

# Arab Spring, Bribery, Business and Faith

by John Lovatt

**Personal experience of the effects of the Arab Spring in Egypt leads John Lovatt to reflect on the faith of the Egyptian people he has met, and the purposes of God in Egypt now. In a deeply religious culture, which extends into the business world, and affects life at work on a daily basis, can the Arab Spring bring tolerance, prosperity and peace?**

## A contract, and bribery

**O**n 28th February 2011 I was sitting in the Hilton Hotel Praed Street London trying to get an Egyptian businessman interested in doing a \$60m project to make ceramic tiles and hotelware in Egypt. He was accompanied by his son, whom he had come to visit at the University. The Arab Spring in Egypt was a month old.

I had known Dr Mohammed many years ago, but in recent years we had not met. I outlined the project to him, and he began to ask searching questions, which I was able to answer I believe satisfactorily.

Suddenly he leant across the coffee table, looked me straight in the eyes, and said: "Just between you and I, Mr Lovatt, is this project viable?". Taken aback slightly, I replied, "It is 30-40% profitability". "OK," he said, "let's go". Readers who know the Arab mentality may not be as surprised as I was, personal relationships being of prime importance over financial calculations. He proved as good as his word, and within a few months (rather than weeks!) had raised the necessary \$20m equity, obtained permissions and provided the land for the site.

I asked about the Arab Spring, although it was not known as such at that time. His son replied that two of his friends had just visited the

government offices, one to obtain a driving licence, the other an ID card. To their amazement, the official in both cases produced the document in 15 minutes. At this point, the normal old system of personal payment to an official for speedy service came into play, and the boys asked about that. The official replied, 'no - nothing to pay, it is the new government system.'

When I came to Egypt a month later, I relayed this story to our agent, and asked if the situation was still the same. He replied: "Oh no, not at all, much longer than 15 minutes". I pressed him as to the situation with regards to bribery. No bribery any more. This was confirmed a few minutes later when we came to park our car outside the bank. There was a policeman organising the double-parking Cairo system, who found us a space. When we returned, the policeman was still there, but did not approach us. Knowing as he did the considerable drop in police income from the new system, our agent furtively approached the policeman and quietly gave him a small tip.

What is the explanation for this quite sudden enormous cultural change, after centuries of bribery endemic to the system? Others may have more expert analysis to provide, but my personal impression of the Egyptian people I have met is that it is quite simple: after weeks of dangerous marching and bloodshed, the oppressive regime has gone, and for



▶▶ government officials to continue using their position to exploit the public for private gain is unacceptable. I have yet to test whether this new non-bribery culture is extended to the private sector.

### The new Egyptian government

Egyptians believe Mubarak and his people siphoned off large amounts of public wealth for their own benefit, and the new government is there to serve the people. In this respect, another surprise during that visit in March was a piece of information given to us by one of the banks we went to. They told us that during the last three weeks they had received more than \$100m in deposits from private citizens. This appears to have been due partly to patriotic fervour. However, a logical explanation would be that if people believed that their government was siphoning off funds, they would keep their money under the bed or in Dubai.

The new government sees itself not as a means of enriching its top officials, but as providing stability by reducing unrest, mainly through providing employment. So the banks also told us that they had had a directive from the Central Bank of Egypt that they must provide finance to any Egyptian citizen who has been trading for at least two years, subject to a satisfactory feasibility study.

So the Arab Spring includes not only freedom of speech and making the government responsible to the people, but encourages business in order to provide employment to solve social ills.

### Faith

But what place does Faith have in this picture?

From what I have seen, Faith has its place in a personal way in the minds of the Egyptians I have met; and Faith has its place in the overriding purposes of God, as revealed in

Scripture - not only in the Bible, but also, indeed noticeably, in the Qur'an.

### Personal Faith

We usually think of Egypt as an Islamic country. However, we need to recall that Coptic Christians make up at least 10%, possibly as high as 23% of the population. In the city (El Minya) where we hope to build our factory, I understand the population is



*El Minya City, Upper Egypt*

50% Christian. They are in all walks of life, rich and poor. They were the original native Egyptians. Their Coptic language is the direct descendant of the Demotic Egyptian spoken in the Roman era, but it has been near-extinct and mostly limited to liturgical use since the 18th century. The media are quick to publicise violent clashes in Egypt between militant Islamists and the Copts, but my experience is different. Some years ago I met one rich Egyptian ceramic sanitaryware trader who is a Copt, and I asked him how he felt about his faith in the context of an Islamic State. He said to me, in the presence of my agent who is a devout Muslim (and equally amused), "I always tell them (i.e. Muslims) that they are either invaders or paupers!". He meant that Islam was brought to Egypt by the invading Arabs, but that local Christians were allowed to keep their faith if they paid a poll tax to the state.





