

Arab Spring, Islamist Ice Age: Islamism, Democracy, and the Dictatorship of the “Liberalism of Fear” in the Era of Revolutions

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Between June 30th, the twenty-fourth anniversary of the Islamist military take-over in Sudan, and July 4th, Independence Day in the United States, something miraculous happened in the Middle East. Suddenly everyone was in agreement, and – almost – everyone was happy. President Bashar al-Assad was ecstatic. In an interview with the Baath Party’s newspaper *Al-Thawra* shortly after the army deposed Muhammad Morsi, Egypt’s first-ever freely elected civilian president, on July 3, Assad applauded the coup as marking “essentially the fall of political Islam.”¹ In his lengthy interview, he categorized his enemies into two groups: those “who completely abandoned their identity and embraced a ‘Western Dream’ even with all its flaws” and those “who went in exactly the opposite direction and abandoned their identity and embraced religious extremism.”² The latter he alternatively designated as “Wahhabis” or “Takfiris.”

In the presumed bastions of Wahhabism in the Gulf, Morsi’s downfall was received with even more elation. Within days, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the UAE pledged an aid package worth USD 12 billion to cash-strapped Egypt, showing how much they appreciated this outcome.³ And while Israel joined its sworn enemy Hamas in maintaining a guarded silence,⁴ its media (and some politicians) did not hide their glee at Morsi’s political demise.⁵

As usual, the Obama administration was either unable to make up its mind or was too embarrassed to say what it believed. But that was in itself a clear stance, since the United States was happy to permit its key allies to provide massive cash injections to the new army-backed regime. It also refrained from

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condemning the coup (or even naming it as such, just as the Clinton administration deliberately refrained from calling the 1994 Rwanda genocide by its proper name), which was quite significant in itself. In this regard, the American reaction was not much different from what was described as Iran's "measured response."⁶ Iran stated via its main media outlets and key allies (like Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki of Iraq) that it was not sorry to see Morsi go. Reasons given were that Morsi's stance toward Israel and the United States was not that different from Mubarak's, and that Egypt under him rebuffed all offers for rapprochement with Iran.⁷

Islamism: Uniting in Dividing

If this bizarre unity among archenemies in glee at this apparent setback to Islamist fortunes is a mystery, then it is also a very revealing one. For finding out what it was in the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood that had so troubled so many irreconcilable actors would be key to understanding the focus of regional politics. It could not be religion, for the Gulf countries, alarmed at this ascendancy, are among the strictest in enforcing religious codes regarded by most Muslims, including the bulk of Islamists, as unduly harsh. Assad's regime, by contrast, is getting its main support from (besides Putin's Russia) the Iranian mullocracy and its equally fanatical Lebanese Hezbollah allies, plus an assortment of Shi'i fanatics in Iraq, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. Thus none of the main actors were troubled by religion as such or even by religious fanaticism, provided that it was the "right kind." Even inside Egypt itself, Salafi groups far to the right of the Brotherhood sided openly with the military and were equally embraced by the coup's "liberal" supporters. It was no secret that the Mubarak regime had nurtured and used Salafi groups (and their Sufi adversaries) to counter the Brotherhood's influence.

So when these diverse actors jointly lambaste "political Islam," it is the "political" dimension of this phenomenon that gives them sleepless nights. The cue again is in Assad's equation of religious "extremists" with those who have bought into the "Western Dream." Both categories are of the type that does not submit easily to autocracy. Indeed, it was a rapprochement between the Islamists and their secular rivals in Egypt, Yemen, Tunisia, and Syria that made the democratic revolutions possible.

So what is it about "Islamism" that causes so many to embrace it and, for the same reason, simultaneously project it as a threat to so many others?

What is intriguing here is that despite the many differences among experts about how to define Islamism, everyone claims to "know Islamism when I see it" – often seeing it where it may not exist. For example, even though it is illegal to have an "Islamist" party in Turkey and even though the AK Party's

founders continue to insist that it is not Islamist, critics and friends alike treat it as an Islamist party. Critics of several entirely secular civil society groups representing Muslim minority interests in the West brand some of these as “Islamist,” even when activists disavow this label and concentrate on activities in which any similar group would engage.

In its own self-definition, Islamism is the struggle (jihad) to bring Islam to life. A key assumption behind this approach is that Islam had disappeared from life, both in terms of the true understanding of its message and the faithful implementation of its teachings and norms, particularly in public life. The challenge was thus to properly study and capture and preach Islam’s message, mobilize people around it, and then move on to implementation and activism.

