HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

SDIR • NUMBER 073 • 1st SESSION • 41st PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Thursday, March 21, 2013

Chair

Mr. Scott Reid

Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

Thursday, March 21, 2013

● (1300)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC)): Order, please. This is our 73rd meeting of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. Today is March 21, 2013, the first day of spring that is, despite appearances.

[*English*]

Today we are continuing our study of the situation of the Coptic community in Egypt and particularly of the persecution of the Copts in Egypt.

Joining us electronically from Washington, D.C. is Professor Nathan Brown, who is a professor of political science at George Washington University.

Welcome to our subcommittee, Professor Brown. We invite you to begin your testimony, please.

Prof. Nathan Brown (Professor, Political Science, George Washington University, As an Individual): Thank you very much for having me, and thank you very much for your flexibility in allowing me to do this by video conference, which means that I don't have to abandon my teaching obligations to appear.

My own expertise as an academic is not specifically on the Egyptian Christian community, but on two issues that now impinge very directly on their welfare. One is the general constitutional process in Egypt, and the other is the Muslim Brotherhood. I thought what I would do in my remarks is talk about the role of the constitutional process and the new 2012 constitution, and the country's new Muslim Brotherhood leadership and the way that will likely have some impact on Egyptian Christians.

There is no doubt that the year 2011 saw absolutely dramatic changes in Egyptian politics and, really, a sort of spirit of idealism that unified large parts of the Egyptian nation. Today, two years after that, I think a lot of disappointment and disillusionment have set in. Specifically among Egyptian Christians, I think the mood ranges from strong concern to absolute panic.

My own perception is that there are very strong and legitimate reasons for concern. I'm not necessarily sure there are reasons for panic, but Egyptian Christians have some very legitimate concerns about the country's political position, many of which stem from the ways in which the political process has simply not worked well to deliver a functioning government.

Let me go through the constitutional process and what I think that has delivered and has not delivered, then talk a little about the Brotherhood, and then finally talk a bit about specific worries for Egyptian Christians overall.

In terms of the constitutional process, Egypt now has a constitution that was approved by voters at the end of 2012. It was written by a constitutional assembly that was dominated by Islamists, although it did have some non-Islamist participation. If you read that document kind of outside of the political context in which it was written and compare it to Egypt's previous constitutional documents, I think in some ways you actually see some more robust protection for religious groups within Egypt, at least in certain respects. I'm not sure those robust protections will necessarily change much in Egypt's operating legal environment.

For instance, Christians now have a constitutional right to be governed in their own affairs by Christian personal status law. That is now enshrined in the constitution. However, that was Egyptian practice, and it has been Egyptian practice for decades and even centuries. That is to say, when you get married, divorced, or inherit as an Egyptian, you do so based on which religious community you are a part of.

There are some ways in which the constitutional process resulted in a state that will have a stronger religious flavour, and it has some constitutional provisions that are fairly vague in content but could accentuate the role of Islam in public life and even in the Egyptian legal framework. We're not sure yet how those are going to operate. I think what we've seen so far just in the few months in which the Egyptian constitution has been in effect is that they're beginning to operate in some ways that would surprise even the drafters. Really, we're just at the beginning of understanding what will happen as this paper document gets put into practice.

However, for Egyptians who are not members of the majority Sunni community, I think the fundamental worry about the constitutional process is not necessarily in any specific constitutional provision per se, but in the fact that the constitutional process in Egypt did not work to produce a consensus document that all parties accept as legitimate. The result is an unstable political situation.

In an unstable political environment in which the basic rules of political gain are not understood or accepted by all actors, and in which there is an environment in which there are strong security concerns and a government that is not quite sure it has the tools to deal with those concerns, minority communities tend to be the most exposed, so in looking at the constitutional document, I'd look a little bit less at constitutional text. That is not irrelevant, but what I would look to much more is the political environment, which I think most Egyptians would agree simply is not functioning as they hoped it would when they undertook the revolution back in 2011 to produce a democratic, strong, and functioning political system.

● (1305)

With regard to the Muslim Brotherhood, I think if you take a look at the Brotherhood's trajectory over its history, you will see an organization now that in some ways has covered a significant distance in ways that would be meaningful to non-Muslims within Egypt. The Brotherhood is unequivocally an Islamic organization and it wants to see a stronger role for Islam in Egyptian public life.

It has come some distance in accepting a conception of Egyptian citizenship that does not depend entirely on religion, and it has come very far in accepting democratic processes and ultimately the voice of the people as a determinant of the governing legal and constitutional environment within Egypt.

In a sense that's part of the problem as well, that the Brotherhood's view of democracy is at this point robust enough, but it's also fairly majoritarian. That is to say it understands that the Egyptian people, the majority of whom are Muslim and who, in elections since 2011, have basically tilted heavily in an Islamist direction, should have a fairly free hand in determining their rulers and in determining the laws and so on. It's a view of democracy that you could say is democratic but not completely liberal, and it doesn't give the sort of strong protections to liberal freedoms that I think some Egyptians would like.

