



« FANATICISM, PREJUDICE AND PEOPLE WHO ARE OUTSIDE OF POLITICAL PROCESS THREATEN MIDDLE EAST THE MOST »

By Ksenia Svetlova

Dr. Saad eddin Ibrahim to the DC

Ibn Khaldun research in Muqattam hills in Cairo is always a busy place. Hundreds of brochures and books on democracy, liberalisation and civil society are piled up on the shelves, tables and chairs, and the activity is always in high gear in here: the founder and the director of the place, Dr. Saad eddin Ibrahim has many plans. In January this year he and a group of 20 students of American University of Cairo, Egyptian and foreign, undertook a "fact-finding tour" in the Middle East, visiting Lebanon, Jordan, Israel and PA, and now the rambunctious doctor is planning another such visit, scheduled for mid-April. A professor in political sociology in AUC and a renknown civil rights activist, who was imprisoned for a brief

time in an Egyptian jail after unjust trial, Dr. Saad is a firm believer in communication and interaction, even it involves meeting with some taboo personalities and visiting risky and dangerous locations. These days, when Egypt is enraged with Fuad Ben-Eliezer alleged killing of Egyptian war-prisoners during the 1967 war, and many egyptian politicians demand the government to expel the Israeli ambassador out of Cairo, going to Israel and meeting with Israeli academics, politicians and journalists is probably not the easiest thing - I ask. Dr. Saad explains that the group wanted to learn about the health of civil society in the region, and to determine the capacity for democracy-building and conflict resolution "and this is what we did", he concludes and

adds that the trip was widely covered by both international and egyptian media, which was very curious about it. "Some people wrote about us that we are probably spies or double agents, since we met with both Hassan Nasrallah and with Israeli top politicians. But we have also felt a kind of a secret admiration, hidden in the words of the others, who wrote about this initiative. Anyhow, I believe that this is highly important - we need to break the silence and to establish some kind of dialogue between the young people who aren't intimidate to speak their mind and to search for the truth". Dr. Saad says that his students - American, European and Egyptian were mostly surprised by the level of confidence in one's group particular truth, may be

the Palestinians, the Israelis or the Hizbullah supporters in Lebanon. "Everyone tried to prove to us, that they are very moderate, that their demands are in fact quite modest and that the other group behaves unreasonably", he says. "The was some kind of fatigue that we felt in all these words, and after we returned, my students came to a conclusion, that the only key to the solution - is communication, hearing one another".

Hopping from one narrative to another, from one shattered country to another one - does it make you feel somewhat frustrated about the future of the Middle East and about the future of the democracy in the region, I wander. Surprisingly, Dr. Saad eddin Ibrahim, a fierce defender of the civil rights and democracy issues and Egypt and in Arab world, gives me a rather optimistic answer. "In every society you can find radical and extremist elements, but we mustn't forget that there are also the enlightened and bright people, who are not ready to be intimidated and are not afraid to speak of their minds. I must tell you that in spite of many recent regional developments, we have more democracy in the Middle East today, then 5-10 years ago. Look at Lebanon - the standoff between the government and the opposition continues for more then 3 months now, but we don't see any bloodshed and anarchy: the opposition is resorting to peaceful and legal means, such as sit-ups and demonstrations, rather than throwing bombs. Also in Palestine, the parties were able to overcome their differences for now to avoid the civil war." Dr. Saad is aware of the rising popularity of Islamist movements in the Middle East - last August it was his institute that conducted an opinion-poll in Egypt in which Nasrallah was ranked as the most popular politician, followed by Mahmoud Ahmadinajad - 2-d place, and HAMAS leader Khaled Mashaal - 3-d place, and Usama Bin-Laden who was pushed to the 4- Th place.

In his lecture "Towards Muslim democracies", published on the institute website he claims that "rather than reading into these patterns an ominous sign of



Dr. Saad eddin Ibrahim

rising extremism, as some in the West persist in doing, we should understand it as the expression of legitimate frustration with ruling regimes that have failed to meet their people's most basic aspirations, whose brutality and corruption have become rampant... out of the three forces competing for Arab public space, autocrats have a monopoly of state coercive powers and resources; and have used them brutally. Theocrats have the monopoly of the mosque and the claim of virtue, and have used them shrewdly and loudly. Democrats are squeezed in between, outgunned by the autocrats and outnumbered by the theocrats, but with claims of legitimacy and the support of a silent majority. A budding liberal movement has been making some strides recently. The mushrooming of over twenty Arab satellite TV channels is boosting this new liberal trend. While still far outgunned by the autocrats who control state power, and the theocrats who control hundreds of thousands of mosques, the liberal democrats hold the appeal of the future". I ask Dr. Saad for the source of this optimism, considering the solid success gained by the Islamic parties and leader during the last few years, not only in Palestine and Lebanon, but also in Egypt, where the Muslim Brotherhood gained about 20% of the votes in last elections, and according to some observers, could gain much more next time. "I don't think that the islamists will come to power in Egypt in the near future just because we have a religious party in the parliament. First of all, we have an Israeli example in

front of us - Israeli religious party didn't turn the state into theocratic and didn't affect the political life in the country a great deal. Second of all, I think that only the minorities truly support such radical movements as Al-Qaida and others, while the majority doesn't share their views at all. I believe that to overcome our problems, we have to struggle with fanaticism and prejudice, that are the most threatening forces in the Middle East. I also believe in putting a human face to the conflict - we must see beyond the brainwashing and the propaganda to really see each other".

Saad Eddin Ibrahim, professor of political sociology in American University in Cairo is an Egyptian American sociologist and human rights activist. In year 2000 he was imprisoned and then sentenced to 7 years in jail under suspicion of espionage and corruption. His defense team countered that the real motives behind the government's persecution of Ibrahim and his assistants was his blatant criticism of president Hosni Mubarak and his government. During his imprisonment, Dr. Ibrahim experienced a series of strokes, and he underwent surgery at the Johns Hopkins Medical Center upon his release. He was later released, some claim, because of external political pressure.

Ibrahim's own life was also fraught with speculation by the local semi-official press in Egypt vis-a-vis his sources of personal wealth, allegations of sexual misconduct, and the role played by his who is in mapping his research strategies.

Saad eddin Ibrahim is a contentious person who gained the respect and admiration of Egypt's human rights and civil society organization in the early the late 1980s for championing the cause of democracy in the Arab world in the immediate aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union.

Despite the stigma, Ibrahim is nevertheless credited for playing a leading role in the revival of Egypt's contemporary research-based civil society movement. Ibrahim is the founder of the Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies in Cairo and the Arab organization for Human rights. ■