

Amr Darrag, chair of the foreign relations committee of the Freedom and Justice party, the political wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, is also the secretary-general of the Constituent Assembly, the body appointed by Egypt's parliament to draft a new constitution. The Globe and Mail's Stephanie Nolen recently interviewed him at his home in at his home in Dokki, a middle-class neighbourhood of Cairo.

Q. I apologize for arriving early – it's only the second time that's ever happened to me in Cairo, that I've managed to be early. The traffic was fine.

A. You see? Everything in Cairo is better since we took over. [laughs]

Q. For me, visiting Cairo for the first time since the revolution, and comparing it to the country I used to come to – it feels pretty magical. It's almost like a place that's awoken from a long dream, like in a children's fairy tale.

A. For me too! On January 23d I was out of the country and I turned on the television and my first sense was that the Egyptian people had been replaced by some other – after all these years of trying to convince people that it's in their interest to participate, finally ...

Q. What do you think happened, what changed, that 20 months ago it became a mass movement?

A. I think they realized that they'd had it. There are several things. Sometimes when people are so full of emotions and frustrations and something little happens that turns everything over. We've had a couple of things like that. One thing is the parliamentary elections in 2010 – although we had been used to forged elections but yet what happened in 2010 was unprecedented and people realized that it's a dead end. There is not even a single room for any opposition in the parliament. They used to live with 20 per cent, 50 per cent, knowing that they cannot change anything but at least the voice of opposition is there. And the former regime did not tolerate even that [in 2010], so that was one thing. The other thing was the killing of Khaled Said [the 28-year-old Alexandria man whose beating death at the hands of the police helped spark the mass demonstrations that brought down the Mubarak regime. This was shocking to a lot of ordinary people, although things like that had been happening all the time – maybe because the guy, if you look at his face, he looked innocent and you look at his face after he was killed. Sometimes you don't know what touches people but that made a difference to a lot of people and they decided that they had had it. And that Egypt deserves much better.

Q. How much of a factor was the economic situation?

A. It was a factor but – as a matter of fact people had been afraid that if something like that erupted it would have been the revolution of the hungry. But it wasn't, as a matter of fact most people who participated in this were middle class or above middle class.

Q. But many were young people with education or skills but the sense that they had no opportunity here, no choice but to leave the country.

A. It's not just because they don't find work – many of the people even like myself were reasonably well off, had good work, families – a lot of young people like [Wael Ghonim](#) , he has a very good job, makes a lot of money. It was not the economic situation – I wouldn't say it was the personal situation that related to the economic situation, but the overall economic situation in Egypt was frustrating people. People realized that Egypt was being robbed and the assets have been stolen and a small bunch of people are controlling all the wealth of Egypt. Egypt is a very wealthy country and the evidence is that it has been robbed for tens of years. Overall people realized that Egypt deserved a much better position than it had. Nobody listens to what Egypt says. Nobody cares about Egyptians; when Egyptians go anywhere they are subject to humiliation and the government does not even care about protecting their interests, either in or outside Egypt. Feelings of – frustrations, no hope for future, no feeling of belonging, as if it's a country that belongs to somebody else. But when this started people starting being encouraged to get in, all of a sudden what I call the genes of civilization stored in Egyptians started to show up. We are a very civilized country, we have the storage of civilization for thousands of years, sometimes it doesn't show up but when the time comes, you get it ... People are very tolerant but when the time comes ... One of the turning points was the [28<sup>th</sup> of January](#) , some of the scenes, of people standing on Kassr al-Nil bridge and praying and the police using water guns and then rubber bullets and then smashing people – such things really intimidated Egyptians and then everyone decided to go out. And that was it – within 18 days it was a success.

Q. Your movement has said it was reluctantly pushed into a major political role, can you tell me about the internal debate about whether this was the right thing to do?

