





“Intolerance will not work in Egypt. We fought a stronger dictator and brought him down, and we will fight any new dictators. The people will not allow themselves to be oppressed anymore...The Egyptian Revolution is not over yet.”

The editor's interview

The future of the Egyptian Spring

An Interview with Karim Abadir of the Free Egyptians Party

Professor Karim Maher Abadir, of Imperial College London, is a founding member of Al Masreyeen Al Ahrrar, the Free/Liberal Egyptians Party and member of the Political Office that heads it. He drafted its economic programme in May 2011 and is Chair of its Economics Committee and of its Data Analysis and Information Committee. On 18th November, 2011, I met with him in Cairo to discuss the then upcoming elections and the future of Egypt and the region. It was on this day that the army recommenced in earnest its brutal attacks on the unarmed protestors in Tahrir Square...

Tomkinson: Professor Abadir, we are here today to talk about the future of the Egyptian Revolution, but before anything else can you comment on the events which have taken place today in Tahrir Square?

Abadir: The events are a continuation of the attitude of the army that thinks it can bully people around. It won't work – it's over. It's just a matter of time before they realise that all this beating people up is futile.

Tomkinson: Many people are speaking of Egypt's Unfinished Revolution. What objectives do you think need to be achieved before the Revolution can be said to be complete, and how long do you think this is likely to take?

Abadir: Civilians have to take over from the army and civilians have to agree on a democratic, secular constitution, not dominated by any form of exclusion whether it is based on religion, race or gender. This is probably going to take some time. I expect the handover – the military handover – to be within a year. And I expect that for Egypt itself to have a functioning constitution and so on will take longer – a couple of years at least.

Tomkinson: Do you think the constitution needs to be further changed on paper or is it just a question of putting into practice what has already been written?

Abadir: Well, you need the paper side as well, then you are working within the law, you cannot bring cases against people without a supporting legal framework.

Tomkinson: So what mainly needs to be changed in the legal framework?

Abadir: Enshrining liberties and the rights of equality... it's not different from any other constitution.

Tomkinson: Could you please give me a general account of your party, the Free Egyptians? What are its values, its general aims and objectives, apart from the things you have already mentioned?

Abadir: Under our logo we have a slogan – which is ‘A Party for all Egyptians’ – so it is a party that believes in equality for all races, genders and creeds. It also believes in making our country more prosperous, more fair, more equitable and a country that is independent, that doesn't answer to any foreign powers.

Tomkinson: And what do you think are your chances of success in the upcoming elections?

Abadir: We are a very young party: we are three or four months old. In a very short period we have gathered a hundred and fifty thousand members, and that is a much bigger membership per month than any other party in Egyptian history. The Muslim Brotherhood has been in existence since the 1920s, and it has got about eight hundred thousand members, so you can imagine that it took them eighty something years – no, ninety years - to get to that point...

Tomkinson:

You have said that you are a very new party. May I ask why you found it necessary to be involved in the founding of a new party, rather than getting involved in one of the many existing ones? Is it a pure question of ideological difference, or do you consider pre-existing centre, or centre-right parties to be corrupt, or to be exclusive of minorities?

Abadir: We need new parties for a new Egypt. It is as simple as that. The old parties have been largely tainted by who was operating in them. Most of the people that you find in my party haven't been active in political life before and they don't want to join structures where people have been active in political life and spoil it. The existing party structures, except some very small parties, like extreme left parties, and such as the ones we have in the coalition, they all used to play ball with the previous regime.

Tomkinson: The Free Egyptian Party is currently part of the Liberal Bloc, along with social democratic and leftist parties. So, presumably, your aim, if elected, would be to form a coalition government. But supposing someone were to object that there are just too many Liberal parties? If you really have common aims why not form one party, and if your aims are so disparate, how will a coalition function?

Abadir: It is an electoral coalition; it's not a political coalition. Our parties are distinct; they have distinct programs – they are running on different platforms; and there are other Liberals that are not in our coalition; it is just an electoral convenience.

Tomkinson: Isn't that splitting the Liberal vote?

Abadir: It is splitting the Liberal vote, but it is also saying that the Liberals once they get into Parliament will have a larger coalition to draw from than the one that is currently running as a bloc.

Tomkinson: And what are the main differences between the three members of the Liberal Bloc?

Abadir: They actually span the economic spectrum, but they agree on wanting a secular state, they agree on wanting things settled by sitting together and deciding together on the best course of action – and compromising – everybody has got their position and they sit together and in the end they agree on a common plan.

Tomkinson: You yourself were recently injured in the Maspero incident of October 9th. Can you tell us about this event and how it's influenced your outlook? Do you believe that the escalation of violent conflict between religious groups can be avoided in the future? And can the Coptic minority ever trust the state again?

Abadir: It was not a religious fight and the proof is today! The same tactics are being used on the protestors in Tahrir Square, the liberation square. I was in Maspero surrounded by two Muslim friends from my party. So it was definitely not a Christian vigil; we were there asking for equality of all under the law...

Tomkinson: But could it be redefined then as a conflict between moderate Muslims, Christians and secularists on the one hand and extreme Muslims on the other?

Abadir: No, not at all, not at all. Because the Salafists and so on were not there siding with the military against us. It was just a stab at saying there are some basic principles – the rule of the law is one - an amazingly simple and powerful principle that hasn't been applied so far; people have been getting away with various crimes, and what we were demanding at the time – we had the banners with us saying so – we said: everybody is equal: apply the rule of law to everybody and don't let criminals get away with their activities, because you are just encouraging them otherwise. That was what we had on our banners. It was portrayed completely differently by the local media – not the local media – by the *State* media.