In my reading of the Brotherhood's positions and its behaviour so far, it probably has a better record on political freedoms, things like freedom of the press, and freedom of the opposition. and freedom to demonstration. Although even there, there are some question marks that have been raised by its behaviour. It has a far less certain record when it comes to issues like freedom of cultural expression, and so on.

Fundamentally then, let me turn to an overview of where this places Egyptian Christians. Perhaps the best way to say it is that in the current environment in Egypt, Christians do decently on Sunday. That is to say, their freedom of worship, their kind of communal freedom to organize their own affairs and to organize personal status law in accordance with the teachings of the church are at this point robust and protected.

The problems have to do with what I might say are weekday Christians, the other six days of the week when they're not acting simply as Egyptian Christians but as Egyptian citizens. This is an environment in which, as I say, public life is taking on an increasingly Islamic flavour, not one that is incredibly oppressive to Christians, but one in which I think some Christians will feel its slightly unfriendly presence when it comes to media and perhaps state organizations that may not be friendly or open to them and so on.

I think there's also a very pronounced security problem, which to me is perhaps the overriding one. The problem is perhaps less what Egyptian law and what the Egyptian constitution say in practice and much more that we do have a security situation in Egypt that is uncertain at best and for which there is no real map that any political actor has been able to lay towards restoring security in a way that is appropriate for a democratic society.

As a result, exposed groups, minority groups, have fewer protections. The security services right now are barely functioning and are deeply implicated in human rights abuses in the past and are deeply distrusted by large segments of the population, so rather than providing for security for Egyptian citizens, they're in a sense seen as part of the problem. The result is that when you have incidents that do involve Christian communities, there is no real agent within the Egyptian state that they can call upon in order to enforce the rights that they have that might exist in practice.

● (1310)

That's why I come down to sort of feeling that there are strong reasons for concern for Egyptian Christians. I think when you compare Egypt to some of the other countries that are undergoing political change within the region, for instance, Syria, Libya or Yemen, the situation in Egypt looks fairly good in the sense that the basic institutions of state are still functioning in a way that does provide some minimal order and security. But in comparison with the hopes of 2011, I think there's no doubt the Egyptians have found out it's a lot easier to bring down an authoritarian system and much more difficult to build one that protects the rights of every individual Egyptian citizen.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Professor.

We have sufficient time that if we have six questioners, we'll have time for seven minutes each.

Without mentioning names, I note the absence currently of one member. They may have been delayed by the weather, as we are off the Hill today.

What I'll do is give time for those questions. In the event we want extra time, and we don't have that member, then we'll adjust and, I'm going to suggest, divide the remaining time between the two parties. I hope that's acceptable to everybody.

That being said, we turn first to Ms. Grewal.

Ms. Grewal, you have seven minutes in this round.

Mrs. Nina Grewal (Fleetwood—Port Kells, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Professor Brown, for your time and your presentation. Certainly all of us do appreciate your time, because we know it was a busy day for you back home.

Our government, as you might know, recently launched the Office of Religious Freedom with the aim of championing freedom of conscience around the world.

In your opinion, what kind of pressure can Canada apply, both through the office and through normal channels, to better the situation of Copts back in Egypt?

Prof. Nathan Brown: Thank you for the question.

I would say that this is a tremendously sensitive issue within Egypt. There are ways to frame the issue that I think tend to set off Egyptian sensitivities in a way that is counterproductive, but there are also ways in which issues can be raised in ways that resonate very much with Egyptian politics.

Any perception that there is a favoured community within Egypt and that Christians might be a favoured community is one that sets people on edge, and Christians can sometimes be among them. A feeling that they are Egyptian citizens and have to be recognized as Egyptian citizens is one that is strong within the Egyptian Coptic community. There's a history within Egypt of foreigners having special status that was abolished more than half a century ago, but still has some historical memory within Egypt.

If the issue is framed in a way that makes it seem as if this is a minority population that needs foreign protection, that tends to set off sensitivities. However, there is a very strong nationalist flavour to Egyptian political discussions right now, so any way that this question can be framed to emphasize Egyptian citizen rights is one that has, as I say, tremendous resonance among Christians and among non-Christians as well.

The sense that these are all Egyptians and that they all have equal rights to the freedoms of the constitution, to freedom of worship, to freedom of religion, and so on and so forth is a sense that few Egyptians can disagree with.

My own sense is that the way for interested international parties to address the issue is to press very hard, certainly to ask questions over and over in terms of citizenship rights and in terms of international human rights standards that should be applied to all citizens of the planet.

That's probably the best way to push the issue.

● (1315)

Mrs. Nina Grewal: Egypt is one of the few Middle Eastern countries with such a large religious minority. With the new government still trying to find its feet, what kind of influence can Copts exert on the national government of Egypt?

Prof. Nathan Brown: Well, right now the government is essentially run by the Muslim Brotherhood....or I shouldn't say it's run by the Muslim Brotherhood, but the president is from the Muslim Brotherhood and the country's largest political party is the Freedom and Justice Party, a party that does have a very small number of Christian members but is essentially a Muslim Brotherhood political party.