A. Certainly for the presidential [election] we were pushed to do it. We never intended to run for the presidency, we'd been saying that all the time. At a certain moment we realized that if we want to move forward the only thing to do is to field a candidate for the presidency, whoever that candidate is – because we realized, we were told, that you have no hope – not we as Muslim brothers, Egyptians, they will not have any say in the executive power of running the country. You can have your own parliament, you can make some legislation, take care of your little affairs, but running the country overall, foreign policy, strategies, all that is for somebody else – that was very clear. So the only way to break through this was to field a presidential candidate. We didn't really – we were not sure whether this would work or not but luckily it did. And if you analyze what has been happening over the last three months or so you find that there are breakthroughs that could have never been there without having a president [from the Muslim Brotherhood].

Q. Like what?

A. Like finally getting rid once and for all of military rule. That was the dream of the Egyptians.

Q. No one else could have done that?

A. I don't think so. Why? First of all the president was supported by the power of the people who elected him – he was really – at his back were the people who elected him. Second, other candidates who are also patriotic, they don't have the organizations to really support, to give them much wider vision, some strategies, some plans – they're a few good people without a big

base. So when the opponents of the revolution face people like this they are very happy, because it's very easy to deal with individuals, they just have to convince that individual. But for a popular force – even if they managed to convince President Morsi to do something that we don't like, as people, we wouldn't let Morsi get away with it – because it's not just the individual. In fact we have proved this by putting in someone else instead of the prime candidate and it still worked. So it was really the power of the organization.

Q. In terms of [ousting the military](#), the popular perception is you succeeded in making a deal with generals at lower ranks so you could cut off the two big heads.

A. It's not like that, I'll tell you why. First of all if you manage to handle the overall situation so you get the least amount of damage, that's a success no matter how you do it. Look at the results – if you look at it from the perspective of removing [Field Marshal Hussein] Tantawi and [Gen. Sami] Enan, yes you would be right. But this is not the case. The main point is that Morsi canceled the supplementary constitutional declaration that gave huge power to the military council – that is the real issue here. And nobody else objected in the military. So it's not that I don't care how it happens – it's not the removal of Tantawi and Enan – our problem was not with Tantawi and Enan – our problem was with the whole establishment that through a very unjust decree, the supplementary declaration, just assumed everything, all powers. And that is contradicting with everything we had the revolution for.

For the president to be able to do this suddenly, peacefully, with the acceptance of the people – everybody in Egypt, not just Islamists, accepted that, except the enemies of the revolution, all Egyptians accepted that and it was in a way passed through the military, that's the end result. And it's amazing. We've been thinking a lot about how to make a safe transition from military rule to civilian rule and our perception has always been that it would take at least 10 years for this to happen, and why, because this has been the experience everywhere else – in Spain, in Turkey, everywhere the transition took so long.

Q. So what happened to get you down that path so quickly?

A. This is the – when you have a strong feeling, when you are a president with a strong feeling of popular support and of course a vision and an ability to seize the moment – my analysis is that he had plans for that and he just took the moment – whatever happened, [the events in Sinai](#) or whatever, he just made use of that to execute his plan. And this is leadership, how you choose the right moment, where you have maximum public support and you get your mission done easily. This is clever! That's how leaders are made. You find very few people qualified to be leaders and presidents.

Q. Which is a bit ironic given that Mr. Morsi is something of an accidental president – the guy who happened to be walking by the office at the right moment, or the wrong one, and the council said, 'Hey, come here a minute!'

A. As a matter of fact of how he got in [laughs], I was in the meeting of the high commission of the party that fielded him as a second [potential] candidate when [Khairat el-Shater](#) was still there – it was a decision that was highly disputed within the discussion and the decision was we have

to play it safe, we have to do that, but nobody ever thought that that would happen including Morsi himself.

