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Subject: In Egypt, U.S. government seeks a few good democrats (Washington Post)

CAIRO (Washington Post) - The United States was giving away \$65 million in grants to build democracy, and Marwan Youness wanted in. But as the portly engineer scrolled through the application on a warm Cairo night, he began to worry.

“Oh, my God, there are a lot of things they need,” Youness told his business partner, Sherif Hossny, who was perched on the edge of his desk. Youness, 38, dragged on his cigarette, leaned toward the laptop and ran through the six pages of questions.

Then came: “Explain why the program is necessary.”

Youness and Hossny paused. That question went to the heart of who they were — and, ultimately, why it could be so difficult for the United States to spend \$65 million on democracy in Egypt.

Just a year ago, Hossny was pitching ads to improve the image of the ruling National Democratic Party, a hated machine that stifled democracy. Youness taught classes on politics for party youths.

Now they were on the side of the revolution that had destroyed the ruling party. And they were proposing to make voter-education ads for free elections.

They brainstormed for days. Finally, Hossny, 35, typed: “This is our opportunity to raise awareness and understanding and change perception about what a transparent democratic society can do for people.”

Then came the question of how much money they wanted. They calculated: personnel, a studio, video equipment. The total: \$420,000.

Just before 5 p.m. May 29, Hossny hit “send.”

Now the newly minted revolutionaries would have to wait, as the U.S. government decided whether they were the right people to help build democracy in Egypt.

Their form zipped into computers in a cavernous glass-and-granite building in a southern Cairo suburb. Here, in fluorescent-lighted offices, a handful of Americans and Egyptians wearing lanyards stamped “U.S. Agency for International Development” sorted through scores of applications.

Three months earlier, the U.S. government had tripled pro-democracy aid to Egypt, to \$65 million. Already, a chunk of it had been assigned: more than \$30 million to two veteran U.S. nonprofit organizations that train budding politicians; about \$4.5 million to a State Department program for grass-roots groups; millions for election infrastructure.

But in the wake of the Egyptian revolution, USAID wanted to go beyond the usual grantees.

The stakes were high: For 30 years, the U.S. government had relied on President Hosni Mubarak to help maintain peace in the Middle East and fight terrorism. "Our impression is that the Egyptian government is stable," Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said Jan. 25.

Within weeks, Mubarak's reign was over and the U.S. government was repositioning itself. "The United States stands ready to help in every way possible to translate what happened in Tahrir Square into the new reality for Egypt," Clinton said March 16.

Of particular concern was the looming electoral battle between politically inexperienced reformers and the Muslim Brotherhood, the once-banned Islamist movement that has become Egypt's most organized political force.

How to reach Egypt's new democrats? USAID put an ad in the paper, publicizing information sessions on democracy grants. More than 1,000 Egyptians turned up. Many of them were unknown to the U.S. government.

The difficulties of distributing the aid went beyond sorting through applications. In a population such as Egypt's, which is deeply suspicious of U.S. meddling, aid recipients were sometimes tagged as American lackeys.

And then there was Egypt's government. It was unhappy that USAID had thrown open its process to include groups that were not officially registered in Egypt, such as big U.S. pro-democracy organizations linked to the Republican and Democratic parties.

Faiza Abou el-Naga, the minister of international cooperation, said in an interview that Egypt considers the groups illegal.

"This is a situation that we cannot allow to go on," she said, sitting in her office. At her elbow was a framed photo of herself with Mubarak, whose visage had been stomped underfoot during the revolution. He was gone, but she was still in the cabinet.

Egypt had lodged a protest about the way the \$65 million was being distributed. "It touches on the sovereignty of a given country," the minister said. And why did Egypt need pro-democracy funding anymore, she wondered aloud. "The situation has fundamentally changed," she said.

But officials at USAID wanted to get the grants moving. Parliamentary elections were approaching in the fall. And there was a tremendous lack of voter information.

"You need to find ways to reach out across the country, to youth, to women, in rural areas, to get people engaged," said a USAID official, speaking on the condition of anonymity under ground rules set by the U.S. Embassy.

That's why USAID was so intrigued by the application from Youness and Hossny to make videos and online talk shows about democracy.

One afternoon in June, Youness left his apartment for the Cairo neighborhood of Madinat al-Salam. He had

wasted no time in seizing Egypt's moment of change: In addition to his video project, he was running for parliament for the first time, as an independent.

He would take the Honda, not the Mercedes. Madinat al-Salam was poor, the kind of place where factory workers plunk down 16 cents for bus fare.