I think that has to be the main concern, that you have a governing party that is Islamic in colouration. As well, it's likely that in the parliamentary elections, when they are held, the Brotherhood party will probably do well, and the next largest party may also be Islamist, of Salafi bent. The tension between Salafis and Christians is much stronger than even that between Christians and the Brotherhood. There is no getting around the fact that Christians are a minority, and that, in a democratic process, minorities don't necessarily do very well.

I think one of the things that would serve Christian interests best would be to insist that Egyptian state institutions—not necessarily those of the presidency and the Parliament, which are probably going to reflect the majority, but Egyptian state institutions, including things like the military, the security apparatus, the judiciary, and so on—be constructed as much as possible on a non-sectarian basis, so that non-discrimination, both on a formal but especially on an informal level, would be a strong principle enshrined in the construction of various state bureaucracies. That would ensure a Christian presence throughout all Egyptian institutions.

As it is right now, my sense of Egypt is that informal discrimination is a very serious issue. Formal discrimination, that is to say, areas that are actually legally barred to non-Muslims, is much less of a problem. The issue will be in a sense enforcing that law, and getting state institutions to take it seriously.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: While media reports may portray the government as acting on behalf of all its people, not all Muslims share a hostile attitude toward Copts. What kind of cooperation is there between the Christians and the Muslim groups to fight persecution?

Prof. Nathan Brown: I think right now there is not that much; I'll be honest there.

The political leadership that comes from the Brotherhood does sort of respond in general to this idea that they are responsible now for all Egyptians and Muslims and Christians. But the fact is that the leadership grew up in an authoritarian environment in which they, if you take a look at the top leadership of the Brotherhood, feel a little bit hounded by the old regime, and really, I think, are sort of an inward-looking group. They are simply not used to these kinds of responsibilities, and I'm not sure the groups are adjusting all that easily.

Some places in Egypt, even within the religious sphere, I think are a little bit friendlier to this. For instance, Al-Azhar University, which is essentially the central part of the Egyptian Islamic religious establishment—it's a university; it's a set of schools; it's a research institution; in essence it's the bulk of the Egyptian religious establishment with state support—is currently headed by a leader, Sheikh Al-Azhar, who I think is much friendlier to the idea of reaching out to other religious communities. He has as strong religious credentials as certainly anybody in the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Chair: My apologies, Ms. Grewal, but you've used up your seven minutes.

We go now to Mr. Marston. You have seven minutes, sir.

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome, Professor Brown. We appreciate having you with us today.

I've scribbled on the paper here about nine different things, because your testimony is certainly interesting to us.

When we consider Egypt itself as a country prior to the last two years, many outsiders would not see it as an Islamic fundamentalist country like, say, Saudi Arabia. Within the Brotherhood, and within the former powers that be, which still are, to a great degree, in power there, I think there's a modest push and shove back and forth.

I'm pleased to see the constitution that developed in the manner it did relative to rights and that. You raise a significant concern, though, in the fact that there's nobody to turn to in order to enforce the rights.

Are you optimistic that they'll change that, that they will put in place mechanisms to guarantee those rights?

● (1320)

Prof. Nathan Brown: There's a lot of criticism in Egypt about the text of the constitution. It was very weak in this regard. My own feeling is that the constitution actually does a better job than its critics allege. The real problem, as I alluded to before, I think has to do with political context.

The constitution was produced by an assembly that had an Islamist majority. At the very end, when they were convinced they could not reach any kind of agreement with the non-Islamists, they simply rammed through a document. The last phases of the process were not pretty. Really, it involved staying up all night in the constitutional assembly and going through it clause by clause, ramming them through, and then presenting it to voters in a lightning referendum.

The result is a document.... I mean, there are all sorts of little glitches in the document that come when you finish it that quickly, but the result also is a document that doesn't have a lot of legitimacy. When you take a look at the political opposition, for instance, it's not even clear that they accept these as the fundamental rules of the game or that the fundamental issues of Egyptian political life and of the Egyptian political reconstruction process have been resolved. That creates a very difficult situation.

Again, Egypt has a very strong state apparatus, and those state institutions—the judiciary, the military—are still basically intact. I think we're only at the beginning of the process to see whether those can be called upon to give some meaning to these constitutional guarantees.

Because my testimony so far has perhaps emphasized those parts where the glass is half empty, let me emphasize a development here that I think perhaps suggests it may be half full. When the upper house of the Parliament, which is the only half that remains and has interim legislative authority in the absence of the lower house, passed an election law for the lower house of the Parliament, it was struck down by the constitutional court. It was struck down by the constitutional court, which was required to engage in prior review. The upper house of the assembly then passed a revised version of the law to meet the constitutional court's objection and did not send it back to the constitutional court for a review, so an administrative court suspended, essentially, the operation of the election law until the constitutional court had an opportunity to review it.

