

The Middle East & North Africa (MENA) and the Balkans: Challenges of Transformation

Sofia, 13th – 15th December 2012

Islam, Democracy and Freedom: Old Rhetoric, New Realities

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Since the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2011, there has been a lot of discussion in the West about Islam's impact on politics. But some of these discussions were quite inaccurate, for they were based on assumptions that failed to grasp the true nature of things in the Muslim world.

For example, in an article entitled, "Brutality and dictatorship: How Islam affects society," Marvin Olaski, a conservative American thinker whose works have inspired some of the people who worked in the Bush administration, argues:

"Because Islam in many ways trains people not to govern themselves, but to be governed by dictates, Muslim countries are always guided by dictators."

In other words, Olaski suggests that the presence of dictatorial regimes in Muslim-majority countries was a direct outcome of the teachings of Islam.

However, the reality on the ground is quite different. Yes, there were many dictatorships in the Muslim Middle East, in countries such as Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Algeria, Yemen, etc. but they were not justifying themselves on the basis of Islam. In fact, they were *secular* dictatorships. The regimes of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and Bashar al-Assad in Syria, for instance, were not "Islamic" regimes. In Tunisia, the ruling dictatorship was so passionately secularist that it banned headscarves in public. The Constitution of Egypt had some references to Islam, but Hosni Mubarak was also a politician with a secular identity.

Moreover, the number one opponents of these secular dictatorships were the "Islamists," or political parties and movements that were inspired by Islam, such as the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt and Syria or the *Nahda* party of Tunisia. In other words, if Olaski's argument — i.e. that Islam leads to dictatorship — was correct, then we should have seen the Islamists as the dictators and the secularists as the oppressed. But the reality in many countries was, and still is, the exact opposite.

There are, of course, a few Islamic-inspired dictatorships as well. One would be Saudi Arabia, which is ruled by an authoritarian monarchy. Another is Iran, which has some democratic institutions such as an elected parliament but still has an authoritarian elite: the jurists who play the role of "guardianship."

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To me, this reality in the Middle East is not just a refutation of Olaski's argument but also a confirmation of one of the main theses I have advanced in my book, *Islam without Extremes: A Muslim Case for Liberty*: that there is a deep-seated authoritarian political tradition in the Middle East that does not stem from Islam but sometimes influences the way Islam is interpreted. Hence, not all authoritarian regimes in this region are Islamic; many of them are rather secular but some of them are.

A Tale of Two Authoritarianisms

What do we mean by authoritarianism? First of all, this term implies to an authoritarian political structure such as an absolute monarchy or a single-party republic. However, we should speak of an authoritarian political culture as well. This refers to the assumption that a certain way of life, religion, or even a particular religious interpretation can be, or should be, imposed on society. Examples of such imposition, such as the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, have become notorious in the West and have often been regarded as a natural outcome of Islam as a religion. Milder but still authoritarian decrees also exist in Saudi Arabia, such as the laws requiring every woman to wear a headscarf. Such examples are regarded in the West as the evidence of an oft-repeated mantra: if Islam influences politics, it will inevitably be authoritarian for it will impose a certain ("moral") way of life on every single individual.

However, let me tell you another fact that can give us some nuance about this matter. As a Turk, I grew up not in Saudi Arabia or Iran, but in Turkey. In Turkey, we do not have an Islamic government that forces women to wear headscarves. We also have no religious police that forces men to go the mosque when the call to prayer is recited. However, in Turkey, until very recently, we had another authoritarian institution: the secularism police. These were officers waiting at university gates, ordering female students to remove their headscarves. In other words, they were the mirror image of the *mutawwa'in* in Saudi Arabia. (Thanks to the Justice and Development Party government's efforts, such secular dictates have decreased in Turkey, although "freedom for the headscarf" is still not a fully realised cause.)

When I first noted this interesting parallelism — that the Turkish system demands that women remove their headscarves while the Saudi system demands that they wear their headscarves — I, again, saw what I had noticed about dictatorial regimes in the Middle East: The authoritarianism that we see in the name of Islam is perhaps an outcome of a larger political and cultural context in which Muslim actors operate. No wonder the secular actors of the region, such as Turkey's headscarf-banning secularists, are no different in imposing political systems and ways of life. I also wondered whether Islam can be detached from this authoritarian context, and, more importantly, be reinterpreted in a new context that values freedom.

