, the oldest surviving son of the deceased President, was meeting all the dignitaries quite as if he was already Head of State. A caller asked how the son could succeed the father without holding a formal position. I said 'Oh, I am sure the Ba'ath party will get together and fix that.' Another caller pointed out that his age, 34, would debar him. I said 'Well, even the constitution too can be fixed. They will lower the age-limit from 40 to 30' (as it turned out they lowered it by constitutional amendment from 40 to 34 – they were not even subtle!) One caller wondered if we were seeing a precedent being set in the Arab world, and asked where else this kind of familial succession might take place. I mentioned Iraq, Yemen and Libya.

I pointed out that what was common to all four cases was that (1) any President who remains in power for more than ten years develops a sense of ownership of the country; and (2) these are Muslim countries and, according to Sharia laws of inheritance, the father bequeaths his wealth to the oldest son. I suggested this combination could foster a notion that the oldest son has the right to succeed the father in running the country or 'the family estate.' At this point a caller asked me why I had not included Egypt in this theory. I tried to deflect the question but the caller was persistent. In the end I gave in, acknowledging that it could happen in Egypt, observing that one of Mubarak's sons was interested in politics.

The next day I was called by the Editor-in-Chief of *Al-Majalla* who asked me to turn my remarks into an article. I did so and it was titled *Al Jumlikiya: The Arab Contribution to Politics in the 21st Century*. That is a hybrid word I made up. In Arabic it means 'Republican Monarchy.' The article appeared on the streets on June 30 2000. Well, that morning all the copies were removed from the Egyptian markets, and that night I was arrested. So perhaps I was arrested because I had discussed the subject of succession in an open way – 'naming names,' so to speak.

Other people offered different theories. I had documented the rigging of Egyptian elections in 2005 and was about to train 1,000 monitors for the 2000 Parliamentary

elections. In fact, that training was due to begin the next day, July 1. And don't forget, they didn't just arrest me. They arrested all 27 people working in the Ibn Khaldun Center which was co-ordinating the training of the monitors. A third theory was that my arrest was due to my frequent defence of minorities, both in Egypt and across the Arab world.

Alan Johnson: You suffered several small strokes while in prison. How is your health today?

Saad Eddin Ibrahim: After I got out of prison I was in a wheelchair for a year and for a further year I used a cane. I have undergone surgery three times at John Hopkins since I was released, and I am due to have a fourth operation. With each operation my health improves a little and now I can walk, albeit with some difficulty. I have to be very conscious of my balance, I tire easily, and my handwriting leaves a lot to be desired!

It was not the decline in my health that upset me most, by the way. It was the destruction of the Ibn Khaldun Center a day or two before my release. Documents and libraries were looted, pictures were destroyed. I had not cried in the previous three years but when I saw what they had done to the Center I cried for the first time during the whole ordeal. It was so senseless and vindictive.

The Court of Cassation, Egypt's High Court, cleared me. It was created in 1923 – a legacy of the brief liberal age in Egypt. The High Court has survived Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak, and is a saving grace in this miserable country of ours. Not only did the Court acquit me and my colleagues of all charges, it also reprimanded the regime, which was highly unusual. It made it clear that if anyone had tarnished Egypt's image it had been the executive, and that it was the job of the state to answer charges made by intellectuals, not to imprison them! This was so gratifying – it made the three year ordeal meaningful. The Court affirmed that everything the Ibn Khaldun Center was doing was legitimate, including receiving grants and publishing in foreign languages (the state had attacked me for writing in foreign languages and 'defaming' Egypt abroad). Indeed, you might say the manner of the acquittal was more important to me than the acquittal itself.

The Ibn Khaldun Center

Alan Johnson: Please describe the work of the Ibn Khaldun Center.

Saad Eddin Ibrahim: We reopened the Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies, on June 30, 2003 – the anniversary of my arrest. We declared June 30 to be Ibn Khaldun day and affirmed that we were back in business with the same agenda: research, advocacy and action for development. We conceive 'development' in a broad sense, economic development, democratisation (which we consider to be political development), and the growth of civil society (which we consider the backbone of social development). We are also concerned with minority issues and women's rights.

