

# The Arab Spring, the West and Political Islam

– Hisham H. Ahmed

THE CONTEMPORARY ARAB political system, until the recent outbreak of Arab revolutions, is the byproduct of a number of domestic, regional and global arrangements and developments in the post-World War II international order.

Established in 1945, the League of Arab States did not reflect popular sentiments but rather the desires of the leaders in the newly independent states and the support of Britain, the region's former superpower. Widespread demands for Arab unity were sidetracked and suppressed.

As the role of European powers, especially France and Britain, declined, more Arab "states" acquired independence in the 1950s and 1960s. For some years, however, violence swept through most of the newly-formed states, in the form of military coups. It was not until the late 1960s-early 1970s that the fabric of the Arab state system was more clearly defined.

## Why Now the Arab Spring?

Whether in monarchies or republics, capitalist- or communist-leaning, the new Arab heads of state invariably relied on a number of tools in their attempt to consolidate their grip on power. These tools themselves became characteristics of the Arab state system, until the Arab street revolted and mobilized its forces to rid itself of many decades of decadence and ineptness.

First, corruption, fraud and nepotism have been systematically employed to instill divisions and to win over the support, not of the average citizen, but rather of the hand-and-cheek kissers. Instead of applying the rule of law, which was absent from the beginning, the new heads of state acculturated the societies over which they ruled into submission and acquiescence. Hence, the results of almost all elections and voting in the Arab world typically produced a 99% support in favor of the ruler! Parliaments and peoples' assemblies served to extend further legitimacy and backing to the head of state, rather than to legislate or to limit executive powers.

Second, the one-party system became the operative ruling measure in the newly formed Arab states. Attempts to organize political parties and/or movements other than the ruling regime were subjected to systematic dismissal and destruction. Any form of opposition was considered to pose a threat to national security, which was solely embodied in the person of the head of state. The leader was idealized, supposedly endowed with supernatural powers.

Interestingly, the differences and distance between monarchical and republican forms of government were substantially bridged in the Arab world with a new concept, monarchical republicanism. A few days before his death over a decade ago, President Hafez Al-Assad of Syria insured that his rule would be handed over to his son.

Assad's embrace of the hereditary system infected other rulers, such as Mubarak of Egypt, Saleh of Yemen and Qaddafi of Libya: all those heads of supposed republics fought hard, before their removal, to ensure that the reins of power remain a monopoly of their clans.

Third, although most Arab countries were formed as a result of wars of independence, the new heads of state worked tirelessly to crush opposition, while vehemently violating human rights and reducing to mockery the dignity of the Arab citizen. A cruel prison system was established and those opponents who did not get killed or imprisoned were forced to seek refuge outside their countries.

In brief, the Arab citizen enjoyed neither liberty nor justice. Freedom, democracy and equality were foreign concepts in the conduct of governance. Up until the Arab Spring, a widely circulated proverb stated that the Arab citizen only has his/her mouth wide open at the dentist office. Self-expression could easily result in one's killing, imprisonment and/or forceful expulsion.

Fourth, Arab heads of state almost uniformly cast blame for their own failures on outside powers and factors. They propagated the view that any protests are a part of a conspiracy directed at their inviolable rule. Their inability to admit responsibility was most clearly shown in dealing with dissent. Whether in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Syria or Bahrain, opponents and demonstrators have been labeled as traitors, gangsters, drug addicts and/or as terrorists. From the vantage point of the state, the leaders are always right and those who oppose them are always wrong!

Finally, the plight of the Palestinian people has been uniformly misused and abused by Arab rulers: realizing the centrality of the question of Palestine among the Arab peoples, the rulers rhetorically championed support of the Palestinians in an attempt to galvanize domestic support, while in reality back-stabbing the Palestinians at every available opportunity.

In the age of global television, where information is no longer the monopoly of state, and given the ferocity of the tyrants in holding onto power "from cradle to cascade" as the saying goes in Arab societies, it should have come as no surprise that the Arab street finally decided to revolt.

Egypt was sitting on top of a volcano for many years, at least since Hosni Mubarak assumed office in 1981. He turned Egypt into a family business and instilled corruption in every corner of the country. Considered by Egyptians as the mother of the world, Umm Al-Dunya, was turned into a dumpster of some sort, as you would hear Egyptians collectively complain.

Clearly, momentous change is taking place in the Arab world. Revolutions have become widespread and their impact has been domestic, regional and global. Zine Al-Abidine Bin Ali of Tunisia, who brutally suppressed Tunisian opposition and forced many people in exile, had no choice but to flee the country under the cover of darkness to Saudi Arabia.

Mubarak, the last Pharaoh of Egypt as many Egyptians sarcastically called him, now resides behind bars. Qaddafi of Libya, once the absolute despot over his people, was killed in a humiliating manner. Abdullah Ali Saleh of Yemen found himself unable to sustain his power in the face of persistent widespread protests, in spite of his reliance on brutal arbitrary oppression of his people.