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Enter Arab Spring

All of the above were observations about the Middle East that one could have made prior to the Arab Spring of 2011. With a few exceptions, Islamists were not the oppressors, but the oppressed. Unfortunately, this very oppression had radicalised some of them, leading to armed campaigns and even terrorist attacks by splinter groups against either local secular dictators or their Western patrons. (9/11 was the hallmark of the latter phenomenon.)

In other words, the Middle East was stuck between secular dictatorship and Islamist reaction, which led to a vicious cycle that left no room for democracy.

The Arab Spring created a historic rupture in this stagnant status quo. In Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Syria, Arab masses revolted against long time dictatorships, and in the first four cases were able to topple them. (At the time being, the Syrian revolution is still in progress, despite enormous odds.) Among the social groups that revolted against these dictators, Islamists were present such as the *Nahda* party of Tunisia and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. The parties formed by these groups won the elections in their respective countries while the ultra-conservative Salafis also had important electoral gains. In other words, the Islamists who once were the oppressed have become the new ruling elite.

During this transformation, it was a pity that some of the *feloul* (or "remnants [of the ruling regime]) were praised in the West as the "liberals" of Tunisia or Egypt. (They should, however, be referred to as what I call "illiberal secularists," in line with their kin in Turkey.) But there were real liberals as well, and their disagreements with the Islamists deserve a closer look.

Liberalism versus Democracy

To get into this, one should first note the difference between democracy and liberalism, and the tension that sometimes arises between them. Democracy is a *political system* in which parties come to power through free and fair elections, and therefore the government remains accountable to the voters. Liberalism, on other hand, is a *political philosophy* that upholds the rights of individuals and protects them from both other individuals and the state. In the West, after long periods of political evolution, liberalism and democracy became intertwined, leading to a synthesis called "liberal democracy." However, if liberalism in this synthesis is lacking, one can end up with *illiberal democracy* in which the majority rules but individual rights are not fully protected.

Illiberal democracy sometimes appears in the West too, with recent examples like the French ban on the headscarf, the Swiss ban on minarets – decisions that rely on the majority but violate individual or minority rights. However, a greater risk exists in the nascent democracies of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and other Arab

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countries; and while some of the reasons for that risk are unrelated to Islam, such as the mundane dynamics of power, some of the reasons are indeed related to Islam or, to be more precise, Islamic law i.e. *shari'ah*.

One iconic example of the illiberal aspects of *shari'ah* would be the prohibition of apostasy, or a Muslim's abandonment of Islam in order to accept another religion, such as Christianity. Punishment for apostasy in all major schools of *fiqh* is execution — a verdict that is widely condemned in the West, especially after recent cases in Afghanistan and Iran. It is not hard to see the tension here between the modern notions of human rights, especially freedom of religion and Islamic law. Similar tensions arise between other aspects of *shari'ah* that I call "enforced piety," such as the banning of alcohol and other sins or the imposition of the headscarf and other virtues.

Now, in countries like Egypt, it is conceivable that a parliament whose majority is formed by Islamists can pass laws that ban apostasy or enforce certain forms of piety. Salafi parties in particular are more insistent on *shari'ah* than the Muslim Brotherhood and other mainstream Islamists, and are likely to push for such moves. In that case, we would have "democratic" but illiberal systems in which the cultural preferences of the majority would be imposed on the whole society, and tensions between Islamists and the liberals would only grow, further destabilising Arab democracies.

'Islamic Liberalism'

But there is another option as well: the reinterpretation of Islamic law in light of the modern context, and with a more liberal frame of mind.

Key thinkers such as Rachid Ghannouchi, the philosophical leader of the Tunisian *Nahda* party, argue for such reinterpretations. On the matter apostasy, for example, Ghannouchi argues that what Islam bans is not defection from the faith, but a "military insurrection." In his own words, he defends "the freedom of people to either adhere to or defect from a religious creed based on the Qur'anic verse that says: 'there is no compulsion in religion'."