Q. But why him?

A. I'll tell you. Dr. Morsi was chairman of the party, don't forget that – he's a leader. He was elected chairman of the party and he has proven very good abilities in running the party for about 20 years, making it the top political party in Egypt, which had membership in that time over 300,000 people in just a few months. Personally I knew his abilities because I have been very close to him... He was very much involved in everything and he showed great skills in having people together, in handling the improvement of the picture the world has about us. He's been seeing a lot of people from everywhere – diplomats, reporters, top governmental officials from all over the world ... He was very involved in setting the strategy for foreign relations and implementing our plans in that. So he's quite capable.

Q. He has clearly indicated that he knows that the West in particular is curious, and nervous, dubious, even outright suspicious of the Brotherhood. How much do you want to do, how much do you have any obligation to do, to placate that? Clearly President Morsi is keen to allay those fears.

A. Not just President Morsi! This is our strategy.

Q. Why? Who cares what the world thinks. You need Egyptians. No?

A. For a country like Egypt that wants to have its natural status in the world, you do care what others think of you, and you do care about your relationship with everybody in the world. We are not keen on being an isolated country. We care about others, we understand their concerns, and it's very important for us that they do understand how we think and what is our vision for the world. We are very much for collaboration and making sure that the best interests of everybody is achieved and the only way you can do that is to communicate with others. And in order for us to have that status and the influence that we deserve in the region and in the world, we have to have good relationships with everybody.

Q. And like it or not you are now the bellwether, the Islamic democracy, you've supplanted Turkey as the country that everyone is watching to see what this experiment will look like.

A. This is one of the things that we really are keen to explain to people. There is no contradiction between Islamic values and Islamic reference and the modern values of democracy and human rights. As a matter of fact our belief is that our religion is the origin of these values. Islam has been there for 1400 years and modern standards are just modern. Of course it's always the case that humanity improves and advances and we believe that the Islamic civilization that was on top of the world for hundreds of years was really an inspiration of the current western civilization to get a lot of the values of Islam and work on them and develop the current standards of human rights and democracy and participation all of that.

So when we apply our values, the West realizes there is no contradiction – I mean, democracy, what is democracy? Democracy means that you allow the people to govern itself; the will of the people is the most important factor in developing how your country goes. This is what we have been doing for 1,400 years. Of course there have been exceptions, there have been tyrants like Mubarak and others – but these are the values themselves that have been there for a long time. Human rights – just open the Koran, open our references, and you see a lot of these. And you see a lot of encouragement to get in touch with everybody, to get to know everybody – this is our main value.

Some Muslims, unfortunately, in different parts of the world have been giving the wrong impression about Islam so the perception of Islam, or of a country governed by Islam, has been ruined by that bad performance. In a country like Egypt where you have all the civilization, where we have always had a base of modern Islam here in Egypt, by modern Islam we mean Islam actually, Islam is modern by definition. What you see – things like al-Qaeda and Taliban, these do not represent the mainstream, these are extremes in Islam. But Egypt is qualified to represent the true face of Islam. That is starting to show up, that people are starting to find out. I'm now in charge of the foreign relations committee, I travel a lot, I speak to a lot of foreigners, I've spoken to hundreds of people and I get a very good impression from these people about what perceptions are – and they realize that we are not the monsters that we used to be afraid of. So we are very keen to correct the stereotype, the wrong stereotype that is all over the world. I believe we've managed to do that partially but we have a lot to do in terms of reaching out to ordinary people in the west. To be honest, the media, particularly in the west, have been quite biased in presenting our true picture. It is very difficult to penetrate that. It is very difficult to find truly objective and truly independent media outlets. There are several but it's very difficult to find.

Q. Events like [what happened at the American Embassy](#) don't help you there much, do they? You can do six months of outreach and then two minutes of that on CNN and the western public just defaults back to the old picture.