The idea that Islam was in decline and needed a revival is as old as Islam, which presented itself as a revival of the Abrahamic message that needed to be salvaged from its putative followers (viz., Jews and Christians, collectively defined as the “People of the Book”) who had distorted and misrepresented the message on the theoretical level and were unfaithful to its teachings in practice. Over the centuries, reformist and revivalist movements kept emerging and fighting for renewal. But two important shifts occurred with the onset of modernity: (1) for the first time Islam was seen as facing a serious external threat rather than a simple decline and inner decay. The inner decay was there and had magnified the external threat, thus making it necessary to wage a dual battle: internal reform and defensive action, and (2) the Islamic approach was “infected” with an important aspect of modernity: the belief that human action could be decisive in shaping the present and the future. Unlike traditional reformers (up to the Mahdist movement in Sudan and the Wahhabi insurrection in Arabia), who continued to believe that Islam was in terminal decline, modern activists believed in the possibility of reviving Islam here and now and restoring or even “improving” upon its bygone Golden Age.

This activism took a variety of forms. First, there was the figure of the lone intellectual (from Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh, to Muhammad Iqbal, Malik Bennabi, and Ali Shariati) who developed new ideas and preached to the public or a select group of disciples. Then there were the loose groups that concentrated on purely “religious” activism and preaching, such as the Young Muslim Men’s Association in Egypt, the followers of Bediüzzaman Said Nursî in Turkey, and the Tablighi Jama‘at in South Asia. Then there were the slightly more activist but equally loosely structured Salafi groups, which usually congregated around prominent preachers or centers and had a marginal political mission. And, finally, there were those militant groups that sprang up in Iran in the 1950s; in Egypt and Saudi Arabia from the 1970s onward; and in Algeria, Pakistan, and Yemen from the 1990s onward, among

others. These were usually small secretive groups that engaged in violence and opposed almost all mainstream trends, including the “Islamists.”

The emblematic and most successful model of Islamism remains the Brotherhood/Jama‘at approach of tight-knit organized groups with mainstream religious views and a distinct political message. The two varieties of this model combined effective organization with popular mobilization, but varied slightly in emphasis: The Brotherhood, which originated in Egypt in 1928 and is dominant in the Arab world, is more populist and action-oriented, whereas the Jama‘at, which arose in India in 1941, is more elitist and intellectually oriented.

But movements were “successful” only in the sense of being able to endure, expand, and continually gain in influence, in addition to becoming an authoritative Islamic voice. Prior to the recent electoral victory in Egypt, the Brotherhood/Jama‘at model had only achieved political dominance in Sudan, where a military coup brought Islamists to power in 1989. Where “Islamist” forces attained power or achieved electoral victories (such as in Iran under Khomeini, in Afghanistan under the Taliban, in Somalia under the Islamic courts, or in Algeria where the Islamic Salvation Front [FIS] won elections in 1991), the approach that triumphed was a combination of traditionalism (Salafi) and populism, which the Brotherhood/Jama‘at trend would regard as too extreme and unruly.

Nevertheless, the regimes in the region and the secular/liberal forces continued to see in the Brotherhood/Jama‘at approach the most serious threat to secularism, precisely due to its sober nature and embeddedness in mainstream Islam. Considerable energy was therefore expended in trying to control and, if possible, destroy or “eradicate” this trend. This may have to do with the latter’s political impact and the insistence on establishing an “Islamic order” and focus on capturing state power.⁸

Paradoxically, it is precisely these groups’ ability to weather these persistent attempts at “eradication” that enhanced the perception of the post-colonial secular order’s guardians that they were threatening in nature. The more they “refuse” to die or be tamed, the more fear they evoke in the hearts of both reigning autocrats and the secular elite that hangs onto their coattails.

The End of Post-Islamism?