Tomkinson: Yet the initial catalyst for this was the destruction of a church in Aswan because of the laws regarding the building of churches –

Abadir: It was not just us complaining about the burning down of churches. You know there are millions of Sufis in Egypt and they also had their shrines burnt by the extremists. We were complaining about criminal activities like this going unpunished. It's very simple: the rule of the law has to be applied, and the army has got the force – it has shown it in Tahrir Square and Maspero – so it should apply it on the criminals, not on the peaceful protestors.

Tomkinson: With regard to the rule of law, would you like to comment on the fate of President Mubarak; do you believe that he should be brought to trial, or as some people say, do you think he should be excused on the grounds of age and sickness?

Abadir: He should be brought to trial. Otherwise, we are giving an incentive to anybody to become a dictator, and rob the country. He has brought the country down; he has got to his account, alone, more than fifty billion US dollars. Why should we let him get away with this and his freedom? No way. The guy has to stand trial.

Tomkinson: And supposing he were to be found guilty of the murder of civilians, what do you think the punishment should be?

Abadir: I am a Liberal; I am against the death penalty. It is on Egypt's books, but I would refuse to apply it. So I would say, jail for life, but not the death penalty.

Tomkinson: May I ask what are your hopes and fears for the Arab Spring in general? And could I also ask if you think that the future of Egypt is tied to the wider future of the Arab Spring, or do you think that the fate of every country is to be determined individually?

Abadir: I think Egypt is a trend-setter in the Middle East; Egypt is huge – it's ninety million people, and if Egypt's Spring fails, turns into autumn, then it's a very bad omen for the other ones. I don't think what happens in other countries will influence Egypt, though. I think Egypt is sufficiently independent-minded and the process of liberation has been set into place.

Tomkinson: If I could ask some more detailed questions about economic and social policy... To begin with, can Egypt be said to be free as long as its economy is heavily dependent on US aid and also on a pipeline sending natural gas to Israel?

Abadir: The US aid is 1.3 billion and it's mostly military, so the economy is definitely *not* dependent on US aid. The Suez canal, for example, brings in around 5.5 billion US dollars. So that gives you an idea of the sums involved.

Tomkinson: So, then, the military aid can just be dispensed with?

Abadir: Well, no, for the moment the army has to remain strong, but what I am saying is that this aid goes to the army, mostly, and stays with the army, but it is not doing anything for the Egyptian economy. The Egyptian economy is reliant on itself, and if it's managed properly, we will be able to generate a lot more, for example, from the Suez canal. At the moment, we're just like when you go on a bus and the guy collects the fare from you, and ships are passing and collecting fares and not providing any services, we are not checking whether the fares are what the ships are able to pay or should be paid, we are not optimising these revenues at all.

Tomkinson:

Would you see a way to a future in which foreign aid would only be required in absolute emergencies?

Abadir:

We welcome foreign aid from friends without any strings attached. We have no problems with that. We are not a country that's going to say, 'Sorry, we don't want to shake hands with anybody unless it is money from Egypt.' That's not our view.

Tomkinson:

But has not Egypt got the reputation of a mendicant economy? Would you not hope for a future in which Egypt only required aid in cases of emergency?

Abadir:

At present it is the case that whenever we gain something from abroad, we are giving much more in return. With regard to the pipeline – the gas pipeline is feeding Israel below market value and another similar deal has been done with Spain, giving them gas at a tiny fraction of the world price. This kind of thing is part and parcel of the corrupt regime and the kickbacks they got, of the fifty billion US dollars the President has amassed in his personal fortune – that's just him and his immediate family – and on top of that there were many others who accumulated huge fortunes. So, in fact, we are giving more to foreigners illegally in such deals as a result of bribes and the like, and if we renegotiate these deals in accordance with the law, then we are going to get a lot more money for the economy. We are, in fact, economically independent, we are just wasting the money as if we were super-rich by giving it away like this.

Tomkinson:

Can you say a bit more about the theoretical basis for your economic policy: to what extent do you believe in the free market and to what extent in government intervention if necessary?

Abadir:

There is a wisdom now everywhere, and it's almost become a consensus, that socialism doesn't work – and by that I mean Soviet-style socialism – and also there is a wisdom that unguided free markets – or uncontrolled free markets – don't work, even George Soros would agree with me on that one – and this is our platform – our platform is the free market with social responsibility and with a role for government to actively manage the macro economy and to actively ensure that the micro economy will be taken care of.

Tomkinson:

So, what you are basically recommending is capitalism with a human face?

Abadir: Not only a human face – the human face is the principle of social responsibility – but also capitalism that knows the limits of capitalism – capitalism where a government is not a spectator – the government has to take an active role in running the economy.

Tomkinson:

So what, then, would your party do for the very poorest people in Egypt?

Abadir:

We've got plans for the poorest people in Egypt in terms of health and education, but also in terms of their pockets. They've been neglected in the past.

Tomkinson:

In terms of a minimum wage?

Abadir:

Yes, but the problem is that we have forty per cent below the poverty line in Egypt, so it is not just about the minimum wage; it is about these people who are not even employed. So, yes, we are going to introduce a minimum wage – it doesn't exist here at the moment– we put it in our programme specifically, and it's going to be a minimum wage that is tied to the consumer price index. We are also going to introduce unemployment benefit. We are also going to deliver training programmes for workers, so that – when they don't have a job they are trained to be ready to go into the labour force, or go back into the labour force, if they have slipped out of it. We are going to raise the tax thresholds for poor people, because for a long time the tax threshold was fixed at a nominal value and, with inflation, everybody at the bottom of the income table gets sucked into paying taxes and that's wrong. We are also going to do things for poor farmers – they are struggling to make ends meet – we are going to make irrigation easier for them, we are going to start co-operatives, farm co-operatives, for them – with financial backing, so that they can get together and have more efficient production and distribution. We should improve storage; Egypt is a hot country and a lot of food gets wasted and spoils because it is not transported on time and in the right conditions, then it rots – and we are going to develop the same for fisheries. Our system of financing farmers will allow us to expand the land farmed in Egypt.