A. But I know the western mind – they have to make analysis, if you analyze the facts you find out that the people who committed these crimes are not really the mainstream in Egypt. As a matter of fact they were condemned by all Egyptians, even by Salafis. The thing started with peaceful demonstrations of Salafis in front of the embassy: in any civilized country in the world this would have been 100 per cent acceptable. Because the beliefs of the people have been touched. And to play with the religious beliefs, it's very dangerous. But people were very civilized in expressing their opinion, demonstrating peacefully in different places. All of a sudden some people who – if you know what religious people look like and you look at these people, you don't really find what you perceive as religious people. A bunch of what we call baltagiyya and some people who were paid to do that, to ruin the image of the Egyptians. A lot of question marks, about that. But then that was a very limited time. It was well dealt with afterwards, and everybody in Egypt condemned that act.

Q. Do you wish you had dealt with it differently or faster, given the presuppositions that the western media, as you just described?

A. I believe that the way the security forces dealt with this was quite slow.

Q. Why was that?

A. I don't know but if I put myself in their shoes I would say first of all that everything developed very quickly, very fast. As a matter of fact on that day I was invited to a dinner in the British Embassy. The foreign minister, William Hague, was there. And I was going – the embassy is just across from the American – when I was going it was just the Salafis demonstrating very peacefully, in a very civilized way. It was tranquil. All of a sudden maybe in 15 minutes while we were there we heard things like fighting, sounds of violence and when I went out it was totally different. So everything happened in a very short period of time. The police are very sensitive now about being accused of brutal dealing with protestors. So if I have good intentions, I would assume they really didn't know what to do. If they really faced this with violence they would have been accused of killing demonstrators and martyrs and things like that. So I think that's what happened. This is one thing.

I think that was a good lesson for future events like that, they have to be abrupt. On the other hand there is a good side of this. People in the west should realize that some actions that maybe are looked at as very insignificant in the west are really significant here, especially in Muslim countries. People don't really understand when they joke about the Prophet or Jesus or whomever that this makes a difference. This is the perception – why would you care about that? People joke about everything. For us we joke about everything – except when it comes to the Prophet. For Muslim believers, the Prophet is more dear than your father, your wife, your son. Even for people who are Muslims but they are not really religious.

So there has to be an understanding that things like that really do intimidate people. And of course there is freedom of expression but there has to be a limit that does not really hurt the feelings of hundreds of millions of people all over the world, which at the end of the day would even damage the national security of western countries. Assume that these violent acts did not happen – now it's balanced, we are even – but if these violent acts did not happen, would the West really have understood that these acts were really absurd, they were not appropriate? Muslims have always been subject to unfair treatment and unfair criticism and they have always been accused of being terrorists and violent although the mainstream of Muslims are not like that, Islam itself is not like that – they are giving hands to everyone in the world, they want to communicate, but they have always been taken very negatively ...

Q. The last 10, 11 years haven't been so good for relations.

A. Yes. So they realize that well, in similar incidents the West behaves differently. When somebody talks about the Holocaust, for example, when somebody makes anti-Semitic comments or things like that, everybody explodes. Nobody tolerates that. By the way we do not tolerate it either. But why are there double standards? Actually I've gone a little bit deep into this issue and if you go through the things that are related to the first amendment, you find that there are exceptions – maybe there are 10 cases that the freedom of expression would be limited or restricted for specific instances, maybe 10 of them. At least two of them apply to our case.

If you go through this you find clear cases that these are not compatible with restrictions of that first amendment, freedom of expression. So people will start to realize that it's really a double standard. Anyway what's good about this, I hope, is that there is an understanding in the West that things like that should not be taken lightly ... Anyway we are trying to do our best to mend the situation, to talk to our people, to tell them, well listen, the American people, the average American people, and even the American government, had nothing to do with this. This is the act of a very few zealots and irresponsible people and we should not blame everybody for that. At the same time we are talking to the west and telling them, Please be careful about hurting our feelings. Please take some steps to make sure that this does not happen very frequently ...

Q. A subject that seems to be of real concern is women's rights. Many people have raised it with me while I've been here. I think many Egyptian women believe this is a government more reflective of who they are, because they are religious people, and the last government was artificially secular and not reflective of who Egyptians are – they believe that religion should have a larger role in public life. On the other hand, in talking to people about the new constitution, there seems to be real concern, even among religious women, about the erosion of rights that were enshrined in the previous regime. Is that a legitimate concern?