On the eve of the Arab Spring, some autocrats (in particular in Tunisia) were confidently boasting of their success in “eradicating” Islamism in their jurisdiction. Many believed them. And they certainly could not be blamed for lack of trying. The “Failure of Political Islam” has also been periodically and ritually proclaimed,⁹ often in tandem with the celebration of a new “post-

Islamist” era in which Islamist thinkers themselves moderate or reject key Islamist tenets.¹⁰ However, these “exaggerated” reports of political Islam’s demise were evidently premature. As far back as the autumn of 1984, some Washington pundits declared the “Islamic revival” over (on the basis of flawed election results in Egypt, Pakistan, Kuwait, and Sudan in which Islamist parties fared badly). It was obvious even then that such claims – and many others made periodically ever since – were a combination of wishful thinking, blindness to obvious facts, and unwarranted interpretations of events.¹¹

The Arab Spring occasioned the latest spate of predictions about the “end of Islamism” and the rise of a new “post-Islamist” dawn.¹² Again, a gentle reminder was in order, and for this occasion I have coined the term “trans-Islamic revolution” to refer to the Arab Spring. The point was that the revolutions could not be termed “post-Islamist” in Bayat’s sense, for Islam was no longer the issue for the revolutionaries. Almost everyone in Tahrir Square joined the prayers, while the majority of women wore headscarves. The bulk of marches started in mosques after the Friday congregational prayer. But everyone took this for granted, and this “Islamic” character of the protests was not seen as threatening by the large sections of liberals, secularists, and non-Muslims who were at their heart. Neither did the Islamists flaunt this as a victory for their cause. It was just accepted as “natural.”¹³

What was surprising – and worrying to many – about developments in the Middle East was that the Islamists continued to gain massive support, sometimes beyond their own expectations. For example, the period 2005-06 witnessed the holding of a series of elections in Iraq, Kuwait, Palestine, Egypt, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia (municipal elections) under the same flawed conditions of 1984. The outcome was a decisive victory for Islamist groups. Earlier, such groups had also made considerable gains in Morocco and Algeria.

We thought the development so worthy of attention that we organized a major conference at the University of Westminster during the autumn of 2006 entitled “Electing Islamism: Islamist Politics and the Prospects for Arab Democracy.” At this and a series of other conferences with similar themes, academics and western diplomats expressed to key Islamist leaders from the Arab world the worry that they might “sleep-walk into power” without being adequately prepared. For example, in Egypt’s 2005 parliamentary elections the Brotherhood (even though banned and with little media access) won 87 seats in the 454-member Parliament out of the 140 it contested. So, what would have happened if they had contested all of the seats and if the elections had been free and fair? This is precisely what happened to Hamas in 2006 when it won a landslide victory that it had not anticipated and at a time when it had no plan to implement.¹⁴

The impression throughout these encounters was that Islamist leaders lived in the hope that they would not win elections or have to shoulder the burdens of ruling. We continued to argue that this was not enough, not to mention irresponsible. The leadership had to contemplate the possibility of coming to power. It is ironic that the Brotherhood's General Guide was arguing, as late as January 2012, that the movement would not field a presidential candidate or support an Islamist candidate because doing so could expose the country to international sanctions similar to those imposed on Gaza.¹⁵ When Abdel-Moneim Abul-Fotouh, a leading member of the group, defied the leadership and decided to stand for president, he was summarily sacked and treated as "enemy number 1." It is also interesting that Abul-Fotouh, like the Salafis in the al-Nour party, sided with the military in its recent confrontation with the Brotherhood and the elected president.

The Symbolism of the Confrontation in Egypt

In this regard, the ongoing confrontation in Egypt between the Brotherhood and its opponents cannot be treated as simply an Islamist-secularist conflict. This is another reminder about the complex character of modern Islamist movements, which are about far more than "Islam" or religion. These movements have been shaped by various influences, including nationalist sentiments; sectarian, ethnic, or class influences; and political agendas. For example, in Iraq Shi'i and Sunni Islamist tendencies drifted apart early, whereas the Kurdish branch of the Brotherhood became independent. Both Shi'i and Sunni movements developed along nationalist lines, even when they started as regional movements. Even within each country, a polarization occurred along different lines. For example, in Egypt the more militant groups tended to come from rural backgrounds and poorer neighborhoods, while Brotherhood supporters tended to come mainly from urban lower middle class backgrounds. In Pakistan and Bangladesh, the Jama'at foregrounded a "nationalist" Pakistani agenda, as can be seen in the stance on Kashmir or Bangladesh's secession. Similarly in Egypt, the Palestinian struggle, the fight to drive the British out, and later on the conflict with Nasser (and the resulting alliance with Gulf countries) all exerted a formative influence on the Brotherhood and its political agenda.