Tomkinson:

What about the question of social mobility? What about people who are very talented from working class or lower-middle class families, who would struggle to go to university? What can you do for them?

Abadir: Well, first of all, to continue, we also have in our programme methods for dealing with the slums. The population of Egypt has grown to ninety million people without, unfortunately, any proper urban planning being implemented and the result is the declining standards that we see in Cairo, in particular in the slums, where the standards of health, education and so on are unacceptable, and these are people who were not at all touched by the previous government's policies; they were of no concern to the dictatorship because a dictatorship doesn't care about its citizens. Democracy, whether it is from us or others, will eventually deliver ways of caring for these people – we have already shown that we care about these issues on our programme; we hope the other parties copy us in this respect among others, because no other party has talked about its economic plans for the poor like we have. In terms of social mobility, yes - we are all for it, in fact, we want to encourage small to medium enterprises, we want to encourage people to have more education so that they are

able to get out of the poverty trap – and we want to be a meritocracy – which is the key to success in any country.

Tomkinson: A related question: how will you tackle corruption? Can your party do anything to protect small businesses from the necessity of paying bribes?

Abadir: Corruption hits small businesses disproportionately, because the bribes, as you said, are more affordable for big businesses and as a result it's the small ones who can't compete and who suffer. Bureaucracy is another thing that hits them hard – and we want to implement the rule of the law; as simple as that – I keep going back to that. That is the demand that we said we were demonstrating for: that includes punishing corrupt practices, and making sure that money, the money of the Egyptian government and taxpayers, is not wasted, and that initiative is encouraged. The days of thinking that the government can do everything on its own are gone; those Soviet days are gone – look at China, for example! The government has to give people the ability and the incentive to act. We are a Liberal party, so we are all for the freedom of thought and action within the law, and – unlike some parties that are terrorising people into not being able to think or express themselves, we are all for freedom of expression.

Tomkinson: What else will you do, apart from the things that you have already mentioned, to encourage growth in the Egyptian economy?

Abadir: If you put the right structures in place, this is not enough. You have to take an active role in starting things; you have to take an active role in subsidising new good activities, and then in removing these subsidies when they can survive and compete on their own. In terms of tourism – the plans of some of our competitors in this election are scary, because they are going to destroy tourism, they are going to say to tourists - *you can't go there and you can't wear this and you can't drink that* – and tourists are just not going to put up with it – they are just going to go somewhere else ... Then they are going to destroy banking; the banking system that they want to imitate is the one of Sudan and Somalia, which is hardly something to emulate. This is exactly what they are going to do, because they are going to abolish interest rates, and these are the only two countries that have done that.

Tomkinson: You mention the negative things that the Islamists would do if elected, but can you outline some more concrete proposals of your own? What plans do you have for growth in the industrial sector?

Abadir: A lot of the economy is now living on services, not on actual manufacturing –

Tomkinson: But you are not going to write off the industrial sector –

Abadir: No, no, no. But I want to stress the importance of the service sector. With regard to other sectors, I started by saying how we are going to help the farmers, how we are going to help the agricultural sector, and we also hope to initiate some favourable deals with the EU

because they have been anxious to help the new Egypt and I am sure they will now listen to our requests.¹

In terms of manufacturing, we are going to provide the right framework for factories to be set up – minimum corruption, minimum red tape – we are going to give incentives, so at the beginning when they need some loans at reasonable rates, we are going to provide them, and later that can be phased out – and in terms of services, providing services – I gave you the examples of tourism and banking, but there are also services like those connected with the Suez canal; we are going to develop that into a Dubai-like area, if you think of the growth of Dubai, which is brilliant, in terms of tourism and other services – we could provide all that and more in the ports of the Suez canal, because, frankly, a lot more ships are passing through the Suez canal than Dubai.

Tomkinson: To return to agriculture. What about the question of land ownership? There are currently limits on land ownership, would you abolish these, and allow land to be concentrated in fewer hands?

Abadir: If you mean concentrated as in percentage, yes, it's inevitable, but if you mean land being concentrated in such a way that small landowners will disappear, no – I'm against that – in fact we are going to expand the ownership of the land by peasant farmers – getting investors to finance the farmers – this is going to be through private investors who are going to be in partnership with the farmers, giving loans at reasonable rates: they are going to provide the cash for the farmers, they are going to provide us with capital – and they are going to share the ownership of the land and what comes out of it.

Tomkinson: What about nuclear power? Do you support the development of nuclear power in Egypt?

Abadir: I support nuclear power in general, but I think it is unnecessary in a country where you have got the sun shining three hundred and sixty-five days a year.

Tomkinson: So you don't support nuclear power for Egypt?

Abadir: And we have got wind along the coasts, especially the Mediterranean and Red Sea coasts. There are cheap sources of energy that we can tap into and – because of what's happened in Japan and before that – really nuclear power should not be the priority when you've got easier and cheaper sources of power.

Tomkinson: So is that a yes, or a no?

