Tradition and Modernity in the "Arab Spring"

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The upheavals spanning much of the Arab world over the last year have introduced dramatic change in the region, overthrowing leaders in some countries and seriously destabilizing regimes in others. The recent level of popular participation in Arab politics has been unprecedented, as masses of people have vented their anger in protracted struggles against the oppressive regimes that have ruled over them for decades. After more than two centuries of westernizing modernization, Arab societies in the non-oil-producing countries face profound economic crises with huge younger generations confronting a dire and depressing future of unemployment and poverty. Thus, the disempowered and the dispossessed have risen up against the alliance of tyranny and corruption in Middle Eastern societies, yearning like all peoples of the modern world for the universal values of freedom, justice and prosperity.

In this crisis the computer-savvy younger generation, skilled in the social networking tools of Facebook and Twitter and the modern media, especially the plethora of satellite TV stations, mobilized the masses and magnified and multiplied the impact of their struggle to great effect. The region is unquestionably experiencing a variant of revolutionary change in many places, through novel forms of political struggle, enhanced by the marvels of cutting-edge technology of the modern age.

Yet, at one and the same time, in this era of novelty, innovation, popular participation and revolutionary change, the mystique of ultra-modern high-tech has been allowed by many observers to overshadow the forces of tradition that continue to dominate Arab societies. Virtual reality and influence in cyber-space have been confused with real political power, as the leaderless mass movements that have produced neither coherent political platforms nor well-articulated policies have encountered great difficulty in transforming virtual influence into tangible political strength. Other, more traditional,

better organized and more ideologically coherent forces in Middle Eastern politics, such as the Islamists on the one hand, and the military on the other, have been more adept in seizing the reins of actual power in the wake of the regional turmoil.

The modernization, westernization and secularization that the Middle East has undergone in the last two centuries has not been a linear progression, and in recent generations they have been seriously curtailed and even set back. Secularism is in crisis, if not retreat, as Middle Eastern societies become ever more "secular-religious," to borrow a term from Asef Bayat. Arabism was not only an ideology that promoted Arab unity, it was a platform for secular and secularizing politics. After all, the cohesive element of Arabism was not religion but language, which united rather than divided Arab Muslims and Christians. But Arabism, despite its initial promise, was a dismal failure. It never delivered the political or economic success that the Arabs across the Middle East had hoped for. The march towards Arab unity, coupled with Arab socialism and an alliance with the Soviet Union proved to be a false messiah.
The ideological vacuum left in the wake of the failure of Arabism has been filled largely by resurgent Islamist politics. The concurrent decline in the regional clout of formerly leading Arab states like Egypt, Syria, and Iraq has been countered to a large degree by the burgeoning influence of non-Arab Middle Eastern powers like Turkey and Iran. Both of these rising regional forces offer models of emulation that are hardly secular. Turkey of the conservative Islamist Justice and Development Party, though still functioning more or less in accordance with Turkey's secular constitution, is a far cry from the purist secularist model of the republic founded by Kemal Atatürk in the early 1920s. Iran of the Ayatollahs, needless to say, is nothing of the kind either.

In a Middle East where secularism is in retreat, interstate relations are no longer a function of great power politics or contrasting forms of government, with monarchies pitted against republics, but have instead become the domain of religious sectarianism, with Sunni Muslim states aligned against their Shi`ite competitors. If that is true in interstate relations, it is even more so in domestic politics, where traditionalism, or neo-traditionalism, have resurfaced as the dominant forces of Arabism and Arab states have lost so much of their erstwhile 'stateness', vitality and popular appeal. Islamist politics, religious sectarianism and tribalism have filled the void.

Looking across the region, from country to country, this trend is readily apparent. In Tunisia, the Islamist al-Nahda Party has just won the first elections in the post-revolutionary era. In Egypt, the Muslim Brethren and more radical Islamists, like the Salafists and al-Gama`a al-Islamiyya are poised to perform well in the forthcoming elections. If the referendum held last March in Egypt is any indication of what is to come, the Islamists are virtually in the driver's seat of post-Mubarak Egyptian politics. Syria has turned into a sectarian bloodbath where the Alawi–dominated regime is fighting for its life in a ruthless struggle against its opponents from the ranks of the dispossessed Sunni majority. Iraq, though unrelated to the "Arab Spring," has become the scene of ultra-sectarian politics in a new post-Saddam, Shi`ite-controlled country in which the erstwhile Sunni masters of

the land have been systematically driven to the margins. In Bahrain it was the downtrodden Shi`ite majority that rose in rebellion against their Sunni rulers, only to be put down violently with the help of Bahrain's Sunni allies in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. They could not bear the thought that Bahrain might turn into a Shi`ite-dominated Iranian bridgehead on their doorstep. Politics in Libya and Yemen are largely tribal affairs, coupled in both cases with strong Islamist undertones.

With the Islamists so well placed in the countries that are en route to more pluralist political systems, the question arises if Islamism and democracy are necessarily mutually exclusive. The answer is no, provided that the Islamists prove to be willing to accept four key interrelated principles: the non-application of the Shari`a as the legal system and the acceptance of its secondary status to the legislation of a democratically elected legislature; the full and unhindered equality of all religious minorities; the complete and uninhibited equality of women; and the unequivocal acceptance of the principles of freedom of speech, freedom of thought and the freedom of, and from religious belief. All democracies rest on the fundamental principle of the sovereignty of man. There can be no compromise between the sovereignty of man and the sovereignty of God. In a democracy, there can be no substitute for the free election of men and women to a legislature that provides a system of man-made laws for the governed. A legal system like the Shari`a (or the Jewish Halakha, for that matter), which is deemed as God-given, might be fair and just, but democratic it is not, simply by virtue of the fact that it is not the making of the elected legislature, and its source of authority is God Almighty and not the people.

The so-called "Arab Spring" has in many ways become a launching pad for Islamist political ascendance. Whether that means more, or less, democracy, only time will tell, but the present is shrouded in doubt and skepticism.

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