This suggests that those institutions, the administrative courts and the constitutional courts, still have some vitality in them. How they are going to operate, we just don't know. The constitutional court is a long-standing body, but its composition was changed as a result of the constitution. There are other institutions in the country that are still trying to adjust themselves to a post-Mubarak environment.

The structures are still there. The question is whether they'll be able to play the role that you're talking about and whether the political opposition will begin to accommodate itself to the constitution, seeing that, in a sense, it's not simply the tool of the Islamists.

Mr. Wayne Marston: One of the things that strikes me when we talk about the Islamists, the Muslim believers in general, is that in North America we've come to a stage where we equate that with fundamentalism. But within the Muslim communities that I meet in Hamilton, where I have a vibrant Muslim community, there's a variety of countries that they come from, and you can see very distinct differences in their belief structures.

I'm heartened to hear what you've said about the two courts, their responses, and the fact that their responses were listened to. I think that's crucial. From this side we could look at Egypt and worry that there was a breakdown occurring there, because what we have to deal with quite often isn't just the media reports that come out.

When you equate where the government, today's administration, is compared to the attitudes of the ordinary person on the ground.... When we look at the situation of the Coptic Christians who have been attacked and have had instances of hate crimes against them, my feeling from the testimony we've heard here before is that it's at a level that's more what I would refer to as the grassroots, that they're not institutionalized attacks. I'm sure there's an occasional mullah that has pushed for it, but overall, the view of the Muslim community themselves probably would be abhorrence of that. How would you see that?

● (1325)

Prof. Nathan Brown: I think that's basically true.

Egypt has been a society that has not seen a large degree of political violence. There has been some communal tension in the past. Generally what happens is you have all sorts of disputes laid on top of each other. Sometimes you have a neighbourhood dispute between families, neighbours, and that sort of thing. That sometimes morphs into a religious dispute if one side happens to be Christian and the other side happens to be Muslim. There are instances when, for example, because law on personal status is determined by your religion, somebody may convert, may leave one community for another. That sets up all kinds of family tensions.

Again, political violence is something that occurs in Egypt. Some red lines have been crossed over the last two years, but fundamentally this is a society in which violence of that kind still shocks people. It is also a very socially conservative society. It's a society where family is very strong. Your religion is not simply a matter of personal conviction, but a matter of who your family and relatives are and often who your friends are and where you live. That sometimes tends to create some sort of insular pocket. That's where I think the problem can be on a grassroots level. Those are the kinds of problems that get much worse in an uncertain security environment such as we see right now.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Unfortunately, that ends the time for that round.

Are we going to Mr. Schellenberger now or to Mr. Sweet?

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): I'll go unless Mr. Schellenberger wants to go.

The Chair: Mr. Sweet, go ahead, please.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you very much, Professor Brown.

I just want to push a button there that was left for me. You mentioned in your answer to my colleague, Mr. Marston, that you feel there's less religious tension except when an argument breaks out and then it kind of morphs into a religious argument. For generations the Coptic community has been suppressed by not being able to have the same jobs as others in Egypt, by not being able to own property in specific places and only being able to own in certain circumstances. They even have to ask permission to do repairs or upgrades to their church and so on.

Is it so much that it morphs into a religious argument, or is it that because of the in-built suppression of the behaviour of what I would call religious castes that these arguments don't break out as long as they stay in their place?

Prof. Nathan Brown: It's difficult to answer. I would say you're talking about two different kinds of discrimination. One is informal in terms of areas of employment being off limits and so on.

If you look at Egyptian law, you'll find virtually no trace of that. Juridically when it comes to most things, Egyptian Muslims and Egyptian Christians are absolutely equal. Property ownership is the same thing. That there are places where Christians can't own property you will not find in Egyptian law books. What you will find is an environment which, as an American, I would compare to the situation in the northern States prior to the civil rights movement. Juridically there is no segregation. Informally there is tremendous segregation. It is accentuated by what I talked about with the nature of Egyptian religion being very strongly a communal affair. It tends to be that if you're hiring, you hire who you know. You hire who you are related to. So there probably tend to be pockets where Christians would not feel welcome, and there are probably pockets where they feel especially welcome. That creates that kind of environment. That is on an informal level.

On a formal level where the discrimination can exist has to do with worship, as you said, and it has to do with repair work and the incredible bureaucratic hurdles that have existed to building churches and even to doing very slight repairs in churches. I don't see either of those situations getting better any time soon.

What I do see is a spirit of activism among the Christian population which was not there before. If you go back 20 years or so, I think the dominant approach within the Egyptian Christian community was essentially to try to operate within the system as it was, and when demands were made, to emphasize what I'm calling the Sunday Christian, the church rights, the freedom of worship, the freedom to repair churches and so on.

What has happened especially since the Egyptian revolution has been a spirit of activism within the Christian community itself which says that we need rights not simply as Christians to repair our churches but as Egyptian citizens. They are willing to tackle that area of discrimination that is largely informal. They are willing to place it on the agenda and to insist very publicly on a new conception of Egyptian citizenship that really looks right past religious affiliation.

