

Arab Revolts: Islamists aren't Coming!

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ABSTRACT

There has been strong concern about the direction of the current revolts in the Middle East. The fear has been that the revolts may result in the Iranian-style Islamic revolutions in the Arab countries. This commentary questions the empirical validity of such claims, showing that the Arab revolts differ considerably from the Islamic revolution in ideology and trajectory. It suggests that we are witnessing the coming of a post-Islamist Middle East, in which the prevailing popular movements assume a post-national, post-ideological, civil, and democratic character. It is, therefore, argued that we are entering a new era in the region where Islamism—undermined by a crisis of legitimacy for ignoring and violating people's democratic rights—is giving way to a different kind of religious polity, which takes democracy seriously while wishing to promote pious sensibilities in society.

For years the Western political elites and their Arab allies have claimed that the Arab people, against all historical evidence, are politically lethargic. They have postulated that Arabs neither have the interest nor ability to compel their authoritarian regimes to carry out democratic reforms. But when millions of Egyptians (then Yemenies and Bahrainies), inspired by their Tunisians counterparts, defied tanks and bullets to oust a dictator, there was a disturbing murmur of hesitation and muted fear that the uprising in Egypt and elsewhere would develop into an 'Islamist revolution'—something similar to what happened in the Iran of 1979.

The idea of an 'Islamic revolution in Egypt' came from four sources. First, it was Mubarak's regime itself, which attempted to scare its Western allies dissuading them from supporting the uprising. The second was the Netanyahu's Israel—and its US and European allies—who wished to maintain Egypt's autocratic

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regime more or less intact by keeping such players as Omar Suliman, the head of Intelligence, in power after Mubarak. Much effort is still being made to keep this idea in focus, using the position of Iran's Islamist hardliners in a desperate rush to downplay the democratic thrust of the Egyptian revolution presenting it to be Islamic and inspired by Iran. The

third source came from Al-Qaeda's Ayman al-Zawahiri, who has also been pushed to the sidelines by the popularity of the current democratic revolts, proclaiming the Egyptian revolution to be inspired by Islamic jihad. And finally, ordinary people also expressed genuine concerns about the possible repeat of the Islamic revolution in the Arab world. Indeed similar reservations are expressed, more or less, with respect to the opposition movements in Jordan, Yemen, and especially in Bahrain where a Shi'i majority has risen against the ruling Sunni minority, led by the Sheikdom. But these ideas and 'fears' are not grounded in reality.

Certainly, there are some similarities between today's Egyptian uprising and the Iranian revolution of 1979. Both have been nation-wide revolutions in which people from different walks of life including religious, secular, leftist, middle classes, working people, men and women participated. Both movements' goal was to remove Western-backed autocratic regimes. And both movements aimed to establish democratic governments that would ensure national and individual dignity, social justice, and political liberties.

But there are also fundamental differences. Ideologically, the Iranian revolution was a nationalist, anti-imperialist and Third-Worldist movement, strongly opposed to the US government for its continued support of the Shah, whom the US reinstated through a CIA-engineered coup in 1953 against the secular democratic government of Mohammad Mosaddeq. In addition, unlike the current Egyptian upheaval, the Iranian revolution was led by an unmistakable religious figure, Aya-tollah Khomeini, who was supported by an elaborate Shi'a clerical hierarchy and religious institutions. So, once the Shah was gone, the Islamist hardliners using the available religious institutions (mosques, madrassas, and shrines) and the new revolutionary organizations mobilized support while excluding the liberals, democrats, and other non-conformists in a final push to establish Valayat-i Faqih (the "Rule of Supreme Jurist"), a semi-theocratic state. Hence, the designation 'Islamic' revolution. The Islamic Revolution then ushered a new era of Islamism, which overtook the Middle East and the Muslim world for some two decades.



Photo: AA, Mehmet Kaman

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But the recent Egyptian uprising seems different. It was not nationalist, nor anti-imperialist or third-Worldist as in the Iran of 1979. The largely civil, peaceful, and jubilant mood of the protesters (until the pro-Mubarak thugs caused a vicious spate of violence on February 2nd) and their demands reminded one of the democratic revolutions of the Eastern Europe of the 1990s. In Egypt, there were no chants against foreigners, Westerners, and Americans. Significantly, not a singular organization, ideology, or personality, let alone an Islamic figurehead, guided the uprising. Like its very diverse grassroots, the leadership of this monumental upheaval was collective, composed of different political and civil organizations with diverse religious, secular, and political affiliations. I am not aware of any religious slogans in the street rallies. On the contrary, at least one chant projected a wholly civilian character of the revolution: “our Revolution is civil; it is neither military, nor religious” (al-ThowratnaMadaniyya, la Askariya, la Diniyya) as the crowd sang in Cairo’s Tahrir Square on Friday January 28th.

