Transcript Q&A

Egypt: A Political Road Map

David Butter
Associate Fellow, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House

Mohamed Salmawy
President, Egyptian Writers’ Union; Secretary General, Arab Writers’ Union

Ambassador Dr Mohamed Shaker
Chairman, Egyptian Council for Foreign Affairs

Mona Zulficar
Founding Partner and Chair, Executive Committee, Zulficar & Partners

Jonathan Rugman
Foreign Affairs Correspondent, Channel 4 News

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Question 1:

I have a very short and brief question, maybe to Dr Salmawy in particular. I’d like to get your view on what we are seeing in Egypt as a deeper engagement from the Egyptian citizens in the political arena. We’ve seen that since January 2011 and we’re seeing that growing bigger since July 2013. What kind of impact would you say this is going to have in future elections and referenda, in terms of more and more people being engaged? And in terms of your assessment of the previously supportive citizens to the Muslim Brotherhood, who have in one way or another changed their direction. These two elements – what kind of impact would you see can happen and affect the future elections?

Very briefly, regarding Tunisia, I have a very small comment, if I would be allowed. I think that Tunisia learned a lesson from Egypt. I support very much what Mr Rugman said: Ennahda were much smarter in dealing with the opposition by the sectarian movements there.

Mohamed Salmawy:

Of course there has been a big change in Egypt because of all the political events that happened, as a result of which the public has become so active and actually have taken, as you would say, the front of the stage – avant-scene, as they say. In all that is happening now, the people – the idea and position of the people – is paramount. It is influencing politics in a way that it never did during the past decades. In fact, what happened on 30 June is a very clear expression of how public opinion, in the form of tens of millions of people, who went down in the street saying ‘we don’t want the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood, we want this to end’, has forced all the institutions of the government to act accordingly. First among them was the military, which was called upon explicitly by the tens of millions of people to take action and remove that despotic regime that has refused to budge in any democratic way that people have proposed.

The second point you mentioned – the impact of that change is that it has made the people feel responsible and feel that they have to participate in any political action that is taken – that there is no political action that can be taken away from what people think. This will reflect and is reflecting very obviously on the writing of the constitution. We have hearing committees that work from nine in the morning to eight in the evening, receiving people. They come in thousands. We have a problem trying to accommodate the people who come into the house trying to be heard or to give proposals. Even here, I have met
a lot of Egyptians here who have given me papers and proposals. They do want to have a say in what the future of Egypt is going to be like. There is almost a – I wouldn’t say unanimous, but there is an overwhelming majority in the way of a modern state that is not theocratic, that is democratic, that believes in the rights of all citizens, that believes in citizenship. All the principles that we are working on.

Jonathan Rugman:
Just to counter that, for the sake of a bit of balance here, do you think that almost the entire Muslim Brotherhood leadership should be locked up, as they are?

Mohamed Salmawy:
I think all who committed crimes against this nation – not this nation, ours, over there – although there have been ones who did that here too. They ought to be put to trial or to be accountable. These people have done a lot of harm to Egypt for the past year. They are now put on trial or will be put on trial on little crimes that they have committed, that they have organized violence here and there. But I think the big crime which history will try them for is the harm they have done consistently for 12 months of their rule, where we have seen the country deteriorate. If you have been to Egypt a number of times, I know you must have seen how the situation has deteriorated on all levels, including the economic and social and otherwise.

Question 2:
My question is about these notions about including the Muslim Brothers and the Freedom and Justice Party in the political process. We know in this country the IRA were never included in the political process until they decommissioned their weapons and they renounced violence. How can you commend – and I care to hear Mr Butter’s comment on that as well – how are we asked in Egypt to include the Muslim Brothers, with their history of bloodshed? Before 1952, since they started, killing prime ministers, killing judges; from their under-cloak emerged all the violent Islamic movements in the world. When they have proclaimed themselves they have been responsible for bringing Al-Qaeda and other jihadist violent movements in Sinai, and they said the violence in Sinai will stop the second that Morsi
comes back in power. How can you, the moderator, call for them to come into the political process and be included, with all this bloodshed and violence?

Jonathan Rugman:
Let’s ask Mona. Are you tired of people like me saying, what about the Muslim Brotherhood? Are you saying that they’ve genuinely disqualified themselves and that you are satisfied with that outcome, given how brutal it has been?

