The Arab Revolution of 2011: Reflections on Religion and Politics

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ABSTRACT

The democratic uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East have been widely celebrated but in the West they have generated concern and apprehension. Most of this concern involves the future role of religion in the politics of the Arab world. In this essay, I make two broad observations. First, concern in the West about the rise of mainstream Islamist parties is partly based not on the illiberal orientation of these groups but the fact that they are politically independent actors who challenge Western geo-strategic interests in the region. Second, the role of religion in government has never been democratically negotiated en masse in the Arab world. To assume that this issue has been resolved and a broad consensus exists is to project a Western understanding of religion-state relations on the Arab-Islamic world. Doing so is both erroneous and analytically distorted. The battles over the role of religion in politics have yet to begin in the Arab world.

The 2011 Arab revolutions are best described as uprisings for democracy and dignity. They are democratic in the sense that they are driven by a deep-rooted hunger for political empowerment on a mass level, specifically the replacement of elite rule with popular sovereignty. They are also about dignity in that the protesters are rejecting the humiliation and degradation that has accompanied decades of authoritarian rule. The indignity brought on by massive corruption, nepotism, the absence of the rule of law and political transparency, and the rampant abuse of power. This is what has produced these protests. The increasingly educated, globalized and young segments of society – who are the driving force behind these revolts – are particularly motivated by the indignity of their political and economic context coupled with a demand to be respected by political leadership; a respect that can only be generated by democratic rule.

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Western support for authoritarian regimes in the Arab-Islamic world has tremendous political consequences in terms of a blowback effect on the region's prospects for democracy

While these uprisings have been widely celebrated around the world, in the West they have also been received with considerable anxiety and apprehension. It is reasonable to wonder what will emerge from these transformative events when the dust settles. Do the uprisings represent another 1989 Berlin Wall moment, or are they a prelude to a democratic transformation across an entire region, or perhaps a replay of the dramatic 1979 Revolution in Tehran, the landmark event that placed the issue of Islamic fundamentalism squarely on the international agenda?

Much of the concern about the future of the Arab world has focused on the role of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and to a lesser extent on the Al-Nahda organization in Tunisia. What role have these groups played in the uprisings? How much popular support do they genuinely enjoy and what are the political consequences for regional stability and international security if they should emerge triumphant in the aftermath of these revolutions? While these questions are all legitimate, to date the mainstream public and policy debate in the West has ignored some basic sociological, historical and ethical questions on political development in the Arab world that I seek to comment on in this essay. Specially, I will make two observations: the first on the anxiety surrounding the role of political Islam in the Arab world; the second on the coming conflict over religion-state relations.

A central trope of the criticism against the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt runs as follows: it is a deeply illiberal organization whose commitment to pluralist democracy is as shaky as its commitment to women's rights and minority rights. The centrality of Sharia law to its political platform is often cited as evidence. More recently, one can point to the 2007 draft political platform of the Muslim Brothers that called for an Iranian-style religious advisory council to review legislation for its conformity with Islamic law. In the same vein, the platform called for the banning of Copts and women from holding the office of president and prime minister.

While there is much to be concerned about with respect to the future role of Islamist parties in the Arab world, I contend that for many in the West it is not the commitment to liberal democratic values that is of chief concern but rather the commitment of these parties to US foreign policy goals that really matters. In other words, mainstream Islamist parties are viewed with deep suspicion *not* because of their disengagement with liberal values but because of the challenge

they pose to long-standing Western geopolitical interests in the Middle East, primarily to Israel and pro-Western regimes in the Arabian peninsula. If tomorrow, for example, the Muslim Brotherhood were to announce its recognition of the state of Israel, accept the legitimacy of the ruling regimes in the Persian Gulf and devote itself to *da'wah* (missionary proselytizing) and social welfare work instead of parliamentary politics, the fear and foreboding about this organization would likely drop precipitously in Western policy and intellectual circles.

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In an insightful essay entitled "Palace Fundamentalism and Liberal Democracy," written more than 15 years ago, the Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi provided an intriguing analytical framework for considering this topic.[1] Mernissi noted that there is a very long and sordid history of Western liberal democracies supporting and promoting backward and fanatical forms of Islamic fundamentalism. This takes place because it advances Western geo-strategic and business interests related to oil production and arms sales in the Middle East. While Mernissi's analysis focused on Saudi Arabia and Wahhabi Islam, her argument can also be extended to many of the pro-Western Gulf regimes whose record on liberal democratic values is arguably far worse than Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood. The point here is that there are good and bad forms of Islamic fundamentalism. Those fundamentalist groups that line-up and enhance Western geo-strategic goals are to be supported and sustained (the Afghan Mujahideen and Pakistan's Zia-ul-Haq also fit this profile) while those that are politically independent and operate outside of a US foreign policy framework are to be opposed and demonized. In this moral and political calculus, liberal democratic values are of little relevance.