Of course, it is in Syria today where there is most anticipation as to how the revolution will unfold: the Assad regime has been deeply entrenched for many years. Now, due to its unrestrained vicious killing, it is doubtful that its fate could turn out more successfully than some of the other deposed Arab tyrants.

Although each Arab society has its internal and external political and economic particularities, commonalities during the Arab Spring are quite striking. For one thing, no longer is the scary ghost

of the tyrant unchallengeable. For another, the people of one Arab country have served as a role-model for another, as was certainly the case of Tunisia and Egypt.

Regionally, the blooming of the Arab Spring has more effectively than any other factor led Palestinian political groups to reconcile differences, given the absence and/or weakening of Arab rulers who played one force against another. Previously Mubarak embraced Abbas of the Palestinian Authority, while Assad hosted Hamas. Internationally, the image of submissive and disorganized Arabs was replaced with revolutionary and highly disciplined citizens: certainly the revolution in Egypt was a clear testimony to the ability of massive crowds to act as one body, despite rampant poverty and high unemployment.

## **The Emerging New Arab Order**

One of the key unanswered questions is how the new order will be configured; what forces will have the upper hand in the Arab street? Will the Islamists dominate, as elections in Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco indicate? How will the West deal with the rise of political Islam?

The Arab people have made abundantly clear that they are hungry for real change: Egypt is a clear case in point. People were not content with the removal of Mubarak as the head of the system; rather, they have been determined to do away with the old system in its entirety. This is why Egyptians took to the streets and gathered again in Tahrir Square months after the ouster of the dictator. They have been adamantly opposed to the Military Council renewed hold on power.

Against the backdrop of widespread instability and uncertainty, Egyptians conducted the first of three rounds of elections very impressively and their voter turnout was exceptionally high, especially given the high degree of volatility in the country.

Even more impressive is that people put their differences aside while the voting was taking place, knowing that just days before, there were some heated differences over supporting or opposing the Military Council. Still, whether in Egypt or any other Arab country, no one would expect to see absolute order and tranquility overnight. The transition from dictatorship to democracy can never be easy, whether in Eastern Europe, Latin America and/or the Arab World. Certainly, Egypt is no exception, especially after many years of devastating tyrannical rule.

While no answer can be given with utmost certainty and no generalization is advisable, it can nonetheless be said that the crux of the process of massive transformation in the Arab world today has been democratic in nature, despite the fact that the outcome of elections in some Arab countries shows that there is a sizable presence of some political Islamic groups and parties. The use of the social network websites such as Facebook and Twitter reveal that most activists, who are young, have opened up to the rest of the world, their ideological affiliation notwithstanding.

In fact, in the key Arab country, Egypt, the Islamists, represented in the Muslim Brotherhood who scored highly in the recent elections, initially opposed the protests; it took them some time to jump on the bandwagon. As a matter of fact, the Muslim Brothers had entered into conciliatory arrangements with the dictatorial Mubarak regime while the revolution was at its height.

Even during the week preceding the first round of elections in late November 2011, the Muslim Brothers decided to refrain from joining many revolutionary groups that returned to Tahrir Square, determined to rescue the revolution from the control of the Military Council. In fact, the Muslim Brothers seem to have established an unholy alliance with the very Military Council people were protesting against.

Nonetheless, the Muslim Brotherhood achieved relative victory in the first round of Egyptian elections, receiving about 40% of popular support. Were it not for a lot of skepticism about the exact position of the Brotherhood in the revolution, they could have achieved even more sweeping results. (Established in Egypt by Hassan Al-Banna in 1928, the Muslim Brotherhood is one of modern Egypt's oldest parties. Over the years, they have been able to capitalize on growing conservatism in rural areas, especially due to the disturbing growth in rates of poverty and unemployment.)

## **Western Policies, Rising Political Islam**

While the political map of the future of Egypt and the rest of the Arab world is yet to be drawn, the process of Arab awakening is irreversible: the taste of change, even with pain and anguish, is not likely to be compromised. In this process, today's Western policies will certainly influence future outcomes, just as Western support of some Arab dictators has deepened Arab anger. In their protests, people have been expressing frustration with their rulers' domestic and foreign policies – and have also made clear their disenchantment with the policies of Western powers.

In spite of Arab people's preoccupation with their domestic agendas and problems, how the West and particularly the United States deals with the Palestinian problem will remain one of the most important concerns. Such Western policies can strongly affect which forces might acquire further support in the new Arab order.

Certainly, continued Western negation of Palestinian rights to statehood, independence and self-determination will further widen the West's distance from the reconfigured Arab world.

It is not an exaggerated contention that Western policies over the past century have greatly contributed to the state of affairs in the Arab region today. As Arab and pan-Arab nationalists have not been able to rid Arab societies of the Western-supported dictators, it became only natural for many in the Arab and Muslim world to turn to political Islamic movements and parties for salvation. When all else fails, people can be expected to seek answers from above.