A. I'm the secretary-general of the constituent assembly, all right? So I can tell you about the constitution. All that you're saying are just concerns and baseless fears. The amount of rights and freedoms – not just for women but for everybody in Egypt – will be unprecedented ... People are afraid that in a place where there are 100 people drafting a constitution and maybe 30 are Muslim Brothers and 15 are Salafists, it will be a disaster. This is just a fear, a concern.

Q. You can perhaps see why people might have it.

A. I can understand it, of course! But if you look at the outcome – this is what I always tell people – wait and see what comes. If you find something that you don't like, please go out and express your opinion. What is really happening is the opposite. As a matter of fact we are having people, male members of the committee, complaining that the rights that are given to women are too much. I'll give you an example. There is an article that talks about the obligation of the state trying to balance their [women's] role in their professional life and at home taking care of their family. So some men came out and said, We as men also deserve that much attention – we also take care of our family and we have a professional life. We are trying to – of course the intention was not to discriminate against men but to calm the fears, the concerns of women. Because if you look at the assembly, it is full of liberals.

Q. Not exactly full.

A. It has a lot of liberals! A lot of liberals! Tens of them. I know what I'm talking about ... This is not the impression that some people have but – by the way, I'm an Islamist but I'm a liberal as well – I consider myself liberal, I'm with freedoms, the rights of women. I have three daughters and my wife, all of them are professionals, all of them work, they have high degrees, they work everywhere, they play sports, everything. So why am I accused of not being a liberal? Anyway, of course to the interest of these liberals and it turned out also the interest of Islamists is to put

everybody back on track in terms of rights. Because the balance was actually against many women in Egypt. There was discrimination against many women in Egypt.

What we are trying to do is give the opportunity to everybody. So this is actually towards more freedom, towards more balance. And why is that? In Islam you cannot force anyone to adopt the Muslim faith, the Islamic faith, in an Islamic country – if you cannot do that, can you force anybody to do less than that? Can you force a woman to wear *hijab* or *niqab* or whatever if you cannot force her to adopt Islam in the first place? This is what we are talking about. These are the true Islamic values. People insist on getting their perception of what they think we would do from what Taliban does or what Iran does. We are going back to our origin – we've been there [in power] for months now and look at TV, look at the streets, nothing changed. Nothing changed and there is no inclination to change anything.

You cannot change these things by force. Why do we believe that? Look at some other countries like Saudi Arabia for example where by force, by law, women have to cover their bodies totally – if you travel to Saudi Arabia, or outside of Saudi Arabia, and look at what happens on airplanes where women take off their [mimes unveiling] and put on full makeup and then go out – we don't want that! This is hypocrisy in our opinion. We want people who really willingly follow the Islamic tradition, the Islamic rules. Not by force – because if you enforce that, they will just give them up the first moment they are allowed to. This is not what we're after. We would like to have a person with a better relationship with God. This is not a good relationship with god.

Q. There are a few issues women have raised with me repeatedly. One is the minimum age of marriage, which was previously set at 18.

A. You could never put an age of marriage in a constitutional document. This is again a fear that is baseless. As a matter of fact we are having a problem of women who are 35 or 40 years old to get married. How can we try to put regulations [on minimums] when we have a serious problem – something like five or six million women in the age of marriage who are not married. And in a country like Egypt, a traditional country with a classical view, although this is a bit changing, but yet it's difficult for any father or mother to see their daughters not married at the age of 30 or 35, this is a real problem here. So nobody cares about having girls who are 15 years old to get married. So this is ridiculous. Maybe there are some odd people who say things like but this is not the mainstream. This is really not the mainstream. I am an Islamist and I do believe it is not proper to have a young woman get married before she is finished with her undergraduate study. I have two daughters who are married and both of them got married after they finished their university education. Why – because I don't think they would be mature enough to get married before that age.