So far I'm not sure they have actually had much success in making any changes in Egyptian society, but they have placed it on the public agenda, and there is a way in which when you go to Egypt and ask who speaks for the Christian community, you find a different leadership than you would have found 20 years ago. There is now not simply the church but a strong lay leadership as well that emphasizes a whole panoply of rights and not simply the religious ones.

● (1330)

Mr. David Sweet: Considering your credentials in political science, I'd like to get your opinion. This is a broad, sweeping question, but from your knowledge of the Muslim Brotherhood that is currently leading the country in Egypt, would you say they have the depth? You already mentioned they're having trouble getting a handle on some issues. The economy in Egypt is a disaster. Judicially it needs reform. There is a huge problem with corruption that needs to be purged. From what I can see, and maybe you can answer that, they still don't have control of their military, and of course, there is the question of freedom of religion we are speaking about as well.

Does the Muslim Brotherhood, in your opinion, have the depth to bring those changes about in Egypt?

Prof. Nathan Brown: In terms of where their political instincts are in most of these areas, I would be more in favour of them than many of their critics are. I think fundamentally they want to build a democratic Egypt, one in which there is civilian control of these institutions. They have some sense of where they want to lead the economy and the sense that the state simply needs to do a better job of providing for basic needs of Egyptian citizens and the sense that there needs to be much more emphasis on job creation and so on. All of this is within what is primarily a liberal economic framework.

I think their instincts in most of those areas are basically good. I do not think that right now they have the depth within their own ranks or the expertise in most of them in order to do so, nor do they have the political position to do so. What they have right now is the presidency. There is no legitimate parliament there. They have a cabinet that is technocratic in nature. They do not feel comfortable at this point coming up with a partisan cabinet, one that would be able to deliver on the political program of the Freedom and Justice Party, their political party. They are not even quite sure they control the levers of power within the Egyptian state.

The fundamental problems there have to do less with their instincts and more with their depth, with their capabilities, and with this incredibly uncertain protracted transition process which is making any kind of decision-making difficult.

Mr. David Sweet: I have one last question. You mentioned the constitution right in the first minute of your remarks and said that the way it was playing out would surprise some of the drafters.

Could you expand on that a little bit?

Prof. Nathan Brown: Yes. I'll give you one example, even if it seems a little bit arcane.

The constitution says in article 4 that in matters of the Islamic sharia, in matters of Islamic law, Al-Azhar, this institution that I referred to before, should be consulted. That was put in there for all kinds of political reasons having to do with the constituents they had to satisfy. It was deliberately worded in the passive voice, so it wasn't clear who was supposed to be consulting Al-Azhar.

It looked to me like a clause that was there for its symbolic value, but one that wasn't necessarily going to have any operative meaning. Well, Al-Azhar has stepped into the breach. It hasn't waited to be consulted.

In one issue, for instance, the UN document on preventing violence against women, which the Brotherhood has publicly attacked, Al-Azhar has decided to take it up and say that they will, on their own, see whether or not this is consistent with the Islamic sharia.

You have a system in which the Brotherhood thinks that because it's the Muslim Brotherhood and because it has electoral majorities, it can in a sense almost speak for Islam, and push Islam within the country. But what it has found out is that it has empowered this alternative institution, Al-Azhar, the leadership of which is not particularly friendly to the Brotherhood, and which has its own interpretation.

Rather than write a constitution that empowers them, they've empowered another structure to speak for Islam, and one that has a lot of legitimacy within Egyptian society.

● (1335)

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you very much, Professor.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Sweet.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jacob, you have the floor.

Mr. Pierre Jacob (Brome—Missisquoi, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Professor Brown, thank you for joining us this afternoon.

In your view, how could Canada best promote respect for freedom of expression and for the rights of women and religious minorities in Egypt during the transition period? Are there some actions that might be more effective? In your view, are there institutions in Egypt or non-state entities with which Canada should engage more than with others?

[*English*]

Prof. Nathan Brown: I think various countries will have to get used to dealing with Egypt as a more democratic society. For that reason, I think the question is a very good one.

When you deal with an authoritarian regime, you're used to dealing with generally the office of the head of state. You don't have to worry about the rest of the state apparatus, the rest of the political opposition, and so on and so forth.

That's not how countries that are democratic tend to interact with each other. They tend to interact across the board. It would be absolutely routine, for instance, for a diplomat to meet regularly not simply with the governing party but with the political opposition, and to have meetings with various civil society actors as well.

I think that's the way things should move, and I think it has to be done very carefully. As I've tried to make clear, one of my big worries about Egypt is that you have a transition process that is not regarded as legitimate by a large sector of Egyptian political society.

The political opposition, I think, realizes that when they go to elections, they lose. The problem is that this has led them to look for saviours—in the military, in the judiciary, in the international community—rather than deal with their own people and deal with the fact that the Brotherhood is doing very well in elections.