*Coptic Mass in Tahrir Square on February 6th 2011*

*Note the communion wine in plastic cups on the left*

*The young priest is on the right*

▶▶ My other experience was watching on TV a mass being celebrated by the Coptic Christians in Tahrir Square during the January uprising, and Muslims present in the Square applauding and clapping. I have noticed, especially among young Egyptians, a tolerance and generosity of spirit towards all beliefs and even homosexuality, which seems to me part of the freedom of speech and belief characteristic of the Arab Spring.

What is immediately evident to a visiting businessman is that religion is deeply embedded in Egyptian society. Business conversation is frequently punctuated by the phrase 'Insha'Allah', and is used by Coptic Christians as well as Muslims. This is usually translated by 'God Willing' but the translation to Western minds often implies a passive acceptance of the outcome of a business venture, whereas it is much more positive than this. It is much nearer to the Lord's Prayer: 'Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven' - a desire that the enterprise will be to God's glory and according to his will.

I was surprised in the early days of doing business there to find that suddenly they said, in the middle of a business discussion, 'now we pray'. I later discovered that this is not simply to conform to the requirement of 'five times a day prayer', but for the same reason - to attune our minds to what God wants.

On one occasion, after a long and difficult negotiation in a restaurant resulting in a large contract, we stepped outside and stood together in a circle, which I was invited to join. They knew I was a devout Christian. To my surprise, they said 'This is a fatwah'. I was shocked, and wondered who we were going to condemn to death. It turned out to be a solemn oath that what we had just agreed would never be revoked, and all parties would make every effort before God to fulfill their obligations under the contract. We stood in silence before God for a minute or so. I prayed to the Holy Spirit for a blessing.

Our new factory will have a small mosque within the complex, and this is normal in factory life in Egypt. It allows workers to leave the factory floor for their 'five times a day' prayers. Faith is literally in the workplace.

This is not to say that all business people are saints. Sharp practice still takes place, as it does in all cultures. Some years ago we were cheated out of £216,000 by a very clever Egyptian businessman, who used our money to bribe police, judges and courts when we tried to recover it. I told our agent it was my stupidity which caused this to happen, and not to pursue the matter any further. He replied, "God will ask for an explanation from us on the Last Day, we should not let him get away with it", so we continued until the bribes began to have an effect on my agent's personal safety. My agent faced the fraudulent businessman with the accusation that he will be expected to answer for this eventually to God, to which the businessman replied, "As for God, I have my answer for him". I presume he had a Robin Hood attitude - rich Westerners are fair game. What was interesting was that a conversation about God and business ethics in the context of a dispute took place between businessmen in Egypt as a matter of course. I cannot imagine this happening in a case of fraud in England.

### **Personal faith and personal freedom**

So although the Arab Spring is seen by many as a secularist movement, nothing could be further from the truth. In business, as in



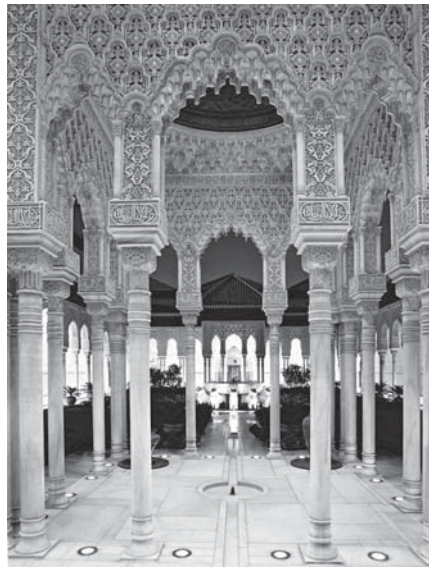


▶▶ private life, society continues deeply religious. It has been so for a long time. What is new in this respect about the Arab Spring? The affirmation of tolerance of all beliefs and regarding all as brothers and sisters strikes me perhaps as the influence, especially among the young, of Western culture but perhaps also (encouraged by this influence?) the resurgence of a long Islamic tradition. The modern violence of some Islamists which I read about with dismay (as have some of my devout Muslim friends<sup>1</sup>), seems in stark contrast to early Islam and some golden age periods in the history of Islam. The view of the Qur'an is that we have no right in this life to criticise, much less persecute, others for their beliefs, but should leave the judgement to God on the Last Day<sup>2</sup>. Historically, Islam has been much more tolerant of other religions than Christianity was. The position of the Jews in Islamic Spain is an example. It led to a golden age of Jewish literature, when the Hebrew tongue developed its grammar and vocabulary on the model of the Arabic language<sup>3</sup>.