¹ In fact, the EU subsequently declared on 20 December, 2011 that it intended to start negotiations to set up a new free-trade zone with Egypt. The FEP was the only party that had this proposal in its programme, and it was also included in the single page summary of the economic programme mentioned later in the interview.

Abadir : Nuclear power is definitely not something I want to spend money on now, when I have got cheap sources of energy.

Tomkinson: But there is an existing program, is there not?

Abadir: There is an existing experimental program – it's experimental, it's not commercial, it's not viable commercially at the moment – it could be viable.

Tomkinson: So you would abolish this?

Abadir: We haven't started anything serious – so that's what I'm saying – if I am going to start new projects – I am going to start with projects which are more beneficial and I am going to start with these and when these are done, and I cannot extract any more benefits out of them, I will go for the next one. So nuclear is not a no-go area, but it is not anywhere near the top of my priorities.

Tomkinson: I'm sure more to the top of your priorities will be tourism. I've been going around Cairo today and it seems as if everyone working in the tourist industry is absolutely desperate: there are no tourists, people are afraid to come here. So what can you do to make people believe that it is safe to come here, when some Westerners now have the idea that in Egypt 'They kill Christians'.

Abadir: Tourism is at forty per cent of the level it was before the Revolution. And that's largely due to the mismanagement of the country since then. It is nothing to do with Christians, it is to do with the instability of the country.

Tomkinson: But these kind of things have been said, nevertheless.

Abadir: Well, I mean, after today's battering of the people in Tahrir Square, you see it is also against Muslims. What you have heard is just rumours, because as I said, during Maspero, there were Muslims with us who were injured and had to be taken to hospital for treatment: the President of my party is one of them. So what I am saying was that tourism now is forty per cent of what it used to be before the Revolution – tourism went to pretty much zero per cent of what it was, when the terrorists attacked tourists in Egypt – the fundamentalists – and this is really just a foretaste of what will happen if these people take control in Egypt. If conservative-minded parties take over, they will bring revenues from tourism down to possibly five per cent of what they were a few months ago.

Tomkinson: Returning to general economic policy, how will the crisis in the eurozone effect the Egyptian economy?

Abadir: The question of the eurozone and the eurozone economy has affected us for some time. In terms of tourism, we are getting more visitors from other areas – more Russians, more Ukrainians, more people from the Far East, so there has been a substitution. These tourists may not always have as much money to spend, but in terms of the number of people employed in the sector and the number of hotel rooms occupied, there is not as much difference as you might think. So we are not fully dependent on the eurozone. The Suez canal

revenues are still unaffected. We also have workers' remittances that are a huge source of revenue which was really affected by the Arab Spring because millions of Egyptians were in Libya, for example, and that got cut off, but will resume once the situation stabilizes. We are a net importer of goods, so we are not as affected by the Eurozone crisis as other big industrial exporters.

Tomkinson: You said that you favoured a middle way between free markets and government intervention. Specifically, how would you manage the financial sector if you came to power? If banks fail, do you think that the government should use public funds to bail them out, or should they be allowed to fall?

Abadir: It depends on what the situation at the bank is. If it is a liquidity crisis, the government should step in, and that is the role of the Central Bank. And the problem that we saw in the recent crisis was that governments intervened too late and let the problem become a crisis. They should have intervened earlier and they should have managed the macro economy better. It is on my website exactly what should have been done, and I made predictions for the timing of the recession one year in advance; also I predicted exactly what would happen and when it would happen – that was based on my research – these things are not magic – it is just that the institutions were caught napping when they should have intervened earlier.

Tomkinson: Now, I would like to ask you for your views on education and the role of intellectuals. At the moment nearly thirty percent of Egyptians are illiterate. How can this situation be remedied?

Abadir: They are illiterate because they see no gain in learning – even in learning how to read or write – and that is exactly going back to my previous point – the jobs available are not rewarding enough – the jobs are not even there, in some cases, and the kids are pulled out of school by their parents, or they are taken out of school to go into other things, to go into employment.

Tomkinson: So is this mainly a failure in the education system, or is the problem people's inability to take advantage of the system?

Abadir: It's both. It's both. Because another thing which I don't like about the current education system, and which I intend to change if we get to power, is that they encourage rote-learning – they encourage memorisation – and it's wrong – mathematics students are taught multiple problems and they are made to memorise them – this is crazy! They don't understand mathematics – you have to understand the method of solution, not memorize the answer. And this goes for pretty much the whole approach to education: it's memorise – just memorise – and at the end you get robots that are not even well-educated robots. We also have a problem with the curriculum, though it is a lesser and more long-term problem but if I get a student that is memorising even a perfect curriculum they are not going to understand anything and they are going to be incapable of performing in their jobs afterwards.

Tomkinson: The problem of education is related to the question of mass communication. How will you get your political message across to people who have been badly educated or illiterate and who may not have access to a television?

Abadir: In Egypt, people sit together a lot in social or family groups – so nobody's too poor to have access to TV – and there is radio as well – that is not the problem – the problem is giving people an incentive – in telling them why education is good for them – you can force them in a dictatorial way to go to school and learn – but that's not my answer. We should give them incentives.

Tomkinson: But what about getting your political message across in the short term? I think there are a lot of people on the street who have got this blanket idea that all politicians are corrupt – that they are all in it for themselves. I heard this from a couple of people on the street today – from a taxi driver, for example ...

Abadir: I totally agree with them. I fully agree with them.

Tomkinson: But how will you prove that you are different?

