Islamists and the Arab revolutions
Challenges of democratic transition and
state re-building
Doha, 11-12 September 2012 | Sheraton Hotel - Al Majlis Hall

Islamists and the Arab Revolutions: Challenges of Democratic Transition and Rebuilding the State

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For two days, a symposium on Islamists and the Arab revolutions, organised by Al Jazeera Center for Studies, addressed a group of critical issues related to the recent popular revolutions in the Arab region known as the "Arab spring." Participants addressed these issues through papers, input and comments. This report will provide a summary of the symposium's activities with a focus on some key issues addressed in papers and discussions.

The Arab Revolutions and the Role of Islamists

Arab countries have survived many years of authoritarian and autocratic regimes and oppressive colonial and non-colonial dictatorships, followed by a period of independence after World War II distinguished by its military coups and rule by either a single party or a single individual. This situation persisted in spite of several aborted attempts to initiate change and reform.

Such was the context in Arab countries before the outbreak of the revolutions, beginning in Tunisia on 17 December 2010. The ideas behind and the reasons for the revolutions occupied a considerable part of the participants' inputs in the symposium. A consensus was reached that these pre-eminently popular revolutions had taken the oppressive ruling regimes, their western allies and traditional political powers by storm.

Some participants regarded the revolutions as a something of a renaissance for the Arab peoples following the recovery of post-colonial independence. Participants also agreed that the Arab popular revolutions were a clear reflection of the failed experience of establishing nation states and national development projects that ruling elites had promoted after independence. Many observed that the revolutions commenced a new

era that severs relations with authoritarian regimes and lays the foundations for rule based on institutions representing the majority's choice and aspirations.

Many questions are raised about the current scenarios and whether they are acknowledged by the Islamist elites that are gaining power: Will they terminate the practices of the past era or will they revive such practices with a slight change of flavour?

Challenges of Transition: Rebuilding the State

Political transition periods during the reconstruction and rebuilding of regimes on different foundations that break from former practices and methods are considered to be much more challenging that the process of demolishing old regimes. A number of major challenges confront Arab political forces at this stage, especially Islamist organisations mandated by the majorities to lead it:

First is the lack of experience in running public affairs efficiently and impartially, and in managing political dynamics on a consensual basis without creating conflicts and confrontations that might stem from the prevailing mentality of monopolising power and autocracy. If the elite is unable to control these dynamics, chaos might arise where both citizens and political formations will become enemies rather than competitors.

Second is the national fragmentation of political forces: Islamists and secularists – the main political forces – do not represent homogeneous blocs; rather, they are factions and organisations with multiple convictions and orientations. This increases the risk of sectarianism and intolerance instead of compromise and consensus. Many revolutions have failed and were derailed or stripped of their core substance and thus slipped into destructive confrontations and conflicts. It is, therefore, the elite's responsibility to control political and social dynamics after the revolution and establish a state of law and order. Hence, dialogue, as opposed to security solutions, remains crucial in resolving this stalemate. Nonetheless, participants wondered whether the forces competing for power might be able to put their ideological differences aside and overcome their narrow factional interests for the sake of rebuilding a state of citizenship and democracy where everyone is equal before the law. The answer to this question will be determined by upcoming political choices and practices.

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Third is the fact that weak institutions and fragile structures in many states reduce their credibility, impartiality and efficiency in resolving conflicts and disagreements. This allows for hostile external and internal powers to manoeuvre and intervene in attempt to deviate the revolution from its main course and abort it.

There are other social and economic challenges such as unemployment, lack of resources and dependency on international powers.

However, participants agreed that there were many common denominators among competing political forces because they all melt into the same mould of national revolutions, and hold that it is in the interest of these revolutions that they be guided with Islamist culture without the exclusion or marginalisation of any group. Therefore, the future of these states is based on a number of indispensable, fundamental pillars, namely:

1. That consensus and unanimity must be developed by and founded on the grounds of democracy and Islam.
2. That all political forces must look for common ground in order to stand up for their values and earn respect.
3. That "establishing consensus based on the legitimacy of belonging to the land rather than doctrine" is of utmost importance.
4. Respect for minorities and equality for all regardless of faith or gender on the basis of citizenship.(1)

Citizenship and Human Rights: Islamists' Position on Issues of Rights and Public Freedoms

Discussions revealed consensus among participants that Islamists form a real political force despite their marginalisation and exclusion from public affairs as well as the repression and abuse they faced for long periods of time. Nonetheless, it should be noted that Islamists were not alone in this as all political opposition forces, regardless of their ideological orientations, suffered from the same exclusion. Repressive regimes in Arab countries were ingenious in employing various political forces to establish a "balance of power" in order to secure their political survival and guarantee their control over the state and society. Political movements and organisations with different

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ideologies were exploited brilliantly in the short-term. Circumstantial alliances were created and these groups were driven to clash with one another. This weakened them all and left them at the mercy of their authoritarian regimes for a long time.