We created the Ibn Khaldun Center in 1988. For the first three years we focused on research and built a knowledge base. We began to move into advocacy and then into action – the third leg of our work. And that is when we began to step on the regime's toes and we were attacked, arrested, and thrown behind bars.

Today, we continue to conduct research into development, civil society and democratisation in Egypt and the Arab world. We issue annual reports and position papers on current issues. We work to encourage women into Parliament – a programme for micro-credit for women and the poor in several areas of Egypt, moves into literacy capability and reproductive health projects. We also support political empowerment through voter registration, and look to organise to become a political power.

We hold open forums at the Ibn Khaldun every Tuesday – Egypt's Hyde Park. Every week people come from all over Cairo and outside to listen to speakers and engage in debate. We issue a monthly newsletter called *Civil Society and Democratisation of the Arab World*, in Arabic and English.

And now we are involved in an exciting project to create an Arab Endowment of Democracy. We challenged wealthy Arabs to spare us the charge that when we accept grants from outside the Arab world we are 'western agents.' A couple have accepted the challenge and now we have seed-corn money to develop the idea of an Arab Democracy Foundation. This is a project I am very excited about. The inaugural conference will take place in April in Doha, in Qatar.

Part 2: Islam, Modernity, Democracy

Alan Johnson: You have long studied Islamic thought and its relationship to modernity, liberalism, democracy. Can you say a little about the competing strains of Islamic thought, their contemporary political meaning, and talk about the balance of forces between these strains today?

Saad Eddin Ibrahim: It is important to understand the development of Islamic thinking using an *historical* approach. I think this means grasping three things.

First, Islam came to societies that were very old indeed – Egypt and Persia had their own history, culture, and pre-monotheistic religions. So Islam – spread sometimes by the sword, sometimes by preachers – was bound to mix with already existing cultures. By the second Islamic century we begin to detect a mainstream establishment Islam, an oppositionalist stream, and a third that rejected both. And that lasts all the way up to today, as represented by what we call Sunnis, Shias and the Kharagites. Now, the Kharagites have withered away – they are a historical footnote, the remnants are in the Sultanate of Oman, and Algeria. But what did emerge as a real third alternative for people's hearts was the Sufi stream of Islam. Sufism did not go in for the heavy theological baggage – the clergy, literature, the strict body of belief and ritual – but offered to meet people's need for a religious anchor in a more spiritual mode, without the rituals used by the establishment to keep people under control.

Second, in every generation, in every age, there is a yearning for the first century of Islam. Youngsters learn in the history books that this was the golden age of Islam when society was virtuous, everybody was god-fearing and society was just. Piety, faith and justice are seen as having given rise to a strong Muslim civilisation and a powerful state. That is the image that our youngsters learn at school. And every generation will dream of reviving that century, and going back to the 'paradise lost.' Al Qaeda, the Muslim Brothers, Hezbollah, Hamas are all 21st century manifestations of that yearning for paradise lost and the idealisation of the first century of Islam.

Third, since the 19th century, Muslims have agonised over a question: why has the West progressed while we have remained behind? And there have been three kinds of answers. The first answer says we have strayed from the straight path of Islam. Sayyid Qutb, one of the main theoreticians of all the militant movements of the last 50 or 60 years, has a book with that very title – *Ma'alim fil Tariq*, or

Landmarks on the Road. He means to direct his readers back to the straight path of the pure religion. The second answer says we failed to keep up with the West. During our centuries of stagnation the West caught up and then conquered us. The West triumphed because of its revolutions in science, technology, politics, and economic organisation, so we must *emulate* the West. Ismail Pasha of Egypt was an emulator. President Sadat, in his late years, was another admirer of the West. A third answer has been offered by the synthesisers or reconcilers, who deny we have to either go back to the first century of Islam or emulate the West wholesale. They propose to combine the best of our tradition and early heritage with modernity. These three answers have been translated into political ideologies and movements and in today's Arab world we find them in conflict with one another, sometimes lethal conflict.