Of course, Islamic organizations, like the Muslim Brothers, have been present in the movement, albeit only as one segment of the very broad and diverse constituencies. But still there is little resemblance between Egyptian political Islam and that of Iran’s Islamist rule. Egypt’s Muslim Brothers, the largest and most organized Islamic opposition, was not leading the uprising. In fact, the Brothers were even ambivalent in participating in the street demonstrations in early days largely because of the fear of state reprisals. Strategically, the Brothers have not been interested in confrontations with the state, nor have they ever resorted to violence in the past three decades. And once they decided to take part in the current uprising, they made it clear that they did not wish to participate in any post-

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Mubarak administration. Unlike the Iranian Islamists in the 1979 Revolution, the Muslim Brothers did not try to appropriate, or to deliberately give the movement a religious coloring. Instead, they joined (as they did so during the Kifaya mobilization of the mid-2010) a coalition of various opposition groups consisting of political organizations and

associations with nationalist, secular, leftist, and civil orientations (like the 6th of April youth groups organized through facebook), which were brought together mainly by the Noble Laureate Al-Baradei. The Muslim Brothers' disinterest in the governmental power in post-Mubarak administration was genuine, for after all they were confident that they would garner a vast electorate support in future free and fair elections. As was expected, the Muslim Brothers have now formed a new Freedom and Justice Party to participate in the future Parliamentary elections. The Muslim Brothers are likely to appear in the political scene somewhat like the Jordanian Ekhwan, or the Lebanese Hizbullah. But ideologically, Egypt's Muslim Brothers remain very different from the Lebanese Hizbullah and, for that matter, the Iranian Islamists.

In fact, the Muslim Brothers are in the throes of an ideological transformation. An internal debate and discord between the 'old guard' and the 'young' leadership has engulfed the movement in the past decade or so. Indeed, their ability and desire to enter Egypt's party politics has intensified the debate about what Muslim Brothers ultimately want to achieve. While the older leadership remains in ideological quandary, at times repeating the ambiguous and old-fashioned dictum "Islam is the Solution", the 'young' leadership, represented by such figures as Essam al-Eryan and Abdel Moneim Abouel-Fotouh, views the Turkish Justice and Development party (AKP) as their model of Islamic governance. This embrace of the modern concept of democracy is certainly a considerable departure from the group's early 1990s adherence to the Quranic concept of 'shura,' a vague and limited notion postulating that an authoritarian but just rule should be subject to the principle of consultation. The Muslim Brothers are likely to go through further divisions as their divergent views in the current democratic conditions continue to surface. Personalities like Abdel Moneim and Za'afarani have already left the ranks of the Brothers to form a new political party.

The shift in Egypt's religious politics is not limited to the Muslim Brothers. Al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya, the Islamist group that resorted to vicious violence against

officials, Copts, and foreign tourists, vowing to establish an Islamic state in Egypt went through a significant change by the late 1990s; it put down arms, denounced its violence and radical Islamism, and opted to work as a political party to pursue peaceful da'wa within Egypt's legal framework. However, the government refused to allow them to establish a party. Currently the Gama'a plans to form a new political party. Even before al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya, the Hizbul-Wasat had already defected from the Muslim Brothers' ranks to pursue a very different trajectory. Currently, al-Wasat privileges modern democracy over Islamic shura, embraces pluralism in religion, welcomes gender mixing, supports women's involvement for public office, and ideological diversity. Not only are Christian Copts admitted to the party, a Christian activist, Rafiq Habib, serves as the group's key ideologue.

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Indications are that the entire region is experiencing a shift in religious politics. In the current uprisings in Yemen, Bahrain, Syria, and Libya, following the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, religious language has been remarkably absent. The key demands of these revolts are to establish democratic governance in the Arab world. In today's Tunisia, al-Nahda led by ex-leftist Rashid al-Ghanoushi represents the country's largest Islamic group. But al-Nahda is not an Islamist party—that is, its aim is not to seize power and to establish an Islamic state; its aim, as expressed by its leader, seems to be inculcating pious sensibilities among Muslims within a democratic polity. Raihedal-Ghanoushi has categorically rejected the model of Islamic Khalifa in favor of parliamentary democracy. Under him, al-Nahda is committed to social justice, multiparty democracy, and religious pluralism. The concrete model of 'Islamic governance' that the Tunisian al-Nahda, the Egyptian Young Brothers, Iran's reformists and other religious groups want to emulate is the ruling AKP in Turkey. For them, the AKP represents an Islamic party that has arguably pulled Turkey further toward democracy that it had experienced in the past three decades. It has passed laws that have abolished the death penalty, has put an end to army dominated security courts, brought the military budget under civilian control, authorized Kurdish-language broadcasting, and established workable relations with the West as well as the Muslim world. Recep Tayyip Erdogan of the AKP is now one of the most popular leaders in the Muslim Middle East.

This is not to downplay the limitations these Islamic groups display with respect to, for instance, citizens' individual rights, religious pluralism, and demo-

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cratic practice. In Turkey, many seculars and democrats remain wary of the AKP's limited respect for individual rights, freedom of expression, religious tolerance, and broadly democratic practice. In Egypt, a conservative orthodoxy continues to dominate the religious thought. Muslim Brothers are yet to settle accounts explicitly with their past religious poli-

tics by articulating clearly a new vision sensitive to the new reality of the region and the democratic demands of Egyptians; their new vocabularies (such as democratic rule, rights of minorities, and pluralism) are often prompted by events (such as the current uprising) to which they feel they need to respond. Their platform bars women and Coptic Christians from being the head of the state—an issue that the new generation of youth of the Brothers reject.

Yet it is undeniable that we are entering a new era in the region where Islamism—undermined by a crisis of legitimacy for ignoring and violating people's democratic rights—is giving way to a different kind of religious polity, which takes democracy seriously while wishing to promote pious sensibilities in society. We may be witnessing the coming of a post-Islamist Middle East, in which the prevailing popular movements assume a post-national, post-ideological, civil, and democratic character. The Iran's Green Movement, the Tunisian revolution, and the Egyptian uprising, as well as a host of political revolts in Jordan, Yemen, Algeria, and Libya, represent popular movements of these post-Islamist times. They strive to achieve social justice, dignity, and democratic governance that can protect citizens' fundamental rights.