Although participants held that Islamists' peaceful assumption of power through free elections after the Arab revolutions is rather significant, some speakers questioned the Islamists' willingness to comply with the rules of the political game that ensure a peaceful transfer of power. Some accuse Islamists of having hidden agendas and not complying with the rules, and suggest that they may attempt to reverse the processes underway to secure their places in power and remove their opponents. Perhaps the most important of these accusations is that Islamists are committing everyone to democracies based on Islamic law (shari'ah), which automatically excludes their opponents from attaining power.

The question then became whether it was possible to talk about post-revolution peaceful distribution and transition of power with the Islamist rise to power. Some speakers were of the opinion that the distribution of power, even in the democratic West, does not occur among conflicting political trends but among forces that have common aspirations of achieving a state of harmony and consensus.(2) The situation in Arab countries that witnessed protest movements and allowed the rise of Islamists to power, however, is different: the political scene is portrayed by powers that have inconsistent and contradictory ruling programmes hindering the establishment of a power sharing system. Accordingly, one participant stressed the need "for secularists to acknowledge the right of Islamists to be in power, and the need for Islamists, in turn, to recognise the concept of citizenship and the people's authority."(3) One might thus say that acknowledging the other and the values of democracy and modernity are the only means to overcome the stalemate between competing political forces.

Another issue that was posed and debated strongly was human rights and Islamists' commitment to securing public freedoms and abiding by international conventions. It seems that participants, including political leaders and Islamist intellectuals, shared the view that Islamist organisations have no choice but to respect human rights and international charters and conventions as a fundamental aspect of Islam theoretically and practically. Hence, violating them would be a real threat to the revolutions, and would impede the building of a modern state in which all citizens are granted

fundamental rights regardless of political and ideological affiliations. Some participants, however, stressed that the entire concept of citizenship with its values of equality, freedom and social responsibility is new to Arab and Islamic culture(4) – even though many Qur'anic verses promote the dignity of all of humanity.

This can be addressed through political participation and referral to traditional sources – legal texts or jurisprudence – and history. Labels are not a concern. What is, however, is the large disparity between words and actions, the necessity of implementing the abundance of ideas in ways that are compatible with the requirements and challenges of the era. Still, some warn of Islamists that hold that "Islam is both a religion and a state, a Qur'an and a sword"(5) and seek to subject the various aspects of social, cultural, political, economic, legal and technical life to the provisions of Islam. Such people fear that the kind of regime that Islamists seek to establish will not only control political life but will also employ its power to reshape the different dimensions of people's lives in an attempt to manipulate personal consciences. An even more serious concern is that the idea of the universality of Islam might lead to the cultural decline of Muslims with the rejection of wisdom from different sources. This entails the 'Islamisation' of all the aspects of life in a way that turns a blind eye to the complexity of historical circumstances and disregards changing social realities. Moreover, it adds a touch of holiness to our choices as humans, making political agendas untouchable or non-negotiable and regarding whoever opposes them as disobedient and deviating from religion.(6) This view was put forward by a speaker in his paper on the application of shari'ah, focusing on the importance of distinguishing the ethical from the legal and arguing that "coercion destroys the moral conscience."(7)

It should be noted that some important and urgent issues such as civil society and the role of women in post-revolution Arab societies were not properly discussed during the symposium and, when addressed, elicited typical reactions and stiff inputs. Does this mean that the political milieu and Islamist scholars are more preoccupied with the issue of power than they are with issues of voluntary civic participation in managing public affairs? Does this mean that women and their participation in political life will remain dependent on outdated traditions and the propagandistic political discourse on the other?

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Islamists and the State: The Nature of the State and Distribution of Power

Symposium participants discussed several crucial questions regarding the relationship between Islam and the state, what the Islamist rise to power implies, and how Islam is applied in governance. Discussion revealed two contrasting views: that Islam is both a

religion and a state in the sense that it sets not only rituals of worship but also rules and principles regulating people's relations with each other and their rulers (as illustrated by the first Islamic state in Medina and the Righteous Caliphate); and that Islam focuses on worship, spirituality, and ethics and that more than 90% of shari'ah is concerned with morality, leaving 10% for the conducting of daily affairs.(8) The second view also holds that the spirit of true Islam stipulates that "people are capable of managing their worldly affairs." It should be noted that modern terms in political theory such as "state, "citizenship," and "democracy" do not exist in the Islamic political lexicon just as the term "civil state" does not exist in the Arab and western political context. Theoretically and practically, the modern state came to existence in western political theory in the seventeenth century and has been aligned strongly to the composition and evolution of the capitalist mode of production.