Abadir: I fully agree with them. When we started the interview I told you that I didn't want to join the old-style politicians of any of the other parties because the majority were corrupt – and we want a new kind of politics. People on the street can see we are a very young party – three or four months – we are going on the street and talking to people and they are starting to get to know us and they see our sincerity. They see that we are not doing things for ourselves, we are doing things for them – so it is up to them – but the only snag is that we don't have enough time before the elections to reach our audience – the public are ninety million people – the elections were rushed, unfortunately – we were not even told the official lists that were accepted to run for the election until a couple of days ago when the elections are ten days from now. What kind of campaign can we run in twelve days?

Tomkinson: But with regard specifically to economic policy – you referred earlier to your research – which is very high level research – but even given an infinite amount of time – can you explain the foundations of an economic policy which has been developed using sophisticated econometric techniques to people who are not educated enough to understand it? Even most educated people don't have a grasp of econometrics, so are you not asking the electorate to make a leap of faith in trusting to your theories? Economics professors and econometricians disagree among themselves; how can the layperson distinguish between them?

Abadir: My research is sophisticated, but it is built on a lot of straightforward knowledge which has accumulated over a period of time, like in any other science, and as a result one can say that there are simple ideas behind my research. And I have communicated this in a very simple programme, a one page programme in my leaflet. An economic programme that was distributed to all the candidates, speaking to the people in their own language.

Tomkinson: Going on specifically to university education, then, what is your vision for university education and how do you think university education in Egypt should be financed? Should it be free to all of sufficient merit, or should there be a system of student loans?

Abadir: I am not in favour of student loans and I objected to them when they were introduced in England. I am in favour of financing education freely, but not for everybody. There is no point in doing what we are doing at the moment, which is to cram everybody into universities when, first of all, they don't have the qualifications to be at university when they did poorly in their exams and when, frankly, they don't want to be there, when they will eventually work in a job which doesn't require the education that they get there.

Tomkinson: So you want a free, but more elitest system?

Abadir: Not elitest –

Tomkinson: Élitest in the sense of a meritocracy?

Abadir: Yes, exactly. So: you perform well in your exams, you get to go to university, if you want to. There is a stigma at the moment for someone who doesn't have a university degree – and that's wrong – and, in fact, a lot of skills – labour skills – can be acquired outside the university, and be more beneficial for us than a university degree which is forced upon young people, when they never actually use it and they don't understand why they are doing it – and they are crowding out the good students.

Tomkinson: So what are you talking about in terms of academic standards – would you send the top ten percent, top twenty per cent of academically gifted children to university?

Abadir: I'm not going to measure it in terms of percentages – I would measure it in terms of setting a bar of minimum level of ability and knowledge and desire to achieve – and that's going to be the qualification. It would be arbitrary to say what percentage would reach this bar. If you have only ten percent that are good students in a year, OK – but if you have thirty percent who are qualified to continue to university, then they should go.

Tomkinson: Can you say more about university selection procedures?

Abadir: This ties in with what I was saying previously. Why do students learn by heart and memorise without understanding? It is because the exam procedures are encouraging them to do so – they memorise all sorts of answers and use them to pass. Here in Egypt, there is a nationwide exam which is a school-leaving qualification. You don't have much choice at school except to specialise in sciences as opposed to arts – and the exam is standardised – but it is an exam that doesn't allow you to recognise a good pupil from a bad one – anybody can memorise – if you can memorise, then you pass. So we end up with most students getting over ninety per cent! It's grade inflation; and then how can you tell who is going to be bad; and then you take everyone. And the end result is that you get classes full of people who cannot think for themselves and it is bad for the country. You want people to be able to think. Therefore, we need selection exams which are more demanding and less predictable, based less on memorising and more on thinking.

Tomkinson: OK, so supposing you reform the education system, can you get rid of the problem which now exists of many talented university graduates who are unemployed or underemployed?

Abadir: It's connected, obviously. A degree means nothing; a degree is completely empty when the employer interviews the student and finds that they wasted three or four years at the university.

Tomkinson: Those are the untalented ones – what about the talented ones?

Abadir: The system will be much slimmer in the sense that the guys and girls who go to university and pass will be of a higher calibre and will have had a better training. As a result, the firms that are hiring them will *want* to hire them.

Tomkinson: What about people who study the humanities and so on? Will they be finding jobs in firms as well?

Abadir: Yes, if you look at a lot of companies now – they are doing many interviews – because a degree does not discriminate – in terms of telling you the goods that you are getting – they are hiring people from all disciplines because after the interview they find that, well, actually the one who studied history can be better than the one who studied engineering.

Tomkinson: Your party has the reputation of being very business-friendly. But what about the professional business classes: people like the teacher, the university lecturer, the doctor in the state hospital, or the public prosecutor? Would people like this flourish under the Free Egyptians, or would they feel that they are doing middle-class jobs without middle-class salaries, whilst less educated people are getting rich?

Abadir: No, the economic programme that I told you about is actually aimed at the lower and middle classes. The rich are already taking care of themselves; we don't need to take care of them. And I also gave you the example of the minimum wage.

Tomkinson: The minimum wage is a safeguard for people in the most menial jobs. But what about salaries for university lecturers, for example?

Abadir: That's just an example. I am also talking about universities that provide education: real education, not memorisation: they are going to be smaller and better paid.

Tomkinson: So some academics are going to be sacked, then?

Abadir: Well, if they are not performing, they have to be sacked.

Tomkinson: But they will have to be sacked whether they perform in research or not if there are not enough students –

Abadir: Currently some academics are doing shameful things in Egyptian universities – you can go and check out what they do. They are exploiting their role and extracting money from the students and so on. This will not be tolerated in the new Egypt. I can give you another example from the police force – we've got a couple of a million – we don't need that big a

police force. Instead, it needs training in how to deal with citizens; and it needs to know how to take care of situations instead of escalating them into major problems.

