Egypt's future

written by newpolitics | January 31, 2011

Mazin Qumsiyeh writes about Israel and the Middle East. What distinguishes his writing is his fusion of sharp political critique and acknowledgment of our common humanity. His most recent commentary, on events in Egypt, contains valuable information and links, as well as his typically thoughtful, moving analysis. But what struck me most was the way he looks to education to prepare a new generation of citizens. His language reverberates with the ideas John Dewey proposed, ideas the neoliberal project has tried to erase from our political vocabulary and imaginations.

Mazin first describes the present reality "…But make no mistake about it: no power transformation happens without a period of unrest, instability, and pain. I believe in these difficult periods, humans are tested. Some are weak and may even try to use the situations to make some quick personal profit. Others are of strong and decent character and this shows in their watching for their neighbors and their community. I have seen countless pictures and heard countless stories of acts that can only be described as heroic (e.g. people protecting the national museum in Cairo or their neighbors' houses). Intellectuals are stepping forward to articulate rational scenarios for the future. People helping other people. So I think we will weather the transition. As to what the future holds. Clearly, the era of ignoring the masses is gone. It will not be easy since we have a legacy of decades of poor education (one that does not emphasize civic and individual responsibility etc). Getting rid of dictators is not enough. Building a civic participatory society is not easy (Europe's enlightenment did not come just from removing a few dictators).

Then he discusses the future and the role of education: "People's expectation raised for change will dash against the reality that it will take decades to create systems of governance, accountability, economic justice, etc to allow for unleashing the great potential in the Arab world… It is critical that people begin to chart this future honestly and pragmatically. Slogans will not work. We the people must take responsibility for our own lives and for our communities. We need to take time to educate children in a very, very different way than we were educated. The beginnings may be simple. For example, in many Arab countries, people were thinking that as long as the country is not theirs (ruled by dictators), they can only watch over their own personal space and literally dump trash in the public space. In the new era, they have to learn that public space is theirs too. Order and respect for fellow citizens and for the country will have to be taught very early to our children. This is but one example for laying a brick in the road to real freedom and real prosperity. The bricks though are many and they will have to be fashioned and laid by the people. It is very hard work but it is the only way forward."