

Egypt national day

Egypt moves forward as a democratic country

Chiho Iuchi
STAFF WRITER

On the occasion of the National Day of Egypt, The Japan Times had the opportunity to interview the Egyptian Ambassador Hisham El-Zimaity, who had been working in Cairo before his appointment to Japan last September, to hear his thoughts on issues ranging from the current political transition in Egypt to cultural exchanges with Japan.

Excerpts of the interview follow:

It is not easy to understand what is really going on within the political transition in Egypt. Could you give us a brief overview of the ongoing political process?

I think what confuses people is that political opponents challenge each other through legal battles. After the Jan. 25 revolution last year, we held a referendum on March 19 to amend some articles of the constitution. Then, on March 30, a constitutional declaration was issued. It is still our provisional constitution for the transitional period. Based on that text, we held parliamentary elections.

Last month, the process of parliamentary elections was contested by jurists. Two-thirds of the members of the parliament were elected by party lists, while one-third were elected as independent candidates. What happened in practice was that some political parties with financial capabilities managed field candidates as independents. So the Supreme Constitutional Court ruled that this was unconstitutional because parties supported their candidates. Now we have to elect a new parliament once

again; hopefully, in next October or November. As you know, our new President Mohamed Morsi took the oath of office before the Supreme Constitutional Court last month, on June 30, as the country's first civilian-elected president.

You will agree that it is a political evolution which will take its time, but a healthy process of democratization as long as "battles" remain among jurists.

It's not street battles like in other countries. There is an emerging political system with many powers in the field. For example, the young people who made the revolution were unable to organize themselves, lacked leadership and remain divided. They were subsidized by others who were better organized.

Have these political changes affected Egypt's foreign policy? Everybody keeps asking what will happen to the peace treaty

with Israel. Let me reiterate that whoever is the ruler of Egypt, whether from the Muslim Brotherhood or other political orientations, the peace treaty remains the cornerstone of Egypt's foreign policy. It is a strategic choice by the people of Egypt and people of Israel. Since the signing of the treaty in March 1979, there has not been one single breach of its terms. Both parties have fully respected their obligations. Sometimes, there was what was called a "cold peace" as a result of the stagnation in solving the Palestinian issue, but the peace treaty is respected and has become the cornerstone of regional stability. This is a very important achievement and it is our official position at all levels. We are still hopeful that Israeli leaders will seize the opportunity offered today to settle the Palestinian problem in a just and peaceful way.

How about relations with Japan?

2012 marks 150 years since the first mission of samurai came to Egypt in 1862. The foundation of our friendship is really deeply rooted.

After the revolution, Japan was very much interested in assisting our peaceful transition. Japan was the only country from which we accepted assistance for the elections. The assistance included logistic support, such as booths, cabins, ballot papers and ink, as well as organizing seminars for the media that covered the elections and technical support by fine Japanese experts to civil servants at polling stations during the elections.

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exchanges at the political level. In January, the Minister of Antiquities Mohamed Ibrahim Ali visited Osaka for the opening of the "Tutankhamun and the Golden Age of the Pharaohs" exhibition. He was followed by the Foreign Minister Mohamed Kamel Amr in March and then we received the Minister of Tourism Mounir Fakhry Abdel-Nour in April.

From the Japanese side, we had two important visits to Egypt: Foreign Minister Koichiro Genba at the beginning of May and just before him was Sadako Ogata's last trip as president of JICA (Japan International Cooperation Agency). We signed the yen loan to provide the first tranche for Line 4 of the Cairo Metro.

Has there been a decrease in investment from Japan or cancellation of ongoing cooperative projects because of the political situation?

If you visit Cairo, you will see that life goes on normally. Toyota Motor Corp. started producing its new four-wheel drive vehicle Fortuner in April. Nissan has a new line of production in Egypt, too. We also have other projects in renewable energy in the oil and gas sector working together with Japanese companies. Of course, the total amount of Japanese investments is still below what we would like to have. But the relations have become diversified. And at the business level, things are going relatively well despite the situation.

What were the achievements within the bilateral academic cooperation?

I am glad to report that last

March, nine students obtained their master's degrees from the Egypt-Japan University of Science and Technology (E-JUST) as the first graduates, two of whom delivered speeches to greet Ogata during her visit to Egypt. Another important project is the Grand Egyptian Museum, located at a unique site near the Pyramids in Cairo. Japan was kind enough to give us two resources adjacent to the museum. One is a modern data center to register all the artifacts and the other is a sophisticated restoration center with many Japanese and Egyptian experts. We hope that the museum will be open to visitors within a couple of years.

We Japanese are so grateful for the support from Egypt in the aftermath of the Great East Japan Earthquake of March 11,

2011. Are there any special activities planned for the areas affected by the earthquake?

When I arrived in Japan, I made sure my first visit was to Fukushima Prefecture. Coming from an old civilization, I was happy to present the Fukushima Gov. Yuhei Sato with the "key of life," an ank that is a Pharaonic symbol confirming that despite the difficulties, life should continue until we reach eternity.