Similarly treating all as brothers and sisters who are equal under God, where the most honoured are to be those who do the most good, is an Islamic principle<sup>4</sup>. This freedom of expression and tolerance has had its effect on ordinary life: the numbers of young women I have seen in Cairo who now wear the hijab (head covering) has increased dramatically since the Revolution. It seems that Mubarak was very nervous about Islamic extremism, and discouraged the hijab. Now they are free. In many countries, and to some extent in Egypt, I have noticed that peer pressure, from men as well as women, results in wearing of the hijab, but I was surprised and encouraged to see some of these young ladies one evening in the bazaar in Cairo wearing their hijabs, and accompanied by two

of their friends who were chatting and laughing with them while wearing high heels and short skirts! My experience in Egypt is of wide contrasts – I have frequently watched a Cairo street with full burkah dressed women as well as high heeled western dressed Egyptian women. My impression is of freedom rather than repression.

In the business world this new freedom has taken the form of questioning the social justice of employers. In March there were, and to my knowledge today, there are as yet no laws governing labour disputes, except the draconian ones left over from the old regime, which can now rarely be enforced. I was present at a strike of agricultural workers on the premises of Dr Mohammed in March. They were complaining that temporary workers from the city were being brought in at higher rates of pay than the permanent staff. He



*Court of the lions, Alhambra, Spain*

had to deal with this new situation, and sighed to me as he got into his top-of-the-range Mercedes, “Where do they think I am going to get the money?” My agent said to me, ‘We dismissed one president, now we have 80 million presidents. Everyone has their own idea.’ Economic growth has apparently been slowed down by large numbers of strikes. One can see that a lot of work needs to be done to find a balance in law and practice between social justice and economic growth.

### **The overriding purposes of God**

The release of those oppressed by tyrants is a theme not only of the Old Testament Salvation History<sup>5</sup>, and the Messianic Mission in the New Testament<sup>6</sup>, but also in the Qur'an<sup>7</sup>. Depending on the basis of your faith, you might look on the hand of God as direct



►► interference in Egypt to bring freedom from oppression. An alternative eye of faith might see the Arab Spring as the work of the Holy Spirit inspiring men and women to seek freedom to express themselves and so to give glory to God by fulfilling their potential. Another very down-to-earth faith might see God as being present in the creation of the new social media and better world communications which provided the means for Revolution<sup>8</sup>.

### Release from oppression, and economic blessing

But does our faith in the overriding purpose of God in releasing the oppressed lead us to expect economic blessing and prosperity to follow? Is there a connection, either in scripture or in practice, between freedom and prosperity?

In scripture, the deliverance of the Israelite nation by God from slavery included the consequence that they would be brought to a 'land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing,

a land whose stones are iron and from whose hills you may mine copper<sup>9</sup>. Economic wealth followed freedom. The later prophets connected tyranny with poverty<sup>10</sup> and wealth with freedom<sup>11</sup>.

In practice, the Arab Spring experience in Egypt is that individuals under an oppressive regime withdrew their investment funds to safe havens, where the regime could not siphon them off. Once the regime had fallen, liberated from that oppressive regime, and desiring the best for their country, the new government has issued regulations to the banks to provide finance for businesses to grow and so bring prosperity. Clearly, too, if a government regards the economic prosperity of a country as a means to enrich its own ministers, the drain on the economy, and the reduction of profit for entrepreneurs, results in reduced economic growth.

It looks as though we can expect much better economic growth in the Arab Spring countries in the next few years. Released from oppression, perhaps we can also look forward to a flowering of Arab art and literature, reminiscent of earlier liberated times in the region. ■

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1. When the 9/11 event took place, my agent was amazed, and said that he could not believe the attack came from the Muslim world, but must have come from within USA. He was half right.
2. "Those who believe (in the Qur'an), and those who follow the Jewish (scriptures), and the Christians...and (all) who believe in God and the last day and work righteousness, shall have their reward with their Lord; on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve." Qur'an, 2:62
3. Chejne, A.G., *Muslim Spain, Its History and Culture*, The University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1974.
4. "People, We have created you all male and female and have made you nations and tribes so that you would know each other. The most honourable among you in the sight of God is the most pious of you. God is All-knowing and All-aware". Qur'an, 49:13 (Sarwat translation).
5. Exodus 10:3. 'Let my people go.'
6. Luke 4:18. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."
7. "What is wrong with you that you do not fight in the Cause of Allah, and for those weak, ill-treated and oppressed among men, women, and children, whose cry is: 'Our Lord! Rescue us from this city whose people are oppressors; and raise for us from You one who will protect, and raise for us from You one who will help.'" The Qur'an, 49:13 (Mohsin Khan translation)
8. See for example Peter Heslam's article in this journal, *The Winter's Tale and an Arab Spring*, FiBQ 14:1, pp 33-34.
9. Deuteronomy 8:7-9
10. Jeremiah 9:6-11. The consequence of oppression is "the pastures ... are laid waste, ... and the lowing of cattle is not heard"
11. Isaiah 60-61. Isaiah paints a picture of a people released from oppression, with wealth as the result: "the wealth of the nations shall come to you" (Isaiah 60:5)