I worry sometimes that we might communicate too strongly to them, “We are your backers.” There is some natural affinity with groups that have a more liberal social and political agenda. I think that kind of broad engagement has to be done, and I think it can now be done in a way that is much easier than it was under the authoritarian period, but we have to be very careful that we are not communicating the message that we are picking particular winners or particular losers or particular people we want to see in power.

Right now the perception in Egypt is that the international community, led by the United States but with other western countries involved, has reached an accommodation with the Brotherhood. I think that's essentially correct, but the perception in Egypt is that we can't go so far in tilting the level of engagement the other way to communicate the message that we are against the Brotherhood and that we're with the political opposition.

● (1340)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Jacob: Thank you.

How would you describe the observance of the rule of law in Egypt right now?

[*English*]

Prof. Nathan Brown: I'd say it's shaky. There is a sound legal structure there. Egypt has a judicial system which at this point is a century and a half old. It is very well established within Egyptian society. Levels of litigation are extremely high. Egyptians go to courts very easily. The basic fundamental structures there are sound. They are sometimes creaky. They are sometimes slow. They are sometimes inefficient. But the basic structures are sound.

There are real problems, however. The problems have to do, I think, with going back to the security environment. If you went to an Egyptian courtroom, you would be surprised at the low level of security that is there. In the past, Egyptian courtrooms have been able to try a large number of civil and criminal cases simply with the majesty of the law and the courts, and, as I say, with a very light police presence.

There have been repeated incidents in which courtrooms have been stormed. There have been attempts to intimidate judges in which court sessions have been broken up. There is now a feeling among the Egyptian judiciary of being somewhat besieged and a little bit of a feeling that they cannot operate their courts very effectively.

There is also laid on top of that a strong tension between the presidency and the judiciary, so they feel they don't necessarily have the support of the security apparatus and of the apex of the Egyptian state.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Jacob: Thank you.

I have one last question.

Do you think it is likely that President Morsi's government is trying to establish the facts and the responsibilities with respect to past violations of human rights?

[*English*]

Prof. Nathan Brown: No, I don't think they are trying to walk away from their responsibilities, but I don't think it's their priority right now.

The priority right now is, I think, to establish a sound political system and economy. The sorts of pressing human rights issues are ones that I think they are willing to postpone, and that is a matter of concern for me. I do take Morsi's commitment to at least [*Technical Difficulty—Editor*] very seriously, but I do worry that the longer he stays in power and the more his opposition background fades the less this will seem like a priority to him. So matters, for instance, of accountability for past human rights abuses have basically not been raised. That's a clear political judgment on the part of the country's senior leadership, the president and those around him, that they cannot tackle this issue right now, because there are too many other issues on the agenda.

Freedom of the press, for instance, is an area in which I think domestic criticism of Morsi is extremely strong. In my view some of that criticism is fair and some is unfair, but the fundamental underlying problem with freedom of the press and in other legal areas as well is that the authoritarian legal heritage that was so deeply entrenched in Egypt for decades is still on the books, still legally there. There almost has to be a comprehensive review of operative laws in all areas relevant to human rights. That simply has not started, and I don't see it being a priority.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Jacob: Thank you, Professor Brown.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Jacob.

[*English*]

Mr. Schellenberger, you have seven minutes.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Thank you. It's always great to be the last questioner, because all the good questions have been taken already.

You've answered a lot of the questions. I have more papers in front of me right now than most people would.

I have one question on education in Egypt. Is there segregation in the school system, or is there a public system that integrates all Egyptian children regardless of religion?

● (1345)

Prof. Nathan Brown: Basically yes, there is informal segregation in terms of housing and neighbourhoods, which would mean that Christians would tend to be concentrated in specific areas, and there would be large areas that would not have Christians.

There is also the Al-Azhar system which is alongside. It is part of the Egyptian state, but it has a religiously based Islamic curriculum, and it's a separate school system which I would guess has maybe about one-tenth of the Egyptian school-age population.

There is also a large network of private schools, some with religious affiliation and some without.

Finally, what I would say is that religious education is a mandatory subject in Egyptian schools. If you go to a school that has a mixed Muslim-Christian population, students would be separated for religious instruction.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: You referred to the northern states where segregation was not the law but was practised anyway. I'm probably a little older than you are, and I do remember the situation in Detroit which was quite prevalent back in the 1950s. There would be white neighbourhoods and black neighbourhoods. Maybe a house on a white street would be sold to a black family, and before long all the white families moved off that street. It then became a black neighbourhood.

Does this happen in Egypt with people and religions?

Prof. Nathan Brown: Not as far as I know. I don't think, first, that the segregation is quite as severe. I did live in Chicago in the 1970s and the segregation there was absolutely extreme. You could go block by block. I don't think the informal segregation in Egypt is nearly that strong, nor are there the same socio-economic differences laid on top, nor is it always obvious when you see somebody on the street that somebody is Muslim or Christian.