The significance of the Islamist victory in elections and rise to power in a number of Arab countries, many participants maintained, is that it is "one part of a chain that aims to restore community-based identity"(9) and revive the religious aspect of state building and reviving the ummah. Others, however, argued – without underestimating the success of Islamists in elections – that the Islamist rise to power is an symbol of the popular protests against the failure of the nation state and its replacement of the goals of development and social justice with corruption and despotism. But do these Islamist victories serve the objectives of pluralism and consensus and allow for peaceful distribution of power? If pluralism and consensus "imply reaching a meeting point for all parties, Islamists have demonstrated through their political practices, despite their calls for consensus, much contradiction."(10). The Islamists, in our opinion, should overcome this contradiction by taking a number of bold actions:

1. Separating political activity from da'wah because mixing them can be a source of serious tensions fuelling conflicts.

2. Resolving the problem of reference and practice in the field of human rights by emphasising its universality.

3. Clarifying the concept of majority vs. minority, so as to relativize the success of Islamist movements rather than exaggerate it.

4. Ending the conflict between major Islamist factions (e.g. the Muslim Brotherhood, the Salafists and the Jihadists), and between them and secular factions, to achieve consensus and prevent open-ended confrontations that threaten the outcomes of the revolutions, weaken the state's legitimacy, and lead to a state of chaos.

Therefore, grasping the benefits of modernity is very important because the absence of national consensus does not make it impossible for political forces to rebuild the state and achieve transition from an era of repression to one of democratic participation where all rights are protected, including those of minorities. Democracy, some participants noted, is a system that favours the majority, possibly overlooking minorities.(11)

In addition, there are a number of fallacies that need to be corrected, and some dilemmas require interrogation. These include the denial of the existence of pluralism in former regimes while the truth is that, although nominal, pluralism existed in many cases before the revolutions and before Islamists rose to power. However, pluralism can easily be used as a weapon against Islamists even though the constitutions of Arab countries now ruled by Islamists had always regarded shari'ah as the main source of legislation.

Islamists and the Military: Alliance and Conflict

The relationship between the military and the state in Arab societies is a controversial topic that has not been properly discussed and tackled by researchers or the various political forces. Opinion on whether the issue, which has caused many tragedies in the Arab world, is a problem was split in terms of the status of the army and its role within various Arab regimes. The positions did not stem from deep conviction and long-term strategies but came as an expression of various current tactics resulting from circumstantial alliances and the narrow interests of forces competing to satisfy the regime and the army. The experiences of other nations may offer us an important

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lesson: that it is crucial for the army to distance itself from political power, disengage from the political scene, and allow public affairs to be run by social forces.

Relations between Islamists and the army have not differed from the rule mentioned above. Over the course of time, they have fluctuated in all Arab countries, ranging from implicit or explicit alliances to violent confrontation and conflicts including military coups and "revolutionary corrections," as well as popular revolutions. Countries such as Sudan, Egypt, Yemen, Algeria and Mauritania are perfect examples. The recent Arab revolutions may not have deviated from that rule and given that neither the military nor Islamists initiated or led these revolutions, they have not earned credit for the success of certain revolutions such as those of Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen. The army had always been in accord with the regime, where military institutions had an unspoken agreement with the ruling authority detaching itself from decision-making in foreign policy in return for material gains and economic concessions. The army tried to protect certain regimes and manoeuvre the situation in order to crush the revolution, and in fact clashed with protesters in different degrees in Egypt, Yemen, and Syria.

Speakers pointed out that almost all Arab countries have seen reformist Islamist movements, especially the Muslim Brotherhood. Although the Brotherhood was not a revolutionary movement, its members took part in the political struggle to topple authoritarian regimes; and although the long political exclusion and prohibitions they faced for a long period of time boosted their position as anti-regime players, they are still weak in terms of performance and efficiency in managing public affairs. Islamist movements, particularly the Brotherhood, had a fluctuating relationship with the military over the different stages of their political struggle and activism, from truces at times to confrontations at others. The army itself has either joined forces with liberals and leftists or turned against them. The recent revolutions are perhaps the best example of this volatile and tense relationship between the Islamists and the military. While the military in Yemen tried to remove Islamists from the political arena through the use of force, that in Egypt resorted to a constitutional addendum, until the elected president, who happens to be an Islamist himself, dismissed a number of military commanders. This is a milestone in the relationship between Islamists and the military.