Opening the gates of Ijtihad and the reformation of Islam

Alan Johnson: You have argued that 'freedom is a central Koranic value' and that from this central value can be elaborated other values 'like equality, gender equality, human rights, democracy [and] the separation between religion and the state.' On the other hand, you have written that the violent reaction to the Danish cartoons reflected 'the degradation of the concept of freedom within the Muslim value system.' Can you talk a little about the struggles over the place of freedom in Islamic thought today, and the prospects for a reformation of Islam?

Saad Eddin Ibrahim: This is one of the projects we are working on in the Ibn Khaldun Center. On our Board of Trustees is Gamal al-Banna – the only surviving brother of Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brothers. He is in his mid 80s but lucid. Since he joined he had been pressuring me to start a research action project on Islamic Reformation. Frankly, it wasn't on my agenda as a pressing issue. But then I was arrested in 2000 and while I was in prison, 9/11 happened. A few days later, Gamal al-Banna wrote to me to say that while he did not know who had committed the terrible acts, he would not rule out that they were young Muslim militants. Recall that the media in this part of the world spent weeks denying that the perpetrators were Arabs. Many people were in deep denial, saying they were CIA or Israeli agents seeking to create a pretext to aggress against the Muslim or Arab world.

Al-Banna made me see the importance of the project for Islamic Reformation. His thesis is that Islam – as a heritage, as a theology, and as a system of rituals – has

not experienced the kind of reformation that both Christianity and Judaism have. As a result our Sharia and our Islamic thought have not been critiqued in 1000 years. For ten centuries, Ijtahad – the disciplined reinterpretation of the text to cope with and guide our development in changing contexts – has been banned by the religious authorities. For the first four centuries rethinking, critique and development were happening all the time. However, according to al-Banna, once the Muslim world began to be encroached on, the Ulema – the learned religious authorities – *closed the gates of Ijtihad*, citing foreign pressure on the abode of Islam. Any reinterpretation, they said, would be construed as playing to the foreigners. Al-Banna believes that *we forgot to re-open the doors of Ijtihad* and as a result we have not had a new idea in our theology in 1000 years. We must reopen the gates to deal with the 21st century rather than dream of recreating the first Islamic century.

The Islamic reformation project has been running for the last three years. We have invited Islamic thinkers from all over the Muslim world, from Tunisia to North America, and posed to them all the questions of the 21st century. And we say, please, as you read the Koran and the basic heritage of Islam, develop 21st century Islamic answers that will help our youngsters to be faithful to their religion and their heritage *but also help them to live in the 21st century as full partners, not as enemies and not as warriors.*

Democrats and moderate Islamists: a strategic alliance?

Alan Johnson: You have argued for an alliance of sorts between democrats and 'moderate' Islamists. In August 2006 you wrote that 'Mainstream Islamists with broad support developed civic dispositions and services to provide are the most likely actors in building a new Middle East.' And in December 2006 you complained about an 'unjustified fear of modern Islamists' and called for a policy of dialogue and inclusion, saying 'Hamas, Hezbollah, Muslim Brothers – these people you cannot get rid of; you have to deal with them … the name of the game is inclusion.' You deny that these organisations are inimical to democracy, pointing out that Islamists have never come to power via elections and then reneged on democracy. Warning that 'the Islamist scare is propagated and marketed by autocratic regimes to intimidate the middle class and the West, to ward off any serious democratic reforms,' you have urged a positive response to Hamas and Hezbollah's participation in elections. While you warn that 'no sober analyst would consider this a final commitment by Islamists to democracy,' you believe 'the process of transforming them into Muslim

democrats is clearly under way.' Now, these views have raised some eyebrows. Can you set out your thinking?