Q. So there is nothing in the constitution that is going to make it possible for parents to marry off underage girls?

A. Not in the constitution or even in legislation afterwards. This is not on our agenda.

Q. The second issue people raise is the quota that existed previously for women to have a minimum number of seats in parliament – what happens to that?

A. We don't really believe – we believe there is a cultural problem in Egypt. We believe that we are the party – not the political party, I mean the group, that is trying to do much better in terms of the empowerment of women into public life. If you look at the number of candidates – parliamentary candidates – that the Freedom and Justice party fielded in the parliamentary elections, it is higher than the number of women fielded by any other party including all liberal parties.

I'll give you another example but not from Egypt but from Tunisia – you know there are 49 women in the assembly over there. Forty-two of these women belong to [the ruling] [Ennahada](#) party. Forty-two out of 49. Which means that other parties did not put women on top of their lists. We believe this cultural problem, this male culture, is not an Islamist culture, it is the culture that is dominating in the whole area and we are the party that is trying to change this practically by fielding women in good positions on the lists. We did that. But to give quota for women in the parliament, this is discrimination, as a matter of fact. But in order to change that we have to change the culture. But in order to assess the role of women in the public life in Egypt, don't just look at the parties, look everywhere else.

Q. There is lots of research from different parts of the world that shows that while yes, you can call affirmative action or quotas discriminatory, it is an intervention that serves to change that male-dominated culture you're talking about. It changes the public perception of women when they are seen in leadership roles. Of course you have to change the culture from the bottom up as you were saying, but this is also a powerful way to change how women are perceived. Your party fielded many women, but what if you don't do so well next time and parties that don't field women dominate parliament – and you end up with assembly of three women, then where do those voices go? If you don't have some guarantees in a discriminatory culture ...?

A. The voices of women do just necessarily show up in parliament.

Q. No, but it's a pretty important place.

A. I would refer you to the U.S. Congress for example. Please tell me how many women show up in the Congress? Or the British parliament. This is everywhere. It is probably less severe in the West than it is here, but it is something that is [universal](#). But I'm talking about other aspects of public life. We have other plans actually which is more important in our opinion which is the municipality elections. On the level of the municipality elections there is an opportunity for tens of thousands of candidates and our plan is to push a lot of women for these elections and a lot of young people. This is really a good opportunity. And women are very active in terms of the local community – take my wife for example, she runs an NGO with thousands of people taking advantage of their activities. I can think of her as a very good candidate. She's not Muslim Brotherhood by the way...

Q. Does that make for awkward dinner-table conversation?

A. This is a political preference. Of course she's religious but she doesn't have to be politically active in our party – but anyway what I'm saying is that women are going to have a very important role in municipalities and the same applies to young people. Because again this is

another cultural problem. Our society tends towards older people being in top positions and making key decisions. We are used to [a president that was 80 years old](#) . When he refers to somebody being a kid, [he means] someone who is 65 years old. So this is a culture that has to be changed. And I believe the revolution has a very important role in changing this. People realize how important young people are. So this is something we are really keen in pushing in our party.

Q. Your party has opponents on both ends of the spectrum – both secular and much more religious – and people have suggested to me that in a way you being in power weakens the state – that it creates a space for, for example, the Salafis to do something like the Embassy attack –

A. The embassy thing was not by the Salafis.

Q. Okay, but there's an example of individuals that can threaten the well-being of the entire country, and the perception is that the government did not act – and I know you've made the case this was not the case, but I believe it's a strong perception – that the government did not intervene because the Brotherhood are supposed to be guardians of Islam and to shut down a protest like that harshly from people who started out protesting as offended Muslims is inappropriate for your party. So people who are perceived as atheists, or blasphemers, or selling alcohol – the citizens or other political actors could move against them and it will be hard for your government to stop them from flouting the law, or taking it into their own hands – the perception is that there is space for these actions now that the government is afraid to shut down because they are supposed to be guardians of Islam.