While it's true that Islam as a religion and a culture is intrinsic to Arab life, the politicization of Islam is a product of internal and external developments. The support by the West of corrupt regimes and its concerted attack on nationalist and pan-nationalist secular forces have made the rise of political Islam almost inevitable.

At the same time, by no means are all those who vote for Islamist parties in Arab elections necessarily members and/or supporters. Many are casting votes of protest against Western policies and attitudes.

I can confirm this based on extensive observation of legislative elections in Palestine in 2006. Many Palestinians, including Christians, voted for Hamas, not because they were members or supporters but rather to send a message to the West that no pressure tactics or cutting off foreign aid can dictate their decision at the ballot box.

Following many attempts to curtail the rise of political Islam, whether in Sudan, Palestine and/or Algeria, the West seems to have reconciled some of its policies with the assumption that this phenomenon is here to stay. The West seems to have concluded that these forces can serve to counteract "radical" Islam, as represented by Al-Qaeda.

For sure, the campaign in the West to mischaracterize and actually tarnish Islam at every available opportunity is far from over. Nonetheless official Western expressions have accepted the results of recent Arab elections.

However, this clear shift in Western policies towards the Muslim world, as underscored in President Barak Obama's address at Cairo University a couple of years ago, has raised the eyebrows of many secularists and nationalists in the Arab region. Does the West plan to play Muslim groups against each other, in order to further weaken and divide the Arab World?

First, it is widely believed in the Arab world that the West will use the rise of political Islam to further advance Samuel Huntington's idea of "Clash of Civilizations." Especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the West has been in dire need of an "enemy" to help mobilize its forces and resources in service of its policies. Nothing could play this role more effectively than Islam and its perceived threats and dangers.

This Western need is even more pressing today particularly as economic and financial problems reach unprecedented levels. This is the time when attempts to divert people's attention in the West from underlying living hardships are at their strongest; playing the card of Islamic dangers is expected to achieve this objective, many Arabs fear.

Second, many warn that the West's tacit approval and actual measured backing of the rise of political Islam at this stage is meant to further divide the Arab region on sectarian and ideological grounds. The examples of Palestine and Sudan are cited to illustrate the concern about the role of the West in bringing about divisions and disharmony, whether between the West Bank and Gaza or in the case of Sudan, Darfur and South Sudan. At the same time, Western-led campaigns for protecting the rights of minorities are feared to deepen existing divisions – in Egypt, for example, between Muslims and the Christian Copts.

The third concern is that Israel will exploit the rise of political Islam to overcome its isolation in Western civil societies. In the face of a strengthened Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, for instance, some voices in Israel calling for a "Jewish Brotherhood" have gotten louder. Israeli officials have unequivocally stated that the new configuration of power, with the rise of political Islamic movements and parties in a number of Arab countries, requires Israel to further enhance its "security" and military superiority.

Fourth, observers in the Arab world suggest that nobody might be happier at such developments than neoconservatives in the West! Contrary to their public posturing, the radical right and neocons consider what is happening in the Arab world to be a fulfillment of their vision for the world at large, i.e. that Armageddon in the form of war with Islam is around the corner.

Finally, Western policy makers will expend every effort to "tame" and/or "westernize" Islam to make it more adaptable to their expectations. In conjunction with other measures the West might undertake, it is also expected that policymakers will tirelessly attempt to condition their relations with the new Arab systems, particularly those dominated by political Islamists, on various social, political and ideological conditions, whether in regard to personal freedoms, policies concerning "radical" Islamic groups, and/or relations with Israel.

Arab critics of the rise of political Islam and the West's response expect to see more tensions in Arab-Western relations in the foreseeable future. Also important to observe would be continued Western sophisticated programs to meddle in internal Arab affairs, including through supporting some NGOs, so as to insure that political Islam itself fails in delivering on its promises.

## The Revolution Continues

In conclusion, the Arab world is undergoing a process of massive transformation, necessitated by profound feelings of many years of humiliating national, regional and international injustices, Western-supported corruption and subjugation.

While predicting the future in a constantly dynamic region is futile, indications are that the desires of the people will eventually prevail. Egypt serves as an example for other Arab countries; at a time when some may have thought that the revolution was over with the removal of Mubarak, Egyptians loudly reminded the entire world that they were not about to accept an extension of the Mubarak regime through the Military Council.

Indeed, the pressure cooker has finally cracked. The “Arab street” has been, and will most likely remain, on alert. The transitional political Islamic forces themselves will also be held accountable.

The road ahead is rife with internal and international challenges. Yet returning to the corrupt regimes of the past will prove more costly than carving the path of freedom. The Arab masses will not wait passively at the receiving end. In spite of many odds, they will insist on being makers of their own history.

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