Today, Islamists that have come to power in some countries after either a popular revolution or peaceful political reforms seek to establish a new type of relationship

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between the civil government and the military in aims of maximising gains and minimising losses. But Islamists in office still have to deal with complicated issues that can cause tension in this relationship such as the military's level of power, the military budget, and judicial immunity of the military elite.(12)

The Islamic Economic Project: Reality and Challenges

Throughout the symposium, participants seemed to agree that the economy has been the biggest challenge from even before the Islamists came to power in certain countries. There was also agreement that the Islamists dealt with this particular issue without digging deep into the reality of the situation, and hence need to shift from theory to practice. Since the revolutions, economic demands have continued to surface and economic growth has declined dramatically, threatening the general situation in the countries in question. Islamists resolutely express their intention of running the economy in accordance with Islamic guidelines. However, what are their chances of achieving this goal? Will they really succeed in applying an economic system that complies with Islamic laws while meeting the demands and expectations of the people and responding to external challenges? These are the fundamental and decisive questions that Islamists need to face, as was observed by several participants.

Participants with a background in economics almost unanimously agreed that what Islamists propose is not an integrated economy as much as it is a set of partial solutions. This implies that they still face the challenge of applying an economic formula they promoted in their political theories. Other major economic challenges are that the economies of the countries affected by the Arab spring are largely dependent on external economic relations, i.e. aid or trade. These economies have been affected even more by the rising rates of unemployment (reaching 25% in some countries), high inflation rates in public expenditure, the acute shortage of revenue, and the subordination of Arab economies to international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund.(13) Consequently, it is difficult, if not impossible, to adopt an economic system based on Islamic principles.

Moreover, other political blocs have accused Islamists of seeking to seize power and reduce the state to the ruling party. Despite the exaggeration of these accusations, the Islamists have justified this sort of behaviour as an expected consequence of the

formation of a new government. They have also attributed their monopoly over decisions that affect public interest to the newness of the democratic system, the weak participation of other factions, the distribution of power, and lack of experience in the management of public affairs in general but particularly in the economy.

Islamists and the International Affairs Front: Opportunities and Constraints

Speakers confirmed that Islamists' dialogue is clear in defining its relations with the West as it is based on religious reference symbolised in the verse "O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another" (Qur'an, 49:13), and the words of the Prophet Mohammed, "Wisdom is the lost property of the believer; wherever he finds it, he is entitled to it." The nature of the relationship between the Islamists in power and the West is governed by the rules of international law and norms that establish relations between peoples and nations that Islam had already set.(14) However, the relationship is still dominated by historical and religious residue and mutual stereotyped visions and perceptions that can only be corrected through dialogue. Furthermore, although Islam emphasises the importance of maintaining agreements and conventions to strengthen ties among nations and achieve certain goals and on the basis of justice and equality, Islamists acknowledge that agreements reflect the prevalent balance of power which remains temporary until one party allows for renegotiation. In addition, observers believe that limited and turbulent relations with Iran and Turkey are perhaps exactly what prevented Islamists from establishing strong regional and international relations as a result of American hegemony and U.S. support of Israel.(15)

Nonetheless, participants agreed that the Arab spring has provided an opportunity for Islamists to establish balanced relations and explore unity and coordination on regional and international levels, as in Tunisia and Morocco and Egypt's participation in the summit of the Non-Aligned Movement in Tehran that ended the deadlock in relations between the two countries. However, there are still many dilemmas the Islamists must face with regards to the Arab-Israeli conflict. In principle, they do not recognise Israel because of Islamic principles but they are aware that they are obliged to comply with international treaties and conventions. The revolutions seem to have placed all parties, including the Islamists (especially Hamas in Gaza) and Israel as well as countries that

protect the Zionist project, in a position of difficulty. Controversy over both fixed and flexible views of the Islamist position on this issue and the alternatives available to the Islamists will persist because Palestine remains a key issue in the present and the future of this region.

Two key events that occurred during the symposium must be mentioned: the book signing of Rachid Ghannouchi's Democracy and Human Rights in Islam, and an open dialogue on Syria that was chaired by Dr. Basheer Nafi and included Dr. Burhan Ghalioun, Ali Sadreddine al-Bayanouni, and Abdul Wahab Badrakhan. Both events took place on the first day.

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