I would say that it's probably less severe than Detroit, but it is still fairly marked. There are areas, as I say, where I don't think they're exclusively Christian areas, but there would be areas where you would find a heavy Christian concentration, and areas of the country where you would find very few Christians at all.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: At various committee meetings we have discussed the situation in Honduras and various other places, and the rule of law is very important. It seems to me if people don't go by the law, are not law-abiding, it can cause all kinds of problems. At this time is there a judicial vacuum, or is the rule of law being followed relatively closely?

Prof. Nathan Brown: I don't think there is a judicial vacuum in the fundamental sense. There are courts that are active, that are trusted throughout the country. In fact, the judiciary is probably one of the country's most respected institutions. What has happened over the past two years in Egyptian life, I think, is a breakdown in, I would say, informal social control. Public behaviour has become more problematic. I don't have numbers on this and I'm not sure there are numbers, but I do know how Egyptians talk, that street crime is simply more prevalent, even carjackings and violent crime which were very rare in Egypt before, and sexual harassment on the streets, even sexual assault on the streets. Those sorts of things are increasingly common in Egypt. There's a feeling of decreased personal security which I think affects people's perception of the rule of law.

In a sense the structure is still there and the structure is sound, and there's plenty of confidence in the personnel who man that structure, but there's much less of a perception that if you go out the door of your house, you're operating in an environment in which the rule of law prevails on a normal daily level.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: Is this the same judiciary, or was it changed?

Prof. Nathan Brown: As before? Yes. There has been virtually no change in the judiciary. It's a very, very strong institution. When the 2012 constitution was written, it changed the composition of the constitutional court, but that was about it. If anything, the judiciary has gained some autonomy, I think, since 2011. It used to be that the president had a very strong set of informal tools by which he could influence the judiciary. Those, I think, have dissipated, so if anything, the judiciary would be a more powerful institution, or at least have more autonomy now from the executive than it did previously.

● (1350)

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: Unemployment in Egypt right now is fairly high, or is it relatively in a good spot? Again, this will cause problems in these various neighbourhoods. What do you see going forward for employment?

Prof. Nathan Brown: I think that's an absolutely critical issue. When you go back to 2011 and how is it that Egyptians understood and what it was that they did in 2011, they often talk about it as a revolution of the youth, and the youth who were.... In a sense, there was a generational change in Egypt. This generation of youth was going to be much less deferential, but there was also a strong sense that the society had failed its youth. It was providing bad education. It was not providing housing. It was not generating jobs at the level at which it was producing children.

As a result, this was not simply an unemployment problem, but a particularly severe unemployment problem among Egyptian youth and those people who wanted to enter the labour market, and really at all levels, including people who were well qualified and at college graduate levels. There was a sense in 2011—again, this was primarily youth who led the revolution—that the political system had failed them, that they needed to build a new political system, one that was responsive not to the needs of a few officials, or the president, or the narrow group around him, but to the broader society.

I think an awful lot of the disillusionment in Egypt with the current state of the political process is that it simply hasn't led in that direction at all. They've managed to bring down the old rule, but they do not have a political system that is capable, at least so far, of generating employment opportunities for this generation of Egyptian youth that led the revolution.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: For my last question, if I may, we had some people commenting on Honduras the other day. In Honduras, 54% of the population is under the age of 15. The daily wage averages $2. Looking forward, I think that five years from now in Honduras the average age of 60% of the population, or maybe 65%, will be under 20.

Is there a big population of young people in Egypt that makes it very difficult for the government to get ahead and have those jobs for those people?

Prof. Nathan Brown: Yes. I don't know what the exact figures are in Egypt, but I suspect you're dealing with a very similar kind of situation.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: Thank you, sir.

The Chair: Thank you.

We have time for a final round of questions. Monsieur Jacob has told me that he has one question, so I suggest that we go to him first. Then we'll go to Mr. Sweet.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Jacob: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My next question is for Professor Brown.

In a speech delivered at the United Nations in New York in September 2012, President Morsi said:

> Egypt would like to stress that the international system will not get fixed as long as the application of double standards remains. We expect from others, as they expect from us, that they respect our cultural particularities and religious points of reference, and not seek to impose concepts that are unacceptable to us or politicize certain issues and use them as a pretext to intervene in the affairs of others.

In terms of promoting human rights and Egypt's transition to democracy, how should we interpret President Morsi's statement?

[*English*]

Prof. Nathan Brown: As an extremely guarded attitude towards international human rights instruments that deal with very specific issues, I think, and I would say most particularly gender. The most relevant political party, the Freedom and Justice Party, for instance, specifically cited in its campaign platform the convention on economic discrimination against women as a document that it was uncomfortable with.

I don't think it's an attempt to question international human rights standards across the board. As I say, especially in the political sphere, the brotherhood has accommodated itself to those, but I think especially when you get into the issue of gender relations, that's when they begin to get very suspicious and start looking at the fine print.

The fact is that Islamic personal status law is a gendered law. You have different rights according to whether or not you are male or female. That is something that is very hard for them to get around, and something that they regard as based on divine instruction, and not the sort of thing that the United Nations should be telling them not to do.