Saad Eddin Ibrahim: After 9/11 – at the same time as I was being pressured by Gamal al-Banna to launch a project for an Islamic Reformation – I was engaging the Islamists in prison. Everyone was shaken up by 9/11 and so open to discussion. On my release, the comrades of these Islamists contacted me and proposed we continue the dialogue. We did for a few months and then one asked a question – why has the outside world raised such a fuss about you and not about our comrades, even though they have been rotting for 25 years? They asked why the BBC talked about my case but not theirs. I reminded them that I was perceived as sharing core values with human rights groups around the world. They asked what these core values were. I told them: belief in democracy, freedom, human rights, equality, tolerance, diversity. They claimed to share those values. I said, 'Have you guys forgotten that I studied you 25 years ago? You did not have those values then!' They claimed to have changed in prison, having rethought their ideas. I said: well, your image is still one of bloodthirsty, violent, intolerant fanatics. They asked how they could change their image. I told them: the same way you created it, by your actions and rhetoric and writings. They claimed to feel morally responsible for what happened on 9/11. I said: begin to write in a different way. They wrote four small volumes revisiting their beliefs, and these were smuggled out of prison and published. These were published under the name El Moragiat which in Arabic means the revisiting or the revising.

The Supreme Guide of the Muslim Brothers held a press conference on March 30, 2004, fully supporting democracy. Of course there remain doubts about whether they are really committed. But at another level they do seem to have moved. I am optimistic. I say we should give Islamists a chance to show whether they are truly committed to these core values or not. There is nothing to lose. Instead of a bloodbath every generation, let us see if they can evolve.

What helped me in this dialogue with the Islamists, inside prison and outside, was the assumption of power by the Justice and Development Party in Turkey towards the end of 2002, and the similar development in Morocco. That gave the dialogue credence and reminded me that Islamists are not metaphysical abstractions but human beings in time and space – historic forces subject to change like everybody else. They are not beyond change or reform.

Alan Johnson: But what of the danger of an Iranian development? Did the Iranian left not commit a grievous error in making that kind of alliance, literally digging its own grave? How can that be avoided?

Saad Eddin Ibrahim: Well, this is the question that is raised all the time. Iran, Afghanistan, and Sudan are cases in which Islamists came to power not through the ballot box but through a coup or a revolution. But when Islamists were given the chance via the ballot box they have not reneged on the rules. In Indonesia, Malaysia, Bangladesh, Turkey, and other countries, Islamists who came to power through the ballot box left power through the ballot box. Look, I am as concerned as you are, being a secularist and a civil society advocate. I hear your question – if they come to power will it be 'one man, one vote, one time,' or will they leave office if voted out by the majority? But I would like to keep that question alive, as an open question.

Engaging Hamas

So, in April 2006 I took my students to Palestine to engage Hamas. They were studying social movements and had asked me whether the theory that an extremist movement elected to power will moderate over time would hold true for Hamas. I said, 'Well, let's go to Palestine and talk to Hamas!' We sat in the Parliament seats in Ramallah and the cabinet members who were in town – including the Deputy Prime Minister and the Speaker of the House – sat at the podium as if they were on trial, and we debated for six hours. The Hamas representatives said, 'Yes, we may change, but we have not had a chance to breathe. We were elected one month ago and from day we have been under siege by the US, the EU and Israel.' They reminded us that it took Egypt 30 years to recognise Israel but they were being asked to make the same journey in 30 days. They said they needed to educate their constituents and it would take time. Some of us were convinced by that and some were not. But we kept the question open.

I have also met with Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, in his hideout. He claimed the only violence they have used has been against Israel – they do not use violence against the other Lebanese forces or the government but organise demonstrations and sit-ins instead – Nasrallah even quoted my earlier work at me, on the role of civil disobedience in democracies.

So I am encouraging people like Hassan Nasrallah, like Mahdi Akef of the Muslim Brothers, and like Ismail Haniya in Palestine. These forces are quite aware of my writing, of what I am doing, and none decline to see me. As I say, I have more influence outside Egypt than inside at the moment.

Alan Johnson: You are drawing a distinction between different kinds of Islamism and suggesting that there are forms of Islamism that democrats can work with. Do you have a larger strategic goal of realigning the political map of your region by realigning the relationship between the democrats and the 'moderate' Islamists?