In this view, apostasy actually refers to changing one's side in a battle; and early Muslim thinkers thought of it as a crime because of the historical circumstances of war. Since the context has changed in modern times, as changing religion does not reflect a political allegiance or changing side in a battle, injunction should be reinterpreted and the ban on apostasy should be abandoned.

Such nuances about the interpretation and reinterpretation of Islamic law are going to be growingly critical as Muslim societies democratise and Islamic commitments assert themselves more in the public square. That is why the views of reformist thinkers like Ghannouchi are crucially important in the face of the view of Salafis, who are often strictly literalist, rigid and illiberal.

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Ottomans and Turks

Let me offer another source for the reinterpretation of Islamic law, a source that is very important but is long forgotten: the Ottoman Empire, the very seat of the Islamic Caliphate from the early 16th century to its demise in 1924. Most people remember the Ottoman Empire for its classical age, but the story of its final century is perhaps even more crucial. In 1839, the Ottomans had initiated a very important reform period known as *tanzimat*, or "reorganisation," which began as an effort by the Ottoman elite to incorporate liberal practices from the West and reconcile them with Islam. This was a practical decision resulting from the awareness of rebellions and national movements that were arising in various parts of the empire.

In order to keep the empire intact, the ruling elite decided to win "hearts and minds" by making liberal reforms. For example, with the *tanzimat* edit, the principle that individual rights that cannot be violated by the state, including the Sultan himself, was accepted. The *islahat* (reform) edict of 1856, declared Jews and Christians in the empire as equal citizens, and hence they groups joined the Ottoman Parliament which convened in 1876. As the Ottomans faced the issue of apostasy as well, they practically abolished the ban, making it possible for Ottoman citizens to change their religion from the 1840s on.

Ottoman *ulama* justified these changes by noting that Islamic law should be adaptable to times and that the state has the legitimate right to make the reforms it sees it beneficial for society. An Ottoman scholar and statesman, Ahmed Cevdet Paşa, prepared a famous codification of Islamic Law called *Mejelle*, which began with the motto, "As times change, laws should change too." Meanwhile, Ottoman thinker Namik Kemal emphasised liberty as the most important political principle. He was one of the early thinkers in the Muslim world to declare that the Qur'anic principle of consultation, or *shura*, was a basis for the idea of participatory democracy that one can find in the Western political language.

It is imperative to note that such reformist changes and views arose in the Ottoman Empire not as an effort to abandon Islam, but as an effort to re-read it in light of the modern age. I have examined this reform period in the late Ottoman Empire, which had covered some of the issues that Islamist parties are discussing today. Thus, perhaps liberal-leaning Islamists should look back and observe how the Ottoman Empire resolved some of the same issues in the late 19th century.

Aside from the Ottoman experience, the experience of the Turkish republic is worth mentioning. In fact, French-inspired Turkish secularism should be an example for no one as it became too authoritarian, creating problems such as the banning of the headscarf and religious education. I have always been very critical

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of that authoritarian aspect of Turkish secularism for it deprived people from their right to live religiously. However, living under the secular state also gave Turkey's pious Muslims an important opportunity to organise themselves in civil society and be able to flourish and nurture their faith without the state's report. In fact, they asked not for the state's support but for its non-interference. In other words, they learned to seek "freedom" as the basis of their mission.

The result has been genuine, sincere religiosity: in Turkey, pious Muslims are pious out of their genuine commitment to the faith as no one is forced to go to the mosque or wear a headscarf.

To highlight my point, let me underline this contrast: Iran is an "Islamic republic" that imposes Islamic norms while Turkey is a secular state that does not impose any religious norms. Yet, reportedly, more people observe the fast Ramadan in Istanbul than in Tehran.

That is, I believe, the biggest lesson from the Turkish experience: that a medium of liberty, in which the government does not force people to be good Muslims, is the best way to become good Muslims. If Islamists in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia or elsewhere are hoping to have more pious societies, they should take a hint and opt for freedom, not authoritarianism, as the basis of their missions.

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