Mona Zulficar:
I am a human rights activist. I am and will always be for the rule of law. I will respect the rule of law, so if the Freedom and Justice Party is determined to be, by a final court judgment, violating the law, then they have to respect that judgment. What I’m trying to say is that this constitution is going to have a level playground, with clear rules of the game for everybody to compete. If they respect the rules of the game, they re-create themselves and come back. Probably, if you ask me, are they able to do that? From a pragmatic perspective, personal assessment, I don’t think they are currently able to do that. They are still living in denial. They have given themselves the right to use violence. They have given themselves the right to continue on a single pathway, and this is one of their issues. This is one of their basic problems, that they can only – they believe they only hold the absolute truth, that they are the ones that see things right and that everybody else in opposition is either wrong or …

Jonathan Rugman:
Do we have anybody from the Brotherhood or with a Brotherhood affiliation here? I don’t think so.

Question 3:
I just would like to raise one question. I can’t see anyone on the scene now that will replace the president, or to play the part of the new president. So can we extend the time where the interim government is serving Egypt at the moment?
Jonathan Rugman:
So you’re saying the country is not ready for elections next spring, is that what you’re saying?

Question 3:
We are not ready. Can we extend the government?

Mona Zulficar:
The road map – she wants to change the road map.

Mohamed Shaker:
No, no. Why extend it? People are in a hurry to have a democratic state. There are good people around. There are many, many good people around in Egypt that would be ready to put forward their names for president. So why should we delay?

Question 3:
We don’t want to make the same mistake, because we are in a hurry to have a president. We did that before.

Mohamed Shaker:
I don’t think we are in a hurry to the extent of really being – no. I think we have all the time, we have from here until next spring, which is a good time.

Mona Zulficar:
Also, Ambassador, this time we are doing it right. We are starting by the constitution, so it is a constitution for all Egyptians. And then parliamentary elections. The other time, we had parliamentary elections first and therefore the constitution was really a document of ideology. This time it’s a constitution for all Egyptians. Then we will have a proper foundation for parliamentary elections.
Jonathan Rugman:

We’ll have to see what happens. I’m thinking of placing a bet on General Sisi running for the presidency at some point.

Question 4:

We’re talking about a constitution forged on the back of what most people regard to be a military coup. We’ve barely talked at all about what the role of the military should be in this constitution. It’s a military that’s intervened several times to determine the political outcomes of various situations within Egypt. It’s part of a deep state that we wouldn’t recognize in Europe. Just as there’s a division between church and state in Europe, we also keep the military in the barracks. That’s another important element of the kind of democracy that has developed in Europe. So I’d be interested to hear what the panellists think a constitution that Sisi is overseeing is going to determine for the military in Egypt.

Jonathan Rugman:

David, the last constitution made an accommodation with the military in a way that you have to. The question is whether they will retreat to barracks or whether they will be protected by the new political process.

David Butter:

Yeah, it’s going to be very interesting to see what that bit of the new constitution looks like. The last constitution did have this rather explicit reference to military oversight of the budget and who should be eligible to be defence minister – had to come from the military. But my understanding is that previous constitutions didn’t actually have that written down, but that was the custom in practice. So in a sense the constitution passed in December 2012 formalized a situation that was interpreted at the time as some sort of bargain between the Brotherhood and the military. Of course, the original sequencing of having the parliamentary elections first, before the constitution, again was a sort of bargain between – that was the military’s idea, which the Brotherhood very much jumped on.

This is going to be a really crucial element of the constitution and how it evolves. The last thing I’ve seen, I may be wrong, is that the formal reduction
of the military's privileges would be something envisaged in the constitution as being gradual.

**Jonathan Rugman:**
Is that right, Mona? You're writing it, can you tell us?

**Mona Zulficar:**
We certainly would like to have our military in the barracks, doing what they should do: protect the country, as any army in any democratic country would. This is our objective. This is our target. We are going to be working for that. Of course we understand now that there is a question of security and you need the army to keep churches from being burned down, to keep people from being killed, etc., to keep terrorists away in Sinai or to hold them accountable. You have a situation where you need the army to be, for a certain period, actively involved in supporting security forces. But this should be temporary.