The polarization that began to take place under Morsi thus occurred along multiple fissures in Egyptian society: rural-urban, Muslim-Christian, lower class-upper class, old-young, traditional-modernized. Some of these divisions are self-reinforcing, whereas others are mutually mitigating. Some of the decisions taken only exacerbated the divisions. The starting point during the January 2011 revolution was a broad society-wide consensus on opposing dictatorship and instituting an inclusive democracy. After Mubarak fell, dis-

agreement began between the Islamists, who prioritized democracy, and their opponents, who prioritized liberalism. The latter wanted an appointed body to draft a constitution before holding elections; the former wanted an elected constitutional assembly. The issue went to a referendum in March 2011, which the Islamists won by a landslide. They also won heavily in the transitional Parliament and the December 2012 referendum on the constitution.

The verdict in the presidential election was not that clear. The Brotherhood kept insisting until March 2012 that it was not going to field a candidate. But when attempts to find a “friendly” but “independent” candidate to support failed (which is itself a sign of just how isolated the movement had become politically), a decision was taken to nominate Deputy Guide Khairat al-Shatir for president. When it was feared that he could be barred from running on legal grounds (he had been sentenced to prison by a military court under Mubarak), a reserve candidate named Mohamed Morsi was entered at the last minute. Neither was a front runner.

However, as the electorate gave a thumbs down to all leading candidates, Morsi was narrowly elected to prevent a stalwart of the Mubarak regime from winning. And the rest, as they say, is history. Morsi started with strong support from the forces behind the revolution, but steadily alienated this base. The breaking point came in November 2012, after he passed a constitutional decree giving himself powers to take unspecified extra-ordinary measures to “achieve the aims of the revolution” and limit any judicial review of his decisions. This provoked widespread condemnation, and Morsi only compounded the problem by rushing through a constitution that faced serious objections from a broad spectrum of liberal opinion as well as the more moderate Islamist circles.

Part of Morsi’s dilemma was that as popular opposition to his rule mounted, he began to rely increasingly on the repressive apparatus of the state. Yet this apparatus, particularly the police and the security organs, remained bastions of the old regime and Morsi had no real control over them. Thus the more he resorted to repression, the weaker he became by alienating himself from his potential supporters and relying more and more on his “enemies.” It was a self-destructive scenario evocative of Greek tragedies.

We can see from this that the tragedy of the Brotherhood stems from having more power (in terms of popular support) than it had anticipated or knew how to handle, but not enough in terms of control over the state apparatus, the media, finance, or foreign backing. Their opponents may not have had popular support, but they were well plugged into the international system and had control over the media and within civil society. However, during his brief tenure Morsi helped his opponents square the circle of power vs. popularity. By antagonizing a broad spectrum of opinion (including many Is-

lamists), he helped unite diverse and otherwise warring groups (Left and Right, Salafis and moderate Islamists, pro-western liberals and anti-western radicals) into an anti-Morsi force. Suddenly the army and the *mukhābarāt* (secret police) became popular. Not believing their luck, they decided to pluck this rare opportunity and strike because they knew that this moment was not going to last.

The Dictatorship of the Liberal vs. the Guardianship of the *Faqīh*

A lot, therefore, is contingent about the current – and forever shifting – alignments in Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East. Had wiser counsel prevailed in the Morsi camp, a liberal-Islamist compromise would have been feasible along the lines reached in Tunisia, Turkey, Indonesia, Malaysia, Morocco, or even in Iran during the Khatami era. Such a formula has the highest potential for stability and progressive democratization.

Yet there is an underlying liberal/Islamist structure to this confrontation. The Brotherhood's sources of power may not be exclusively ideological, and religion is not the sole determinant of their (often misguided) policies. However, their opponents resented and feared their religious credentials the most. For years, secular liberals have backed dictatorships (including some ultra-conservative Gulf monarchies) as the lesser of two evils. The alternative in a democratic setting would have certainly been the Islamists, feared as unpredictable outsiders more than for anything they specifically championed. By bringing "religion" into the center of political conversation, they have introduced an uncontrollable factor that those in authority have no way of taming.

For some western (and many Arab) theoreticians, the apparently unstoppable rise of the Islamists' popularity was a reflection of a deeper pathology within Muslim societies, which have remained deeply patriarchal, tribalistic, and resistant to modernization.¹⁶ This was also the belief of many a valiant dictator, from Kemal Atatürk to Nasser and Saddam Hussein, who struggled to violently bring these societies into "modernity." Most recently, the impact of the Third Wave of democratization, which swept the globe from the mid-1970s, occasioned concerns among theoreticians that bringing democracy prematurely to societies not that deserving of it may create the "wrong type" of democracy. This position was most eloquently expressed by Fareed Zakaria, who warned against what he called "illiberal democracies," particularly in the "Islamic world," where "democratization has led to an increasing role for theocratic politics, eroding long-standing traditions of secularism and tolerance."