Tomkinson: So what percentage of the police force are you going to sack?

Abadir: Think of the police now as being so badly paid that they take bribes; they cannot live otherwise.

Tomkinson: So what kind of percentage are you talking about – do you think the police force should be fifty percent smaller?

Abadir: We are talking about a transitional period at the moment, so we need a larger police force than in a steady state, but gradually we want to reduce it to a reasonable level; I cannot give you a figure right now.

Tomkinson: Going back to intellectuals, do you think that intellectuals have been marginalised in Egyptian society in the past, and do they have a central role to play in the future of the new Egypt?

Abadir: In the past the Egyptian regime didn't want people to ask questions – and they used the TV as well to dumb down the intellectual calibre of the population and the intellectuals were thrown in jail, or tortured, or forced to leave the country. And now they are coming back, as I have done. Basically, we are coming back, much more of us are spending a large amount of time in Egypt...

Tomkinson: Are there any Egyptian writers who have influenced you in the past, or who you see as having a great influence on the political scene in Egypt today?

Abadir: There are many Egyptian writers who have influenced me in the past, but there is one that I would like to mention who is important for the present and the future and who has been very influential during the Revolution. That is the author of *The Yacoubian Building*, Alaa El Aswany, who is a vocal opponent of the previous regime and of the military. I really admire him.

Tomkinson: What about Naguib Mahfouz?

Abadir: I have spoken about both of them in the past, and Tawfik El Hakim and Taha Hussein. Naguib Mahfouz was named after my grandfather, my maternal grandfather, Naguib Pasha Mahfouz, who was the father of obstetrics and gynaecology in Egypt. He treated the mother of the Nobel Prize winning writer and in recognition she called her son Naguib Mahfouz after him. Mahfouz is not actually the family name of the writer but of my grandfather.

Tomkinson:

So, conveniently making the transition to women's issues... Your party has the stated aim of encouraging the empowerment of women in the public and private spheres. What concrete policies do you have to achieve this? Do you think there is a need for positive discrimination,

and/or for the reform of divorce laws and child custody laws, and can any government do anything to reduce the incidence of domestic violence and sexual harassment on the street and in the workplace?

Abadir: Yes, it can, since harassment and so on takes place because people are frustrated. There is a climate that is very hypocritical about these issues and we need to tackle that. We also need to allow young people to get houses to live in, to get married and so on. This is not happening at the moment – they have to live in a cramped place with their families because they're not able to get a decent-paying job to help them buy a flat. With regard to women in Parliament, yes, we will encourage that. With regard to divorce, to get your rights from the courts can take forever because they are stretched. The courts need more funding and more independence. And in this respect also the constitution is very important: that is why we push for this. When we have a constitution that gives people their equal rights all these problems are going to get much better...

Tomkinson:

Also on this issue, Human Rights Watch has recently expressed disquiet about what happened to a number of women protestors who were subjected to so-called virginity tests as a punishment for their political involvement, particularly as they haven't been compensated for this, nor have the perpetrators been punished. What is your view on this? Do you think these acts constituted sexual assault?

Abadir: I absolutely do, I absolutely do, and I agree that this is completely wrong and the military have not been brought to justice for anything that they have done since the start of the Revolution and they have been abusing their position and they have been doing that on a grand scale. And at the moment all the actions have been in military courts and no members of the military have been charged so far and it's the civilians who have been put on trial in military courts. That's wrong; it has to stop immediately.

Tomkinson:

So, do you think that the people who carried out these so-called virginity tests should be punished in the same way as a rapist –

Abadir: Of course.

Tomkinson: Does your party have a policy on female circumcision?

Abadir: Yes, we intend to take tough action against it. We have a programme on women's issues – and we are the only party that has this – and this is one of the major items.

Tomkinson: There is, however, one part of your party's website which seems to go against gender equality. It states that people can only hold leadership roles in the party if they are the child of an Egyptian father, not 'father and mother' or 'father *or* mother'. Does not this reinforce patriarchal attitudes and thus subvert your program?

Abadir: This is a legal requirement. It is not specific to our party. In Egypt there are very strange and inequitable laws to do with Egyptian nationality.

Tomkinson: Isn't your party supposed to be changing all this stuff?

Abadir: We cannot break the law until it is changed and that is precisely why we want a constitution that's equitable, because if we get a constitution which is equitable, then these laws will have to be changed.

Tomkinson: In what way would you change the law?

Abadir: We think there should be no distinction between a man and a woman – if one of the parents is Egyptian that is good enough for the person to get Egyptian nationality, and have their full rights as an Egyptian national.

Tomkinson: Going on to foreign policy, could you outline your party's major goals in foreign policy? What relations do you envisage with the major world powers?

Abadir: Mutual respect. That's what we aim for, and there's no other way to do it in today's world.

Tomkinson: And this would be a position of mutual respect stemming from a position of Egyptian non-alignment, or do you see Egypt being closer to the West than – say for example - China?

Abadir: There is no 'East' anymore.

Tomkinson: There's no East?

Abadir: I mean that China is very close to the West in its economic practices. They haven't got freedom or democratic rights, but that is also the case in some countries in the Western hemisphere.

Tomkinson: For example?

Abadir: Cuba. You may call that 'the East', of course! And there are some dictatorships in Latin America. It is not a question of a West-East or a North-South divide anymore; the limits are blurred now.

Tomkinson: What about the Arab League? First of all, what do you see Egypt's role in the Arab League as being in general? And specifically with regard to Syria, do you think the Arab League should take further action? Should a no-fly zone be imposed? Should Egypt or the Arab League send in ground troops?