**Jonathan Rugman:**
The state of emergency under Mubarak lasted, what, 30 years?

**Mona Zulficar:**
The state of emergency under Mubarak was scandalous. Nobody even realized it was still going on but technically it was going on, to be used by the authoritarian regime against opposition. But in fact everybody came into Egypt, nobody felt it was under an emergency, although technically it still was.

But what I'm trying to say is that yes, the Brotherhood's constitution had a lot of privileges for the army that we certainly hope to be limiting and restricting, back to where you would see a clear path towards democratic principles. This is what we are hoping for.

**Mohamed Salmawy:**
I would like to make a short comment on the idea of the role of the military, which is an important point. The role of the military will always be there in Egypt until we do have a proper democratic system. This is what we are trying to do now. In the absence of powerful political parties, in the absence of
a strong parliament, in the absence of strong democratic traditions, the only force remaining there would be the army. That is why when the people went out in the streets in the absence of a parliament, with weak parties, they could only call upon the army to make the necessary change.

What we are trying to do now is to build a strong democracy, based on a proper foundation, which is the new constitution we are laying out in order to ensure that any political change in the future would not have to resort to a 
*deus ex machina,* if you like.

**Question 5:**
The violent demonstrations are the biggest problem we have in Egypt now. Noticing what’s going on, you can see that everybody hasn’t got a clear idea, even at the highest level, of what demonstrations should be controlled, how it can be controlled. The idea of demonstrators coming out, going first to the police and giving their name, their group, the timing, their destination, the ideas they want to provide – these are the basic things that we want demonstrations to be in the correct democratic way. It’s a completely confused picture in Egypt. What are you doing in the constitution about this?

**Jonathan Rugman:**
Can I bring Mohamed in here to answer this partly? The concern was expressed that demonstrations – you wanted to know what the constitution was going to do about demonstrations. Perhaps set some – I don’t think the constitution’s job is to do that, but what the limits are, I suppose, in the Egypt that is now being built.

**Mohamed Shaker:**
I’ve been to many of these manifestations. Once I was in my car and I encountered people walking on the Nile Corniche in Garden City. I went through them, they were very peaceful, and they had a permit from the authorities to manifest. Any group of people want to organize a manifestation, they get the permit to do it, like in all countries of the world: you ask for permission and you go through the streets, you block the traffic, etc. This exists now in Egypt, you can have an organized manifestation with the approval of the authority, provided that you don’t hit someone or you don’t use –
Mona Zulficar:

Excuse me, Jonathan and Ambassador. The right to peaceful demonstration is a human right. What we are trying to do is it should be by notice to the authorities and should not be by prior permission. Provided, of course, it does not trespass on the human rights of other people – i.e., it does not block public transportation, it does not block traffic, etc. It has to respect certain rules. Those are international standards. What we are trying to do is respect the human rights of Egyptians according to international standards. Those have now been acquired by the Egyptians, the right to peaceful demonstrations.

Jonathan Rugman:

But I think it’s fair to say that if the Muslim Brotherhood wanted to organize a demonstration in Tahrir Square, as they tried to do quite recently, they would be beaten back. Whereas if it was a group supporting the army, they would be welcome with open arms.

Mona Zulficar:

What you have to remember, first of all, if you say a group pro-army and a group pro-Muslim Brotherhood, I take offence in that. Egyptians are not divided between military and Brotherhood. I take offence in that. I think the 22 million people who signed for Tamarod and the 30 million people who went down on … were not pro-military and against – they were against the authoritarian, anti-democratic regime of Morsi, the theocratic state direction. They were for true rule of law, non-discrimination between citizens and working for a democratic state. So I really take offence.

The military belongs to us. We do not belong to the military. That’s how we Egyptians feel.

Mohamed Salmawy:

I’d like to make a comment on that. What happened in Tahrir Square on 6 October is that the young people of the revolution decided they wanted to celebrate the October War, on 6 October, and that they were going to stage their celebration with a big demonstration in Tahrir Square. What happened is that the Muslim Brotherhood decided, they said: we will go into Tahrir Square. So we had a situation here where you were bound to have a confrontation.
That is when the Muslim Brotherhood were not allowed to come in. I was told by some of my Egyptian friends here that they had the same demonstration on 6 October on one side of the street near the embassy to celebrate, and then they were surprised to find Muslim Brotherhood demonstrators who also had permission from the police go there before them and occupy the pavement. So they told the police: we have taken permission for this pavement. The police told them: yes, they are not in their right place. And the police drove them out, in the same way that the Egyptian police drove the Muslim Brotherhood out of Tahrir.

