



Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon Cairo (Egypt)

21 March 2011

Speech at El Sawy Culture Wheel Centre, entitled "Listening to the People: A Changing Arab world and the UN" [as prepared for delivery]

Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for coming this evening.

For me, this is an honor -- a great honor: to be in Cairo with you, the people of Egypt who have captured the attention of the world.

It is fitting that we meet at this El Sawy cultural center, here on the banks of the Nile, the great river of civilization, a powerful symbol of the ebb and flow of history.

We are witnessing some of the most profound changes of our modern era, a rare moment in the story of humankind:

A moment when we step from the old to the new.

When one age ends and another begins.

When the soul of a nation and a people, long asleep, awakes and finds its voice.

You, today, are that voice, the voice of change, the voice and face of Egypt's future.

Friends and admirers of your great country cheer you on, sharing in your pride and the promise that Egypt is once again on the move.

Those who gathered on Tahrir Square inspired the world with a call for unity and change.

It was above all a moral call, sounding with exquisite clarity.

And you answered -- from every corner of Egypt, from around the world.

Kullena masreyeen. Today, we are all Egyptians.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I have come to Cairo to listen, to hear the hopes and aspirations of the Egyptian people.

I am also here to offer a helping hand, a hand of friendship and the encouragement of the community of nations as you walk a challenging road.

Before coming here, I participated in a roundtable of young people and various civil society groups, many of them here this evening.

Together, you stood in solidarity on Tahrir Square.

You organized on Facebook. Texted on cell phones. Flashed messages across the Internet.

Yet in the end your victory came down to something older and far more deeply human.

It came down to courage.

The courage to stand for justice.

To demand your rights and reclaim your dignity.

To come together in the name of the Egyptian people to build a better future for all.

Young and old, women and men, Muslims and Copts, from the Delta to the upper Nile.

And they changed Egypt.

Let us honor them.

At this moment, I ask you to please join me in a moment of silence for those who lost their lives in the name of freedom and human rights, in Egypt and elsewhere in the Arab world.

Some of their families and loved ones are with us now.

May their sacrifices not be in vain.

Ladies and gentlemen,

There is no going back.

Yesterday and today, I met with the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, as well as your new Prime Minister and other senior officials.

All Egyptians look to them to discharge their responsibilities to the nation.

I commended the Council for their public commitment to a democratic transition.

But I also asked them to listen to the many voices of society in charting the course ahead.

I urged them to lift the state of emergency well before elections.

I emphasized the importance of fair and transparent elections, according to a mutually agreed road-map. I stressed the need for a transparent and inclusive national dialogue that spans the full spectrum of Egyptian society.

My friends,

Your ancestors built the wonders of the ancient world.

We look to you, today, to inspire us once more, to build a modern-day pyramid of democracy in the heart of the Arab world.

This weekend, you took another important step. Millions of Egyptians turned out to vote in Saturday's referendum - many of you for the first time.

Now you must lay a firm foundation, beginning with free and fair elections and a new constitution -- grounded in universal human rights, the rule of law and political and social pluralism.

I am confident that you will quickly put in place other essential building blocks:

Free and vibrant political parties.

A fully inclusive Constituent Assembly.

New programs for social equity and inclusive economic growth.

A renewed emphasis on quality education.

Open space for the civil society groups driving change.

Equal rights for women and minorities.

Full freedom of religion, media and assembly.

In all this, the United Nations can be your partner.

For a decade, we called attention to the problems.

The UN's Arab Human Development Reports warned of the pressures building toward explosion.

We have been a reliable development partner. We have worked to create jobs, reduce food insecurity and save children from dying of preventable diseases. We have sought to advance girls' education and promote gender equity and women's empowerment.

Yet clearly, we, too, must do a better job of listening and speaking out -- in Egypt and elsewhere in the region.

That is my pledge to you today.

My message is that the United Nations is your UN.

We are as excited as you about the prospect of new space opening up, a new era of responsive, effective governance.

Your future is yours, and yours alone, but the United Nations stands ready to help in every way we can.

We have vast experience in assisting countries through delicate transitions. In Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, Africa and Asia -- we have helped to organize free and fair elections and build transparent civic institutions.

We have helped draft constitutions grounded in universal values. And we have supported countries in reforming justice systems and security sectors so that they uphold human rights instead of infringe on them.

This knowledge, these experiences, may prove useful. Our people are ready to work with you, if needed and if asked.

Already, I am urging the international community to provide ambitious economic and financial assistance. I am concerned that rising food prices will make it even more difficult for ordinary Egyptians to feed their families. I want all Egyptians to have medical care and a decent education.

These are not luxuries. They are human rights.

And they are rights that must be fully shared by those who have been disenfranchised for too long -- women and young people.

For too long, Egypt's young men and women have searched in vain for opportunities to exercise their talents and pursue their dreams.

Some have coined a name for this stage of life: "waithood."

Not quite adulthood, but rather a kind of limbo where young people spend their days in long unemployment lines:

Waiting for a job, waiting to earn enough to marry and have a family, waiting to own a home, waiting, in essence, for life to begin.

There is a different reality. A future of education and invention, of freedom and good governance, of the empowerment of women and opportunities for young people.

I believe the people of Egypt and the region can create this future for themselves.

It is a future that we can help create together.

No more waiting for tomorrow!

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me close by saying: your success is not for you alone.

Egypt is a model.

If you succeed here, the rest of the Arab world can hope.

Yes, the winds of change are blowing.

From Tunisia and Egypt to Bahrain, Yemen and beyond.

Egypt was fortunate that change came without greater violence. This is a great tribute to your country and its people.

The situation in Libya stands in stark contrast. The UN Security Council directed Member States to "take all necessary measures" to protect civilians and save lives, including the declaration of a No Fly Zone.

On Saturday, in Paris, I met with world leaders to coordinate our plans for immediate and effective action.

We will continue to do our utmost to end hostilities and find a political solution. We put special emphasis on providing humanitarian aid to those in need.

Please know: we take particular pride in the UN's role in helping tens of thousands of Egyptians return safely home.

My hope is that an Egypt, reborn, can help produce a Middle East, reborn -- a Middle East with dignity and

justice for all, a Middle East that is prosperous and at peace.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The road ahead will be hard.

My own country, the Republic of Korea, also experienced a long and difficult transition.

After decades of military rule, it evolved into what it is today -- a robust democracy and one of the world's strongest economies.

There, too, students initiated the protests that set Korea on its current path.

I remember well. I was there, on the street. We came together in great numbers, which gave us strength.

You began writing a new chapter of your nation's history.

I urge you to keep fighting -- peacefully, without violence, but with passion and commitment for change.

Work with others -- your fellow students, your family and neighbors, your community and your nation's minority groups.

Listen to others, including those you disagree with.

Remember that nothing great is built without cooperation, compromise and common cause.

Remember the call: Kullena masreyeen.

This is Egypt's moment.

Thank you. Shukran.