● (1355)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Jacob: Thank you, Professor Brown.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Jacob.

[*English*]

Mr. Sweet informs me that he didn't have a further question, so I wonder if the committee would indulge me in asking one. I'm anxious to follow up on the issue of gender relations.

One of the things this committee has been looking at, not specifically with regard to Egypt, but with regard to a number of other states in Africa and Asia, has been the issue of the treatment of women.

Was I right in understanding what you mentioned, that both the Salafis and the Freedom and Justice Party had the same reservation about international standards being applied here?

Prof. Nathan Brown: Yes, I think those for the Salafis would be stronger and less diplomatically worded.

The Chair: Okay.

These are not the only two parties in Egypt. Is this a universal thing where there's a consensus among the significant parties or is there actually a meaningful distinction in their views on this issue?

Prof. Nathan Brown: Specifically on gender relations, I would say there would be a spectrum. There is a spectrum. It is fundamentally a socially conservative society in ways that we would understand that to be socially conservative. It is one that understands most people would see men and women as having fundamentally different roles in the society.

However, there is a very broad spectrum. I would say that the Salafis would be most insistent on literal interpretation and application of their understanding of religious teachings. The brotherhood tends to be a little more flexible. It wants to move society in a direction that is consistent with those, but it is a little bit more freewheeling in its interpretations and a little bit more patient in its application.

You still have alongside of that, I would say, parts of Egyptian society in which, for instance, women have played an extremely strong and public role. If you turn on Egyptian broadcasting, for instance, you'll see plenty of women. If you look at the Egyptian diplomatic corps, for instance, it has a history of being open to women. There has been a strong history of an Egyptian feminist movement. It was domestic pressure from Egyptian women that led to the extension of the vote to women in the 1950s.

I think you see a very broad spectrum. There are some Egyptian groups who, rather than being suspicious of those international human rights instruments, especially on gender, latch onto them and say essentially "we have to join the world". There are international standards which are very much applicable to Egyptian society.

When President Morsi made that statement at the UN General Assembly meeting, my guess is that his statement would have resonated for the majority of Egyptians, but would have set a strong and powerful and intellectually active minority on edge.

● (1400)

The Chair: Okay, that's actually quite helpful.

You also mentioned the generational distinction that exists. Maybe this is not possible for you to say, but is there a clear preference among generations as to which party they favour, or is it the case that simply the cleavages within society are not generationally defined when it comes to partisan analysis?

I'm also wondering about attitudes towards gender roles, whether there is a generation gap in attitudes or whether, again, there is not a cleavage on those lines.

Prof. Nathan Brown: Yes, that's very hard for me to say, because my contacts are with the restricted part of Egyptian society, essentially, the middle class or intellectuals, generally in Cairo. I think there is a generational change that I can see in Egyptian society, but it has less to do with political ideology and less to do even with gender relations and more to do with sort of social comportment and behaviour.

The current generation is simply less deferential. You have a society that has a very strong sense, I think, of hierarchy in terms of age. That is beginning to break down in ways that older Egyptians find a little disorienting. Simply, the very strong sense in which where you are in this Egyptian social pyramid depends partly on how old you are is fraying, and that's a remarkable development.

The Chair: In some ways that sounds like developments we've heard of in a number of other countries over the decades, including our own.

Thank you very much, Professor. Unfortunately, we are out of time. I do have some other questions I feel I could ask you, but we have to get from this building where the committee meeting is happening over to our main parliament building, and so I'll have to wrap things up. Thank you very much for taking the time to make yourself available. You've been very informative indeed.

Prof. Nathan Brown: Thank you very much for having me.

The Chair: It's been a pleasure.

Mr. Sweet.

Mr. David Sweet: I just wanted to ask about next Thursday. Will we be having a meeting next Thursday? Next Thursday is a Friday in the House, as far as the schedule goes.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: There is no meeting on Thursday.

The Chair: Is that a vote for no meeting on Thursday?

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: There's no meeting on Thursday.

The Chair: Could I ask you to do that in the form of a motion that we don't have a meeting on Thursday?

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: I so move.

The Chair: All right, let's just quickly find out if you have support.

Mr. David Sweet: I suspect that a lot of members may not be around, and that's why I asked the question. If that's the feeling, then there is probably consensus.

Are you okay with that, Mr. Jacob?

The Chair: I think that's a consensus, so we don't have a meeting. I just wanted to confirm that.

(Motion agreed to)

Mr. David Sweet: Also, do we have more witnesses on the Copts, or is this now a conclusion of our evidence intake on the Coptic Christians issue?

The Chair: Unless the committee feels we need more, this is it.

Mr. David Sweet: Will we have a business meeting soon with a new draft of the Coptic Christian report that would also include the motion that I had made regarding some wording in regard to Parliament being dissolved?

The Chair: Sorry, Mr. Sweet. We're going to go in camera.

Mr. David Sweet: Okay.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]