Saad Eddin Ibrahim: Absolutely. I want to get the Islamists who are willing to play by the democratic rules into the mainstream.

I had an experience with King Hussein that is important in this regard. I happened to be the Secretary General of the Arab Forum, in Amman, between 1985 and 1990. In that capacity King would call on me occasionally, to discuss, to josh and joke. He felt more able to let his guard down with me, I guess, being an outsider. When the food riots broke out in Jordan in 1988 he summoned me for my assessment. I asked him why he had lifted the food price subsidies. He said the Arab summit in Baghdad in 1978 had extended an aid package to Jordan, Syria, Palestine and Lebanon – the countries that surrounded Israel – to dissuade them from following Sadat by striking a peace agreement with Israel. It was a ten-year package and the ten years were up. And now the World Bank and the IMF were on his back to get his fiscal affairs in shape, so he had no choice but to remove the food price subsidies. I said, 'Your Majesty, why have you not gone on TV and explained all this to your people?' He asked what I meant. I beat around the bush, and talked about civil partnerships, freedoms and so on, but he interrupted and asked, 'Do you mean democracy?' I said, 'Yes, your majesty, I do.'

But then he asked the same question you have asked: 'Saad, what do we do about the Islamists?' I advised him to bring them in, along with all other political forces, and make them sign a kind of Magna Carta – a National Charter detailing the rules of the game. A conference was called at which Islamists, Ba'athists, Nasserites, Communists, everybody participated and agreed a revised Charter. The first multiparty elections were duly held and the King's fear duly materialised: the Islamists won the biggest bloc of seats. (By the way, note which portfolios they chose – social development, education, culture, media, and religious endowments

(*Al Kauf*). These are the same type of portfolios as Hamas recently chose – the people-oriented ones. The Islamists understand the battle is for hearts and minds.)

But then the Islamic Front Ministers overplayed their hands. Education and Social Affairs were very feminised ministries – a lot of women worked there. When an Islamist Minister dictated that all employees must veil, and another declared that none should go to a male hairdresser, the women got very upset and marched to the Royal Palace. The King called me and said, 'Saad, do you see what is happening?' I said, 'Yes, but that is democracy, your Majesty.' I advised him to say to the women that they have come to the wrong address, and they should be marching to Parliament or to the Cabinet instead. He met the women, expressed his sympathy, told the women that his wife and daughter were unveiled, and invited the women to redirect their marches. They did and kept marching for two weeks until they forced those Islamist cabinet members to resign. Everything was peaceful. In the following election the Islamists' vote fell.

Look, what is the alternative to engaging the Islamists? We can't engage in bloodbaths. Of course, I would not include people who do not agree to respect the rules of the game. But I would encourage those who say they do accept the rules.

The theory of 'Muslim or Arab Exceptionalism'

Alan Johnson: A common objection to your optimism is the thesis of 'Muslim and Arab Exceptionalism' – i.e. the notion that there is something in 'Muslim and Arab culture' that is fundamentally incompatible with democracy, and that this incompatibility is the reason the third wave of democratisation broke on the Arab shores of the Mediterranean. Is the exceptionalist thesis wrong? If so, why has the Arab world – and I say Arab rather than Muslim – resisted democratisation thus far?

Saad Eddin Ibrahim: Well, here is my answer to the exceptionalist thesis. The world today has 1.4 billion Muslims. Two-thirds are living under democratically elected governments. One-third are not. Granted the two-thirds may not always be living under a Westminster-type system, but Indonesia, India, Malaysia, Bangladesh, Turkey, Senegal, Nigeria are not very different from the general state of the democracies in other areas that experienced third wave democratisation – Latin America, East Asia, Southern and Central Europe.