A. We refer to everything you referred to as criminal acts. I was referring to the slow response [to the embassy attack] and I could understand that slow response. But what happened at the end is that the security forces did intervene and they did shut it down and they did give proper protection to the embassy after. You have to understand that this is something we did not live until last year. We have just come out of a revolution. And people are so emotional. They feel that they have been depressed for so long – as if they were shut up for 30 years and all of a sudden they feel that they have to say everything they could have said in 30 years in one month. So these are acts that are understood.

Actually there are other acts – people go out in strikes and close streets and things like that. These are acts that in a way, we understand them – it's as if you had vapour that was locked in a bottle and all of a sudden you opened the bottle and everything ... but in time we believe that everything will stabilize. And this was quite peaceful compared to other revolutions. Compared to what's happening in Syria or what happened in Libya or what is still happening in Yemen and other countries. So here it's by far less dramatic than that. My estimate is that it will probably take us a couple of years more until things stabilize and they are normal, actually in a much better way, where democracy is much more well-established, you express your opinions through legal channels, through political parties.

Actually people don't find a lot of choices for political parties. If they are not happy with [Freedom and Justice Party](#) or [the Salafist] [An-Nour Party](#) , where else would they go? They would find only very weak parties that are focused and centred about individuals. But with time this will obviously and hopefully change – to develop to a more democratic country where all

trends and social activities are represented in terms of political parties, where all NGOs or whatever, you can express yourself in a peaceful way.

Q. Someone said to me today that the Muslim Brotherhood is not interested in taking over the government or becoming the state, they're interested in making the state into the Brotherhood.

A. This is absolutely not the case. Neither is the case in fact. And the evidence is that when we had the chance to take over the government we didn't. We have the president and he appointed a cabinet with 35 ministers only five or six of which belong to our party. Many of them are technocrats, bureaucrats, who did not practice any political role in the party except maybe one or two of them. The governors – look at how many there are, we have maybe six or seven of them. And other examples. We could have really – even [the prime minister](#) does not belong to our party, he's independent. So if you look at the government – this by the way is not compatible with democratic standards. The logical thing would have been to appoint a government that is totally belonging to Freedom and Justice Party or a coalition between the party and another party. Something like that. But this shows you that we are not really interested in controlling the political life of this country.

Q. I think that was the point of the gentleman who expressed this idea – that you're interested in – that actually you have a social agenda, an intellectual a spiritual agenda – A. Let me explain. First let point out something, something that's funny. No matter what we do, it is interpreted in a negative way. If we take a small part of the government, 'Well, they don't want to take responsibility.' If we take over the whole government, 'Well, they are Brotherhooding the government.' We are always criticized.

Q. Let me read you his exact words – The [Muslim Brotherhood](#) doesn't want as an organization to take control of the state. They want the state to become the organization and that and every Egyptian should be a Brother.

A. Absolutely no. Again more evidence. Look at the members of Freedom and Justice – what's the percentage of Muslim Brotherhood in the party? Twenty-five or 30 per cent. We have something like 400,000 members in the party and most of them are not Muslim Brothers and nobody has asked them to become Muslim Brothers. You have to differentiate between the Freedom and Justice Party and the Muslim Brotherhood. People mix them up. That's the problem. The Freedom and Justice Party is a political party and the objective of that party is clear like any other party – is to get bigger, compete, seek government. That's it. And pursue our agenda politically. Get a majority in parliament, all that. The Muslim Brotherhood is much bigger than all that.

In Western terms it's a social movement but it's not even just a social movement. It is a social, religious, economic – it covers all aspects that Islam addresses. We would like to have really a better society. A better society does not mean that all Egyptians are Muslims Brothers. But a better society in terms of ethics, in terms of standards, of the way people deal with each other. In terms of commitment to the well-being to the country, in terms of having no corruption. This is the agenda of – of having people closer to religion. Of course this is one of the main objectives of the Muslim Brotherhood but the Muslim Brotherhood realizes this cannot be done by force

and there is clear evidence. We've been there for more than 80 years and we never did anything to enforce what we believe in by force.