Jonathan Rugman:
The Muslim Brotherhood demonstrations are getting a lot smaller, it's worth pointing out.

Question 6:
Every time I hear someone talking about a military coup, I feel that people need to learn more and take us out of the nursery book of politics. The question is: has the Egyptian army succeeded in what the German army failed to achieve before and after and during the Second World War? This is the question that people should address, going back to their own history.

My question is to you and to Mr Butter: as an experienced journalist working on the Middle East and with a Western, sophisticated background, how well did you spot the discrepancy between the narrative of the Muslim Brotherhood and their allies inside Egypt to the Egyptian people, and their communication and public relations in the West?

Jonathan Rugman:
Correct me if I'm wrong, but you're saying: were we outside misled by the Muslim Brotherhood? Very briefly, I think the incompetence of the Muslim Brotherhood was very well documented and reported here and elsewhere. Less so inside Egypt, I would certainly accept that point. Various television stations which supported them have since been closed down.

Question 6:
[off-mike; indiscernible]
Jonathan Rugman:
I think we should try and bring this discussion back to the constitution rather than a –

Question 6:
You opened it, sir.

Jonathan Rugman:
I know. It’s very hard to put what happened completely behind us because it was such a significant event.

Question 6:
But you have [indiscernible] speaking from a [indiscernible], looking at the Muslim Brothers as the CDU in Germany. They are not the CDU in Germany. They are violent [indiscernible].

David Butter:
I think my response to the question would be that for journalists looking at the situation, the outsiders, or outsiders even inside, I think there was wide recognition that the constitutional declaration of Morsi on 22 November was a very important event and a very important turning point in the Muslim Brotherhood experience in government. I think as an observer you’d see that they won elections, they were the government and essentially you wished them well but you wished them to do the right thing. In this case, I think there was a strong consensus among observers of Egypt that this was the wrong thing and it would set in train whole other unfortunate consequences. In my area, which is political economy, one of the very unfortunate consequences of this was that it put a political spanner in the works of an IMF economic agreement which was absolutely essential and there was no time to be lost to actually get that going. That again had further consequences over the next six months.

So I think that the accusation against well-meaning Westerners is that they were naive and they bought the Muslim Brotherhood line. I think it’s fine for people to make that accusation but I think there was also a lot of scepticism and unease about the Muslim Brotherhood, both in terms of their political
agenda and their competence. But it wasn’t for us, if you like, as the Western journalistic fraternity to call for the Muslim Brotherhood to be overthrown. This was a political event in Egypt; it came with its own dynamic.

**Question 6:**

[off-mike; indiscernible] half a million pounds in state advertisements last Tuesday in the newspapers. Can you as watchers of this and followers of what’s happening, can you explain where they get all this money from? Half a million in one day, paid adverts.

**David Butter:**

I think actually – I’m not going to respond to that, I don’t know anything about it, but I do think that the question of political finance is going to be a very important part in how things evolve. It was clear in the first parliamentary election that there was an enormous amount of finance coming into Hizb Al-Nūr in particular. Their whole campaign did show evidence of being very well-financed and actually quite well-managed. Clearly there is also a lot of money – the whole Muslim Brotherhood phenomenon has been about finance ultimately. This is why anybody who wanted to talk to the Muslim Brotherhood or to Morsi before the coup, they went to Mr [Khairat] Al-Shater and not to Mr Morsi. This was the American ambassador, Amr Moussa, anybody else. And the party financing and the rules on it in the new election again will be a very interesting aspect of how things proceed.

**Question 7:**

I have a very simple question, to Mrs Mona, please. Can we hope to see one day the abolishment of capital punishment in Egypt? I’ll explain why. I raised this question with someone from the previous constitutional people, Muslim Brotherhood, and they said something like: no, no, this can’t happen because it is against our beliefs. So my question is: can we dream of having capital punishment in Egypt abolished ever, one day?