The one-third of Muslims who have been left behind are concentrated in the *Arab* world. OK, if there is no Muslim exceptionalism, is there an Arab exceptionalism? I have examined that proposition and here is what I concluded. According to Samuel Huntingdon's book, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the late Twentieth Century* (1991), there have been three great waves of democracy. He dates the first from 1828-1926, the second from 1942-1962, and the third from the Portugese revolution of 1974. I examined the interaction of the Arab world with these three waves of democratisation. To my delight I found that Egypt, the biggest Arab country, was part of that first wave. We had our first constitution in 1866 and our first election for a Parliament was held the same year. But that first liberal age in Egypt was aborted by your fellow compatriots! The British occupation of Egypt began in 1882, only 16 years after the experiment began. During the second wave of democratisation, in the inter-war period, Egypt is also represented. In 1919 we had a revolution against the British and enjoyed an independence of sorts. Egypt began a second liberal age – we created a constitution in 1923, and the very High Court that acquitted me in 2003, and there were elections. This evolution was aborted by the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. Since then, all of the countries around Palestine – which had had their own liberal age to varying degrees – suffered a series of coup d'etats. Syria in 1949, Egypt in 1952, Iraq in 1958. In each case the communiqués issued by the Coup Officers highlighted the defeat of 1948 and blamed it on the liberal governments. Since 1948, the issue of Palestine, rightly or wrongly, has been cynically used by dictators to delay and obstruct any true democratic reforms.

A careful historical analysis of the interaction of the Arab world with the West during the three waves of democratisation is better suited to explaining why the one-third of Muslims concentrated in the Arab world have not yet undergone democratisation than the metaphysical thesis of Arab cultural exceptionalism. Look, I know we don't need such metaphysics because I grew up in a home that had a Member of Parliament!

Part 3: The symbiotic relationship between autocracy and theocracy

Alan Johnson: Some of your most important writings have highlighted the symbiotic nature of the relationship between autocracy and theocracy. You have written that, 'So long as the entrenched autocrats of the Muslim world continue to deny their peoples equal rights of participation, there will always be disaffected dissidents who may resort to extreme ideologies and violent practices. In the late

20th and early 21st centuries excluded Muslims rallied to theocrats – bin Laden, al-Zawahiri, and al-Zarqawi – to combat the autocrats – Mubarak, Assad, Fahd, and Musharraf. The autocrats and theocrats are mirror-images: both are exclusive.' In what sense is the autocrat-theocrat relationship 'symbiotic' and what are the political implications of this?

Saad Eddin Ibrahim: The public space is absolutely dominated by autocrats who have been entrenched for 50 years, and theocrats who have been challenging the autocrats for the last 30 years – since the Iranian revolution. The small reviving constituency of the democrats is totally outmatched. Yes, I say the autocrats need the theocrats. How so? Well, the autocrats skilfully and cynically use the theocrats as a bogeyman to frighten not only the West but also their own middle classes and non-Muslim minorities. The autocrats believe that if they can continue to confront the west and their own people with a stark choice – the theocrats or us – then their power is secure. In Egypt in 2005, 77 percent of the registered voters abstained because they did not want either the autocrats or the theocrats. The regime had destroyed the democratic middle ground that could have galvanised the voters. Ayman Nour who leads a liberal democratic party called Al Ghad was arrested in 2005 and has just completed his two years in prison.

In 2006 the West got scared of democracy-promotion because of the election of Hamas and the Muslim Brothers winning 88 seats – one-fifth of the Egyptian Parliament. Mubarak used this result to argue that democracy was being pushed too fast. We democrats must respond by pointing out that Islamists will get 20-25 percent of the vote in free elections, at least for the foreseeable future. Fear of the Islamists can't be used to block democracy for the rest. And if the Islamists get 45 percent of the vote and form a government then we democrats have to have confidence that they will discover the world is not black and white, that they too can be pressured, and they too will have to compromise. I am not worried about that. I am worried when the West swallows uncritically what the autocrats say. The real antidote to the symbiotic relationship between autocracy and theocracy is a politics of inclusion and democratic governance. When Muslims join the third wave of democracy that started in Portugal in 1974, al Qaeda will join al-Hashashin in the dustbin of history.