Abadir: I don't think we should go in as in Libya. Syria is a very special case as it is still at war with Israel. And it is not advisable to set up a no-fly zone because in order to enforce it you have to destroy all the air defences, which means bombing all the airfields, taking out all the radar installations... It's not just a question of saying they cannot fly an aeroplane.

Tomkinson: So if Gaddafi had had the good fortune to be still at war with Israel, he should have been left in charge there?

Abadir: No, it is not a question of that. Suppose we start something against Syria: then Syria is going to send a few of its bombs to Israel, and then you start a bigger war, and then the Iranians will get involved and you will start a massive conflict – it is not wise.

Tomkinson: So what do you think that Egypt should do with regard to the crisis in Iran?

Abadir: Negotiations. There is no way you can bomb Iran out of making nuclear weapons if it wants to make them. If you try to bomb them, their facilities are in a number of underground locations. It's learnt from the mistakes of Iraq – the Iraq of Saddam Hussein. It is not just a matter of their having one reactor in one place like Iraq had: they will be all over the place, they will be underground in bunkers ... You are probably going to miss one of them ... in which case there will be retaliation.

Tomkinson: But in these negotiations, what will the motivation be for the Iranian side to become more moderate?

Abadir: Look at the North Koreans; they are not at all moderate. In fact, I would say that the North Koreans are far from being moderate; the Iranians are much more moderate. It is a question of checks and balances. I am not worried at all about the Iranians pressing a button, because there are checks and balances there, unlike in North Korea.

Tomkinson: So you are saying that even if they have nuclear weapons they wouldn't dare push the button.

Abadir: Yes, because if they use nuclear weapons, they will be annihilated in return. So why would they do that to their own people? They are not suicidal. And also think about North Korea: that is a state which is very unstable because it is a one-man State, it is a one-man show, and the guy there may be unstable. And yet, negotiations have brought peace to the area: these are the sort of negotiations I am talking about. We need a way out of the crisis; we don't need to change the crisis into a major war...

Tomkinson: So, how would you handle relations with Israel?

Abadir: Again, mutual respect. If they respect their treaty and if they respect the rights of human beings, we will respect theirs as well. We have nothing against the State of Israel: we do not want the State of Israel removed from the map; not at all. We believe they can bring positive contributions to the region. We merely want them to respect their obligations to international law and towards the Palestinians.

Tomkinson: Would this involve the setting up of a Palestinian State?

Abadir: Yes. There are only two options: a viable Palestinian state, or an Israeli state with Palestinians having equal rights, and eventually the latter would not be an Israeli state anymore, it would be a Palestinian state, so the second option is not really viable. Separation is really the viable option.

Tomkinson: What about Sudan? Do you think Egypt should play a more active role there? Or does Egypt have enough on its plate?

Abadir: Egypt has played an active role there, but it has to play in a very diplomatic way, because Sudan is our younger brother; Egypt and Sudan were one country until the mid fifties; we have had a long history together. After Sudan split from Egypt, Sudan split within itself and will probably split even further. The South has split off. Another part of the South is now fighting to split, Darfur is fighting to split. Again, the reason for this is that they've got an intolerant regime that's running the country and imposing a strict constitution that doesn't have equality for all citizens –

Tomkinson: And would you say that the international community seems to be giving them *carte blanche* to do this?

Abadir: They are not officially –

Tomkinson: Not officially, but –

Abadir: Sudan is a huge country and we have the international community saying we are going to let it break down like the Soviet Union broke down – on its own. This is very sad for the people on the ground because of the humanitarian crisis and the large number of people that are being affected, and nobody is going to be able to do anything for them.

Tomkinson: So there is nothing that can be done for them at all?

Abadir: There is, but there needs to be international willingness to intervene. Libya is oil-rich so there was the international willingness to intervene; Sudan, especially Darfur, is not oil-rich, so-

Tomkinson: Would Egypt in no circumstances be prepared to intervene?

Abadir: No, it has to be international. There is no way big brother is going to go in and sort out things. No way.

Tomkinson: What about the Sinai? Is there a sense in which Cairo has lost control of the Sinai? And should there be better control over the Sinai to protect the gas pipeline, to bring drug smuggling under control and to reduce the threat of terrorism?

Abadir: The treaty we made with Israel says that we cannot have many forces in the Sinai; we want to enforce law and order, but in the time after the Revolution we have not been able to do so. The treaty in question should be renegotiated because we have no intention of attacking Israel; we should be able to increase the forces that we have there to bring back peace. The reason that the gas pipeline has been blown up is because, frankly, Egyptians feel that this is daylight robbery, since, because of billions going into the pockets of our corrupt leaders and their friends, we are exporting gas at a tiny fraction of the world price. It's incredible and it's unacceptable. These deals have to be renegotiated; otherwise the pipeline will be blown up every other day. I'm not encouraging people to blow it up, but it is very clear why it has been blown up. They feel that they have been robbed.

Tomkinson: What about drug smuggling?

Abadir: Drug smuggling has been happening in the Sinai for eternity. So it is something that we have to control, but we cannot, because of the lack of police numbers there. ... It was also a problem during the Israeli occupation of the Sinai. It is nothing that is uniquely post-Revolution.

Tomkinson: Is the name of your party, The Free Egyptians an allusion to the Free Officers of 1952?

Abadir: Far from it.

Tomkinson: Can you tell me what your attitude is to the 1952 Revolution?