Q. You weren't really in a position –

A. This is something that people are going to have to believe in, to be convinced. I gave you the example of Saudi Arabian women. We don't want hypocrites. We want people who really believe in these values. So the Muslim Brotherhood is and will continue to do efforts to have a better society that is closer to Islam, definitely, closer to better ethics, and a prosperous country, the well-being of Egypt as a whole. But definitely not turning everybody to be Muslim Brotherhoods. You could never do that. How could you do that? But you have to make a distinction between the work of the party and the work of the group.

Q. What's the timeline on the constitution, when will it be put to a public referendum?

A. I would say we have a month [left]. Right now we are finished with the first phase, and we are trying to cross a few obstacles through discussions, deep discussions, to be able to vote for different articles in the assembly and then have the document ready ....

Q. What are those obstacles?

A. I wouldn't say obstacles but for example Article 2, how you define the principles of Islamic *sharia* for example – Salafis they have the vision of being much more specific than that – everybody else believes this is as specific as you can be, you cannot be more specific than that, this is good enough and it's up to the legislators to draft laws that are compatible with *sharia* but in the constitution you can never do more than that. So you have to find ways – for the constitution you have to have consensus. Salafis are an integral part of Egypt, they represent a chunk of Egyptians, maybe 20 per cent of Egyptians so you cannot ignore their opinion. There are some issues that are less significant related to, for example, the electoral system, whether we specify it in the constitution or not, whether the Shoura Council stays or not, things like that.

Q. People keep bringing up Article 2 with me as well – often as a worst-case scenario, of sharia forming the basis of legislation –

A. Principles of sharia. This is a very significant difference.

Q. Okay. So principles of sharia should form the basis of legislation. But then if you have Islamist judges who are appointed, what if they start setting aside 100 years of Egyptian jurisprudence and saying, this is what sharia says.

A. But this is technically wrong. Judges do not judge based on the constitution, they judge based on laws.

Q. But there have already been cases of judges citing the overriding power of the constitution.

A. This is the constitutional court, to decide if there is something in clear contradiction with the principles of sharia, it cannot be part of the legislation. This is – for example, a woman cannot divorce a man. By law. You cannot have a law that allows that. Because this is not allowed in Islamic sharia. Things like that. As a matter of fact there are very few cases that in the law contradict with the true principles of Islamic sharia. And Islamic sharia is very flexible – by the way, it's not – the first thing that comes to your mind is cutting hands and things like that but this has never been the case. As a matter of fact all through Islamic history there are very few hands that were cut. This is something that is ...

Q. So what happens to the divorce law, compared to what it was under Mubarak? It says, women do not have the right to divorce men.

A. Definitely. They cannot have that right. Because it contradicts Islamic sharia. It's contradicting Islam. By the way, nobody in Egypt is disputing – when I say nobody, I mean 99 per cent – is not disputing this. Obviously we find 1 per cent that is not ... It's the same for Christians, by the way. As a matter of fact they are so strict in defending this article because it allows Christians to revert to their faith when it comes to marriage laws and things like that. They are much more strict in divorce and marriage than Muslims. As a matter of fact some convert to Islam just to get away from some social problems, I'm sure you're aware of that. But in a religious country like Egypt people cannot just forget this, it's quite odd to do that.

Q. A last question, what do you think of your prospects for the parliamentary election?

A. I don't think it will be much different than it was before the last parliament was dissolved. The reason I'm saying this is because the others still did not do a serious effort to get into the picture. They just concentrate on TV but they haven't in my opinion done enough to really get to the bottom of the society and to have supporters there. When they do realize that they will start to get support, start to grow and represent strong opponents. Honestly I don't think there will be that much competition. Of course there will be competition but that competition will not be dramatically different than what it was.

Q. Thank you for being so generous with your time.

A. It was a pleasure.