Alan Johnson: When you were released from prison in 2003 you addressed a conference in Washington DC on the theme of US support for democracy-promotion and said, 'I hope the United States will have the sustainability, the

consistency to see it through, along with indigenous forces that will build their own democracy.' What would you have Western governments say and do?

Saad Eddin Ibrahim: We don't want you to enforce things like you did in Iraq. Just withhold your support from the autocrats until they open up the system. You did that with economic reform but you did not do it with political reform. You imposed conditionalities to liberalise the economy but you hesitate to use conditionality to open up the political space.

First, tell the autocrats to open up the system. Second, tell the autocrats to end the use of 'emergency' laws (such as those that have been in place in Egypt since Sadat's death). Third, pressure the autocrats to free up the public space – we need freedom of association, expression, organisation, and access to the media and cyberspace. I can't reach the 77 percent of Egyptians who didn't vote. Here, in the Ibn Khaldun Center, I can say anything I want to you. On Tuesday I can host the open forum, and everyone can speak their mind. But we can't organise a rally outside the building. I need a permit from the state security and I won't get one. And if I organise without a permit I get thrown in jail. Fourth, insist on free elections, internationally monitored. With these measures in place then in five years we would have a robust democratic life in Egypt. The 77 percent would come out and participate. After all, the same middle class people who don't vote in elections vote heavily in their professional associations. My plea to those who live in democratic societies is to pressure your own governments to abstain from supporting the autocrats until our political space is opened up. Use your liberty to help us obtain ours.

Part 4: Whither Iraq?

Alan Johnson: In your view can the continued presence of the coalition play a positive role in Iraq – with new policies as well as new force levels, perhaps – or is it now time to go?

Saad Eddin Ibrahim: First, it is time to redeploy. The coalition should withdraw from all the major population centres, where the presence of coalition forces invites resistance automatically. Even if the occupiers were angels, occupation always calls forth resistance. The coalition forces should go to Kurdistan, where they are still perceived as liberators, and to Kuwait, where the people are still grateful to the coalition for their liberation from Saddam 17 years ago. The coalition would then remain in a few hours' flying time should the Iraqi government need to call on it.

Second, it is time to reconstitute the Iraqi army. Iraq needs a big strong army and time is of the essence. Across the long porous borders come the outside fighters and this must be stopped. It is taking longer than expected to train a new Iraqi army. Middle rank officers and lower rank privates from the old army were let go in the early weeks of the occupation – being unemployed they were attracted to the resistance. As many as possible should now be brought back into service, apart from a small group at the top, even if the majority were Ba'athists. If they come from the Sunni triangle then the people from that area will see that their brothers and sons and fathers are back in that army. They will be less hostile and they will feel more part of the new Iraq.

Third, it is time for a new neighbourhood policy in which you talk to every neighbour, including Iran. It is a luxury to pick and select whom to talk to when you have a complex problem like the one created by the coalition in Iraq.

Alan Johnson: Can I probe you on that last point? You wrote that '[A] seasoned regional observer noted on the second anniversary of the Iraq war that the continued debacle of the US coalition forces was not just attributable to insurgent forces of all kinds, but was also a result of Middle Eastern autocratic regimes joining forces in hope that the Iraqi democratic experiment would fail spectacularly, thus giving them a new lease on life.' Why do you now think these countries can be brought into the process of stabilising Iraq?

Saad Eddin Ibrahim: Well, four of the neighbours – Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Kuwait and Turkey – are on good terms with the US. And Turkey is definitely interested in having a democratic society next door, as is Kuwait. Jordan would also benefit from having a democratic neighbour. Now, Syria and Iran will involve hard bargaining, of course. Syria is ready for a bargain if you can persuade Israel to engage in a serious negotiation to withdraw from the Golan Heights. Syria does not have the resources of Iraq, and is being challenged by Lebanon, so with a face-saving formula Syria may co-operate. I repeat, Syria does not have the resources of Iran, so could not withstand sanctions. Iran would probably be willing to cooperate if you can let Iran get away with the nuclear issue. Can you? That is where you have to make the decision yourself, as the West.