**Mona Zulficar:**

The human rights movement in Egypt has been working on this. We have reports, studies on the crimes which are penalized by capital punishment. We have actually shown in those kinds of reports that many of those crimes do
not deserve capital punishment. So what we are trying to do is a movement towards restriction, towards limiting this kind of radical punishment to the very limited and restricted types of crimes that deserve. I say always that law is force for change: you can use law to change. It has to push for advancement. But also law is a reflection of reality: social, cultural reality, etc. So my answer to you is: yes, certainly we can dream but I think that the more pragmatic expectation is for capital punishment to come down from over 72 or 75 crimes that are penalized by capital punishment to much less. This would be a huge step forward.

We want to get out of this unstable environment. We want to have a good parliament, we want to have a very strong rule of law, equal rights, democratic constitution. That will be a foundation for building a real democracy. Then we will have a basis to look at the laws and look at developing our country, fighting poverty, getting tourism back, getting those factories working and getting the young Egyptians who made all this happen for us to become the real leaders – to take the driver’s seat and to work on rebuilding the country. This is my dream. We will have the younger generation lead and we would be there just to support them and to help them. I think that when this happens, this is going to be the real success of this revolution.

**Mohamed Salmawy:**

We have come very close in the constitution to banning capital punishment. For the first time, there is a clear article talking about the right to life, life being a right, a basic right that you cannot take away. This article in itself, which comes into the constitution for the first time in the history of Egypt, can allow a government later on to produce a law based on this constitutional article to ban capital punishment, if developments go in that way.

**Question 8:**

Dr Mona, I would like to ask you your opinion about the military trials which are unfortunately still taking place today. It doesn’t fit in any part of the picture you gave us. It can set a very dangerous precedent.

**Jonathan Rugman:**

I think I’m right in saying they’re taking place outside Cairo, so they’re less obvious than they were in the past.
Question 8:

Well, it is a dangerous precedent for the future. I would like to ask her as well about, is Morsi receiving a fair trial? Could you give us some information about that? The third thing is – I don’t want to go to the past, but I would like to ask maybe Dr Shaker or Dr Salmawy about that initiative we heard about of Bernardino Leon just before the Rabaa, what happened in Rabaa – that they had some peaceful, some sort of outcome for it. If you have some information about that point.

Mona Zulficar:

Two things. Certainly Morsi is going to have a fair trial. Mubarak had a fair trial, Morsi will have a fair trial. There is absolutely no doubt about that. All the Muslim Brotherhood who are now being prosecuted for criminal offences will have fair trials. If you look at the past, how the former regime faced trials, got some acquittals, got some condemnations or verdicts, you can tell that what is happening is giving fair trials to all.

Military trials – certainly the objective is not to have civilians face military trials. How are we going to deal with that? We have a Brotherhood constitution that gives military trials of civilians a very broad mandate, saying that civilians could be tried by military courts in any crime which caused damage to the armed forces. So it’s like everything under the sun could go to military trials. How you can move from there to having no military trials of civilians is a challenge that we are facing, that we are certainly going to be working on with that objective on our mind. Absolutely. How to do it – you have to remember that we are not going to be achieving miracles just by passing a modern, healthy, rule of law, democratic constitution. We have to change a lot of things on the ground. We have to build our democracy. It’s not going to be in one step. You have to reduce the intervention and the influence of the military on civil life and this will have to happen, as my friend Mohamed Salmawy said, as our democratic institutions are becoming stronger and are replacing the military institutions.

So this is what we’re hoping for, to put the foundation for a strong democracy, to put those kinds of objectives as would be in any democratic constitution – taking into consideration that obviously certain things will have to go in steps. So we will have to see how those steps follow through, especially in view of the realities on the ground.
Mohamed Shaker:
On the question of – you said Rabaa?

Mona Zulficar:
The EU, Bernardino Leon, the EU initiative for reconciliation.

Mohamed Shaker:
Yes, why not? What do you mean, exactly?

Question 8:
[off-mike; indiscernible]

Mona Zulficar:
[in Arabic]

Jonathan Rugman:
The attempts to have a peaceful resolution of this by the EU.

Mohamed Salmawy:
There have been a number of initiatives all coming from our Western friends, who have come to Egypt, who have asked to meet with some of the former leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood. They had the opportunity to meet them. As I personally was told by a number of them, including Mrs [Catherine] Ashton herself, that she found they were not ready for reconciliation.

Jonathan Rugman:
I think we should end it there, everybody. Thank you very much for coming.