The second point concerns the nexus between authoritarian regimes in the Arab world, Western support for them, and the political ramifications of this support for the future of democracy. The proverb that "one cannot eat one's cake and have it too" is apt in this respect. Stated simply, Western support for authoritarian regimes in the Arab-Islamic world has tremendous political consequences in terms of a blowback effect on the region's prospects for democracy. Decades of political repression, particularly of secular civil society, has forced political opposition in the Middle East in the direction of more traditional sectors of society such as the mosque. The forces of religion have indirectly and inadvertently benefited from the authoritarian policies of the post-colonial Arab state in part because all rival

secular political organizations have been suffocated or crushed. A comparison with Iran is instructive in this regard.

The rise of political Islam in Iran in the wake of the 1979 Revolution made perfect sociological and political sense. The social conditions in the decades before the revolution, that was a specific by-product of the authoritarian modernization policies of the Western-backed Pahlavi regime, created fertile ground for the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. These policies undermined the forces of democratic secularism and liberalism and inadvertently strengthened the forces of political Islam.

The benchmark event of Iran's modern history was a 1953 CIA-organised coup that ended the period of democratic secularism and parliamentary politics Iran had enjoyed from 1941 to 1953. It should be remembered that Mohammed Mossadegh, the charismatic and popular prime minister toppled in the coup was a liberal, a democrat, a political secularist (in the best sense of this term), and a strong supporter of international law (as well as a practising Muslim). Imposed in his stead was the Shah of Iran who was as repressive and corrupt during the 1960s and 1970s as Hosni Mubarak and Zine al Abedine Ben Ali were in the 1990s and 2000s. This was a disastrous outcome in terms of Iran's internal political development which had huge implications for role of religion in politics and the rise of an authoritarian Islamist movement that seized political power after the revolution.

This point is no longer a subject of controversy. It was publicly acknowledged by Secretary of State Madeline Albright in a diplomatic overture to Iran in March 2000 when she confirmed that "the United States played a significant role in orchestrating the overthrow of Iran's popular Prime Minister, Mohammed Mossadegh. The Eisenhower Administration believed its actions were justified for strategic reasons; but the coup was clearly a setback for Iran's political development."[2]

In short, in the same way that the forces of political Islam emerged from decades of political authoritarianism as the only credible and organized opposition in Iran, a similar but not identical situation prevails in Egypt and Tunisia today. To decry this state of affairs is to ignore the political consequences of supporting repressive authoritarian regimes. Thus, "one cannot eat one's cake and have it too" – support the social conditions that give rise to political Islam but then decry the strength and popularity of these religious movements after the revolution. Given this enveloping political context, the rise of political Islam makes perfect sociological sense in part due to Western support for Middle Eastern dictatorial regimes.

We should now turn our attention to the deeper historical reasons that explain why religious-based political parties are popular in the Arab world today. I con-

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tend that the history of religion-state relations and the role of religion in public life have been qualitatively different in Muslim societies than in the West. Different political lessons have been learned on both sides of the Islam-West divide as a result. Part of the problem here is one of perception.

Any comparative treatment of the role of religion in politics often suffers from the problem of transference. This is the natural and erroneous tendency to assume that the historical experience of the West is a universal experience. Specifically, it is the misguided assumption that because in the West, after centuries of conflict, bloodshed, and experimentation from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment, a broad democratic and secular consensus on the normative role of religion in government has been reached, then the rest of world must have democratically done so as well. This fallacy has distorted our understanding of the politics of the Arab-Islamic world primarily because the history and legacy of religion-state relations in that part of the world has been qualitatively different.

When most people in the West consider the intersection of religion and government they instinctively recoil and see greater separation and regulation

Today, religion in the Muslim world is viewed by significant segments of the population not as a natural ally of despotism and a cause of social conflict, but as a possible agent of stability, predictability and as a constraint on political power

of the two as better. The 16th and 17th century Wars of Religion, abuses by the Catholic Church and battles over religious toleration are significant markers on this road. By contrast, Muslim societies have been shaped by a different set of historical experiences, especially in the pre-modern era.