Sunni and Shia

Alan Johnson: President Mubarak stated in a recent interview on Al-Arabia that 'the Shi'ites only allegiance is to Iran rather than to their own countries.' You responded to that by publicly apologising to the Shia. The Sunni establishment in Saudi Arabia and Egypt have been making similar noises questioning the 'loyalty' of the Shia. And we have this ghastly sectarian conflict between Sunni and Shia in Iraq. To what extent is this elite hostility towards the Shia shared at the Sunni grassroots?

Saad Eddin Ibrahim: In the middle class and the working class there is a lot of marriage and co-habitation and mixed neighbourhoods. This kind of sectarian strife is new to the Iraqis. There was always resentment among the Shia about discrimination and exclusion from power, but there were enough Shia in power to mitigate that grudge. The sectarianism today is basically from people who had power and have lost it – the Sunni leadership. They are trying to persuade the entire Sunni community to share their fear and resentment and so join their fight. They seek to heighten the Sunnis' fear of the Shia and the Kurds to persuade them to fight.

I have written that the Shia and the Kurds should be more accommodating – they should give the Sunni *more* than their 'share.' You see, the Sunni all know deep in their hearts that the old situation can't be recreated. So, help them to come to an accommodation. There may well be a moment of opportunity here. There is a societal fatigue in Iraq because of the bloodshed. And that is usually when you can strike a deal – when everyone is tired and wants a way out. It is not yet a civil war, and I don't think it will become a civil war. But without Sunni support Iraq will suffer a series of bloody, random, sectarian explosions and eruptions of anger, making it difficult for any government to govern.

Alan Johnson: What you are working on now?

Saad Eddin Ibrahim: The creation of an Arab Endowment for Democracy, for which I am heading back to Beirut for more discussions. We are hoping to hold our inaugural meeting in the first week of April and I'd like to invite you to that meeting. At this time I am engaged more in activism than my scholarly work, but I hope that before too long I can turn back to the three or four books I have in me, including my own memoirs.

GLOBAL POLITICS AFTER 9/11
THE DEMOCRATIYA INTERVIEWS

This book collects together a fascinating series of rich conversations about the dilemmas of progressive foreign policy after 9/11.

The Democratiya Interviews do more to re-establish and invigorate a coherent concept of democratic internationalism than any single volume in recent memory. This book is both a breath of fresh air and an act of democratic solidarity.'

Carl Gershman, PRESIDENT OF THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR DEMOCRACY

'The principles Democratiya develops with such flair are the best route out of the swamp in which too many liberal-minded people have been stuck for too long.'

Nick Cohen, AUTHOR OF WHAT'S LEFT? HOW THE LEFT LOST ITS WAY.

'Democratiya has emerged as the leading voice of a new kind of moral politics grounded in the resolve to stand firm against new threats to freedom and democracy in the 21st century. If you are looking for original thinking on the left, this outstanding collection is the place to find it. Prepare to be provoked and challenged.'

Thomas Cushman, PROFESSOR OF SOCIOLOGY, WELLESLEY COLLEGE

'Democratiya has made an essential contribution to defending our common democratic values of solidarity with those struggling for liberty around the world. In the battle of ideas we require deep intellectual analysis and the sort of moral clarity that Democratiya provides.'

Tony Blair, PRIME MINISTER OF THE UNITED KINGDOM, 1997-2007.

'Democratiya has become, by my lights, the liveliest and most stimulating new intellectual journal on political themes in the English-speaking world—certainly the liveliest new thing to appear on the English-speaking left in a good long time.'

Paul Berman, AUTHOR OF TERROR AND LIBERALISM AND POWER AND THE IDEALISTS

Alan Johnson is Editor of Democratiya.com and Professor of Democratic Theory and Practice at Edge Hill University.

To order Global Politics After 9/11—please send a cheque for £10.95 made payable to the Foreign Policy Centre (£9.95 plus £1 p&p) making clear that you ordering Global Politics After 9/11 and with your full postal address.

Please send cheques to:
Foreign Policy Centre (Book Order)
23-28 Penn Street
London
N1 5DL