In celebration of the 150th anniversary of the bilateral exchange, the government of Egypt invited 21 people from the Tohoku area — seven from each prefecture of Fukushima, Iwate and Miyagi. They had lost their home or a family member, and really suffered. When the minister of tourism came to Japan in April, I proposed the idea to him. So we invited the 21 people for a one-week

Nile cruise visiting Cairo, Luxor and Aswan. We thought it was a nice way of healing. We are not rich like other countries to offer oil or gas, but we have valuable things to offer at the cultural level. On the day of their departure from Cairo, the results of the presidential elections were announced. There was a celebration in Tahrir Square, so their bus stopped at the square. The Egyptian interpreter who accompanied them told the people in the square that these were Japanese visitors coming to join part of the celebration, and the people warmly clapped hands saying, "Thank you, Japanese friends, for coming!"

Can you introduce some Egyptian culture available in Japan?

A very important event this year as already mentioned is the unique exhibition of Tutankhamun treasures, which have been displayed in Osaka since January, for the first time in 47 years in Japan. It's a good occasion for younger generations to enjoy those precious treasures comprised of 122 pieces of art belonging to Egypt's most famous Pharaoh. The exhibition will open at The Ueno Royal Museum in Tokyo on Aug. 4.

How about modern Egyptian culture, such as films by the late director Youssef Chahine?

He made a lot of masterpieces, such as the autobiographic trilogy "Alexandria ... Why?", "Alexandria Again and Forever" and "Alexandria ... New York," and a controversial work, "Destiny," which tackles the religious influence on ordinary people, and the tendency to reject new ideas. His last work, "This is Chaos," is an interesting movie, which depicts an angle of the reality of modern Egypt. It tells the story of a policeman who has illicit love for his beautiful young neighbor and then goes as far as hurting her. It shows this policeman's corruption and ends with a revolt by the people of the district where the woman lived protesting at the police station. And in fact, it was as if Chahine had predicted our real revolution years before it happened.

It seems that Egyptian sightseeing areas are functioning as usual. Can you give us the latest update on the situation at major tourist destinations?

The Red Sea resort area is almost back to normal with direct charter flights from Europe. From there, one-day bus trips to Luxor are available. Honestly speaking, there are still demonstrations here and there in Cairo. However, not one single tourist was harmed during all these events. The manifestations do not target foreigners. So no one should be afraid.

We are hopeful that this coming travel season, which starts in October, will be much better than the previous season. We cherish Japanese tourists very much and encourage them to make Egypt their next holiday destination.

Yuriko Koike
MEMBER OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

I would like to extend my heartfelt congratulations on the occasion of the National Day of the Arab Republic of Egypt.

This year, which marks the 60th anniversary of the Egyptian Revolution of 1952, Egypt has opened a new door in its history. The door was opened by the people of Egypt themselves. May I give applause

to the people of Egypt who took on the challenge of building a new Egypt.

Democratic sandstorms, which occurred one after another in the Arab region circling the Mediterranean since the beginning of last year, engulfed Egypt. Tahrir Square at the center of Cairo was full of tens of thousands of people, which made me feel the ground swell of change. I was fixated to the screen of my computer every day to witness a scene that I had never seen before. The protests were not without bloodshed, and I pray for those who lost their lives.

I pay my respect to the ongoing process toward establishment of a democratic scheme in Egypt, where peaceful and fair presidential elections were held last month after having experienced historic political upheaval last year. Japan will support Egypt's efforts in tandem with the international community.

When Japan suffered from the greatest earthquake on record last year, the government and the people of Egypt sent us their warm sympathy and messages of encouragement at a time when Egypt had just undergone a political change. In addition, I thank Egypt for its gesture of deep friendship and consideration shown last month when the government invited people from three disaster-affected pre-

ferences to visit Egypt.

Egypt plays an important role as a pillar of peace and stability in the Middle East and Africa. Egypt is an important friend with whom we have long established and fostered a cooperative relationship, and is also an important partner in the Middle East and Africa. I am confident that this tradition of amicable relations between Japan and Egypt will not only continue but will also further deepen over time.

Two years ago, the Egypt-Japan University of Science and Technology opened, offering Japanese-style engineering education and research activities. I am delighted that the two coun-

tries are developing multilayered relations in recent years in many fields, such as politics, economics and culture. I expect that such cooperative relationships will greatly contribute to the development of a new Egypt.

We, the members of the Japan-Egypt Parliamentarians Friendship League, are determined to make our utmost efforts to further enhance this excellent bilateral relationship.

Last but not least, I would like to express my best wishes to the people of Egypt for every success and prosperity, and sincerely hope for the success of the ongoing reforms taking place toward a new Egypt.

Congratulations to the People of the Arab Republic of Egypt on the 60th Anniversary of Their National Day

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Egyptian Ambassador Hisham El-Zimaity speaks to The Japan Times on July 17 in Tokyo. YOSHIKI MIURA

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Solidarity: Egyptian Ambassador El-Zimaity presents the Fukushima Gov. Yuhei Sato (right) with the "key of life" ank on Oct. 6 in Fukushima. Right: Egyptian Foreign Minister Mohamed Kamel Amr visits the "miracle pine tree" in Rikuzentakata, Iwate Prefecture, with Ambassador El-Zimaity, on March 24. EMBASSY OF EGYPT

March, nine students obtained their master's degrees from the Egypt-Japan University of Science and Technology (E-JUST) as the first graduates, two of whom delivered speeches to greet Ogata during her visit to Egypt. Another important project is the Grand Egyptian Museum, located at a unique site near the Pyramids in Cairo. Japan was kind enough to give us two resources adjacent to the museum. One is a modern data center to register all the artifacts and the other is a sophisticated restoration center with many Japanese and Egyptian experts. We hope that the museum will be open to visitors within a couple of years.

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A new door is opened by Egyptian people

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