There have been no major wars of religion, nor have there been battles over religious toleration that forcibly generated new moral, political and intellectual arguments on the relationship between religion and political authority in the Muslim world. Most historians are in agreement that in the pre-modern era Muslim societies were more tolerant of religious pluralism than societies in the West, not in an ideal sense nor by 21st century standards, but comparatively so given the historical context. Secondly, the classic constitution of the historic Islamic state was one where religion served to limit political tyranny, rather than acting as a source of conflict and division.

As Noah Feldman observes in *The Fall and Rise of the Islamic State*, through “their near monopoly on legal affairs in a state where God’s law was accepted as paramount, the [religious] scholars … built themselves into a powerful and effective check on the ruler.”[3] These scholars were sometimes able to restrain the autocratic ambitions of the sultans and caliphs by forcing them to recognize certain limits demarcated by Islamic law in exchange for conferring political legitimacy. For example, on May 29, 1807, the Ottoman Sultan Selim III was deposed after the Chief Mufti issued a ruling that his pro-French modernization polices had violated Islamic principles.

Religion-state relations in the Muslim world have thus bequeathed different historical lessons and memories to the faithful. Today, religion in the Muslim world is viewed by significant segments of the population not as a natural ally of despotism and a cause of social conflict, but as a possible agent of stability, predictability and as a constraint on political power. This partly explains why demands for a greater role for religion in politics have had a sympathetic hearing in parts of the Arab-Islamic world today, though notably not where Islamists are already in power.

As suggested above, in the modern era, Arab societies have been deeply shaped by the negative experiences of post-colonial authoritarianism. The forms of sec-

ularism associated with these regimes have had a critical impact on perceptions of the relationship between religion and government. The various modernization projects and political systems that emerged from this experience were often justified in the name of secular Arab nationalism and by the late 20th century they were as politically repressive as they were economically corrupt. Ben Ali's Tunisia and Mubarak's Egypt embodied this state of affairs. Thus, for a generation of Arabs, dictatorship, repression and nepotism embodied a strikingly negative "secular" reality. As a result, the turn to Islam as an alternative source for political inspiration and hope was both logical and natural. At the moment, reliable polling suggests the most Arabs oppose the idea that democracy requires a Western-style form of secularism and large majorities support the idea that Sharia law should be "a" source (albeit not "the" source) of legislation.

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Given this history of authoritarianism, most Arabs and Muslims have never experienced an open era where they could publicly contest political and social norms. State repression, surveillance and censorship have existed for far too long—undermining opportunities for a public debate on the ethical underpinnings of the normative relationship between religion and government. To date, these societies have not yet had the opportunity to democratically negotiate the demarcation of mosque and state.

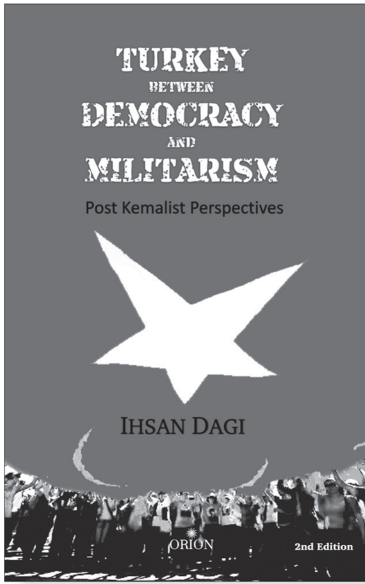
As the old political order begins to crumble and a new one emerges, Arabs and Muslims may be afforded this opportunity for the first time with Islamist parties at the forefront of this debate. The coming debates are certain to be deeply divisive and controversial, just as comparable debates have been throughout Western history. The future political stability of North Africa and the Middle East could well be dependent on such fraught and monumental struggles.

Endnotes

1. Fatima Mernissi, "Palace Fundamentalism and Liberal Democracy: Oil, Arms and Irrationality," *Development and Change* 27 (April, 1996), pp. 251-264, reprinted in Michael Sells and Emran Qureshi eds., *The New Crusades: Constructing the Muslim Enemy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), pp. 51-67.

2. Remarks before the American-Iranian Council, March 17, 2000.

3. Noah Feldman, *The Fall and Rise of the Islamic State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 6.



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