Abadir: It was not a Revolution; it was a *coup d'état*. The so-called Free Officers were not Liberals at all. The reason for this confusion is that *al Ahrrar* in Arabic means two things: it means 'Liberal', but it also means 'free'. So the translation of the name of our party could be any of the two; it could be Free Egyptians or it could be Liberal Egyptians.

Tomkinson: You prefer 'Liberal' to 'Free'?

Abadir: It is Liberal. That is the ideology of the party. So it is just an unfortunate co-incidence and in fact at the start when we founded the party and called it *Al Masreyeen Al Ahrrar*, some would translate it as the Liberal Egyptians, some would call it the Free Egyptians, so we had to choose one of them and we chose Free.

Tomkinson: Can you say more about what your attitude is to 1952 to the *coup d'état*? What were its mistakes?

Abadir: The 1952 *coup d'état*? It brought dictatorship – literally dictatorship – and now we're 'celebrating' the 60th year of it and I hope that with the upcoming elections we will finally get rid of the military dictatorship.

Tomkinson: You have lived and studied and worked in England for many years. May I ask how this has influenced your attitudes, if at all?

Abadir: It has influenced my attitudes in that I have seen things at first hand – how things are done in other countries – in developed countries – and I have learned a lot from my experience – though there are pros and cons to any experience. I have learned a lot about the West. But I already had a lot of experience of that – I had a lot of knowledge of the West before going abroad because Egypt has always been a very cosmopolitan country – we have free interactions with the rest of the world – and we have Westerners living in Egypt interacting and mixing with us. But the travelling to England was a good experience and also the teaching side – interacting with different nationalities – in Egypt most students are Egyptians or Arabs, but in England I taught students from China, from the UK, Europe...

Tomkinson: Do you think that your political rivals might try to use your extended residence abroad against you? To refer to you as an *émigré* and to say that you have lost touch with your own country and its people? How would you answer them if they said that?

Abadir: I have got two answers: first of all, I voted with my feet: I refused to collaborate with the previous regime although I had the qualifications to, unlike some people who stayed behind and

collaborated with them, and I am voting with my feet again by coming back and contributing to post-Revolution Egypt. And that's the first answer. The second answer is: many intellectuals left the country because of discrimination and not just them but also other dissidents, including members of the Islamic Brotherhood, left – it doesn't make them less Egyptian.

Tomkinson: So you are now resident in Egypt, but you still have your job at Imperial College London, to which you are returning. What about the future? Do you think that you may return to Egypt permanently and do you envisage a more prominent leadership role for yourself in your party in the future?

Abadir: I've no idea to be honest. It's – if I had a crystal ball I'd know what happens next with the elections – if I see a role for myself in Egypt I will try to fulfil it, and if not, then I will carry on living abroad. And my role in Egypt need not be on a full-time basis; I can be a consultant, for economics or education, for example. There are many possible paths. I really cannot tell at this stage.

Tomkinson: Thank you very much, Professor Abadir...

Footnote:

Professor Abadir was kind enough to answer some follow up questions in the aftermath of the election

Would you like to comment on the process and outcome of the elections?

Unfortunately, it was marred by massive fraud, on such a scale that it could not have been organized without the collusion of the authorities. I have documented some of it on <http://www.youtube.com/user/kmabadir> where you can click 'more' on the right of that page for more details and links. Just to give you one example, of many. Electoral lists with voters' names are released to each candidate, district by district (not nationally). Some candidates got together and found 9 million repeated names, some names were repeated up to 50 times. These 9 million represent one third of the 'voters', half the 2/3 that the Islamists got, and that's not even discounting all the other fraud. This parliament should have been majority Liberal! My party alone has filed with the police over 500 reports of significant fraud that have not been investigated and no-one has even been questioned so far.

There is a general perception in the West that the Arab Spring is very likely to produce a victory for political Islam throughout the region. Election results in Tunisia and more recently Morocco also seem to point in this direction. Do you believe this perception to be mistaken?

Egypt is a regional trend-setter and will show a different way, but it will take time. The electoral numbers in Egypt are not a true reflection of the voters' will, as mentioned in the previous answer. Furthermore, most of the young revolutionaries boycotted the elections because they didn't trust them to be fair under the military regime, and they were right. However, the elections were beneficial to the Egyptian Bloc in establishing it as the new leader of the Liberals. My party subsequently boycotted the elections to the upper house, a consultative body, as there was no further point in playing by such deficient and fraudulent rules.

Since we last spoke your party has withdrawn from the Egyptian Bloc coalition and the founder of your party, Naguib Sawiris, has been summoned to court accused of blasphemy. Also Egypt is dealing the aftermath of the football tragedy in Port Said, which some are referring to as the Third Egyptian Revolution, and the situation in Syria is escalating. Would you like to comment on any of these developments?

We have withdrawn from the upper house election, so effectively from the Bloc's campaign for it. But our alliance has actually expanded since, and Sawiris has recently been acquitted of the blasphemy charge and his accuser fined 50,000 Egyptian pounds.

Intolerance will not work in Egypt. We fought a stronger dictator and brought him down, and we will fight any new dictators. The people will not allow themselves to be oppressed anymore.

The events in the football tragedy are not an accident. There has been a systematic and sustained attack on all those who have been actively supporting the Revolution, and it will only work to increase our will to fight for complete democracy and equality. The Egyptian Revolution is not over yet, and this is what I said way back in February 2011.

Regarding Syria, I reiterate my earlier position that involving non-Arab forces can lead to dangerous results. But I do not see Arab countries mustering sufficient forces to mount a military challenge to Assad's forces. Arming the rebels is a possible but insufficient step for change there. The solution may come from within Assad's army.