"I didn't know it would be so hot," Youness told his driver as they chugged along the highway. He cracked the window — and was hit by a blast of 107-degree air.

The Honda was overheating, so they pulled into a gas station. Magdy Omar, a friend who was helping Youness make a campaign ad, picked him up in his sleek Chevrolet Cruze.

"It is really unimaginable that Mubarak left," Youness mused to Omar, as they rolled southward. "I feel like it is a miracle."

Some of the young democrats who had emerged in Tahrir Square were floundering when it came to elections. Not Youness. Over the years, he had studied political strategy and tactics — first as a member of the opposition and then, tiring of the constant government surveillance and the amateurism of the smaller parties, in the ruling-party machine.

Madinat was a forest of dingy six-story apartment buildings. Youness and Omar wanted to film unemployed men for the commercial, but the local cafe sat empty under the broiling sun. "We can start shooting here," said Omar, spotting a six-foot mound of garbage.

He filmed Youness standing stiffly in front. A middle-aged man emerged from a nearby building covered with fresh graffiti bearing the words: "Lift your head. You are Egyptian."

Since the revolution, the police had abandoned their posts, the man complained. Nervous, Youness and Omar took the man's phone number and hustled back to the Chevrolet.

Youness's world was a different Cairo. One evening, he met Hossny at Bert's Cafe Contemporain, in the upscale Mohandessin district. Hossny was hungry; he ordered the filet of beef and pondered the choices of sauce. Blue cheese, he told the waiter.

The men had lived comfortably in Mubarak's Egypt. But unlike some in the ruling party, they had felt a gnawing sense of shame about the political and economic stagnation in their country, once the leader of the Arab world.

That's how their video project started.

"We saw Egyptian morale was down to earth. Everyone don't care about the country," said Hossny, a strapping IT consultant with an MBA who had studied at the University of Maryland.

Their first video, released last August, was a 75-second ad called We Are Egyptians, made with volunteers. They followed it with one on religious tolerance. The ads were upbeat. Patriotic. Nothing too political. Egypt, after all, was a police state.

"It's not good to have a video and get arrested and everyone forgets about you," said Youness, sipping a Diet Pepsi.

When they heard about plans for a demonstration Jan. 25 in Cairo's Tahrir Square, they were skeptical. But three days later, Youness and Hossny joined the swelling crowds. Protesters were wrapping themselves in

Egyptian flags, setting fire to the ruling party headquarters, yelling: "We are change!"

It was a historic moment.

And an excellent business opportunity.

"We were the first to produce T-shirts," Hossny said, adding that their company, the People's Marketing Campaign, split the profits with families of slain protesters.

The men felt confident that they could market democracy. Their videos had gotten tens of thousands of hits on YouTube and had been picked up by national television.

But PMC wanted to move beyond volunteers. Hossny began to dream about a video studio of their own. Money from USAID would help them promote democracy and launch their business.

"We need funding. We are waiting," Hossny said.

'Thinking very big'

Day 14 after submitting the application: Hossny was on the 18th floor of a downtown Cairo building, sitting at a desk in a studio that had lent him space. Tapping his iPhone. Waiting for the video editor who should have turned up an hour ago.

"We don't have control over the editors, because we don't pay them," he said.

They could make great videos. Worthy of the Abu Dhabi Film Festival. Maybe even Cannes. If only the money came through.

"We're thinking very big," he said.

Day 20: Youness was taking a break between political meetings. He was pensive, sipping a latte at Beano's, a coffee shop in his suburb.

"I always believed, not my generation, but another generation would do the transition," he said.

Twice, he had been invited by American pro-democracy groups to observe U.S. elections. He was fascinated by the machinery: parties, lobbyists, think tanks.

What impressed him most were the voters.

"How do they believe in their country," he said softly, taking a drag on his cigarette. "In the States, you have your rights, your duty. . . . We don't have this information." It was what he wanted for Egypt. Perhaps PMC's videos would help.

Twelve more days passed. Hossny was in his Lexus when he glimpsed an e-mail from USAID on his iPhone.

"Congratulations," it said.

Hossny pulled to the curb. He called Youness.

"Marwan, man, check your e-mail," he exclaimed.

The grant had been approved. They didn't have the money — yet. It would be doled out gradually as they completed their project.

But two Egyptians who had once resigned themselves to one-party rule now had their “opportunity to raise awareness” about democracy.

“We are going to do something,” Hossny said. “We are capable of doing something very strong.”

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