In many parts of that world, such as Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, and some of the Gulf States, were elections to be held tomorrow, the resulting regimes would almost certainly be more illiberal than the ones now in place.¹⁷

For this reason, democracy need not be hastily encouraged in such regions. Instead, preference should be given to promoting liberalism or, to be more precise, “constitutional liberalism,” a tradition “deep in Western history, that seeks to protect an individual’s autonomy and dignity against coercion, whatever the source: state, church, or society.” If need be, a “liberal autocracy” such as those seen in Singapore or British-ruled Hong Kong would be preferable to the alternative of illiberal democracy that was “not simply inadequate, but dangerous, bringing with it the erosion of liberty, the abuse of power, ethnic divisions, and even war.”¹⁸

I have elsewhere labeled this doctrine the theory of *wilāyat al-librālī* (Guardianship of the Liberal), the reverse side of Khomeini’s *wilāyat al-faqīh* doctrine. In both theories, the populace at large is deemed unworthy of governing itself, as needing the wisdom, probity, and knowledge of some authority to firmly “guide” it along.¹⁹ Theoreticians of democracy, such as Robert Dahl, have criticized “guardianship” doctrines (which come in many other forms, including the “dictatorship of the proletariat” and “guided democracy”) on the more general grounds that the superior knowledge and exclusive moral competence claimed on behalf of the minority of “guardians” cannot be logically sustained. But even if this point is conceded, a problem arises: how to determine whether this minority is pursuing the public good and not the private interests of those “guardians.”²⁰

In Islamic terms this doctrine of guardianship is even less tenable, given that moral responsibility in Islamic doctrine is strictly individual. In fact, the Qur’an condemns the blind following of priests as tantamount to polytheism. Additionally, the notion that Islamic governance refers to already existing and explicit norms is also untenable, since the Qur’an discourages attempts to seek explicit guidance on every issue, even from the Prophet. Thus not only are there no “rules for everything” in Islam, as some “Islamists” have been arguing, but there is in fact a rule against having rules for everything.²¹

It is therefore intriguing that, at this late hour, the Egyptian “liberal” elite and military have decided to institute a “liberal dictatorship” or a “liberal autocracy” along the lines recommended by Zakaria and others in order to block the Islamist march to power. It is more intriguing, however, that this move appeared, as we mentioned at the start of this article, to have the near-universal endorsement of the region’s remaining autocrats, whether among the Gulf

monarchies or with their arch-enemies in Tehran, Damascus, and Baghdad. Is this a complete reversal of the heady promises of the Arab Spring and a return to an even darker era with an “end of history” complete disavowal of any democratic hopes? Or is it the last gasp of the old order?

About This Special Issue

When this special issue of AJISS was conceived, we were motivated by the urge to resolve the puzzle posed by the sudden and unexpected resurgence of Islamist forces at a time when everyone was (again) announcing their definitive demise. The questions raised included: Are these the same old Islamist parties, or have they changed? Are they destined to monopolize governance, or do they form an integral part of an emerging democratic, even a “post-Islamist,” political order? How do the ascendant Islamist groups see the role of the state in their Islamizing projects? How do these competing and rival groups relate to each other and to the wider political spectrum? Which visions are more likely to dominate and flourish, and how stable will the emerging political order be?

A significant number of scholars have risen to the challenge. And as it is the nature of such enterprises, we had to be selective. A wide variety of topics was tackled, from the strategies of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, to the impact on women rights in Morocco and Islamist strategies in Malaysia. Abadir M. Ibrahim’s article on the tug of war over the Egyptian constitution of 2012 provided important insights into the background of the current crisis precipitated by the struggles between Islamists and their opponents. The new constitution, passed by an Islamist-dominated assembly from which the few secularist and Christian members withdrew in protest, was a central bone of contention among the rival factions. It became a main focus for the protests that eventually helped topple Morsi. Ibrahim argues that the constitution was an “Islamist constitution with democratic hallmarks or vice versa.” But it also contained “so many vague or equivocal provisions and many contradicting prescriptions that it says little in so many words.” Still, the provision in Article 2 that the Shari‘ah is the main source of legislation was potentially undemocratic, while provisions relating to the rights of women, religious minorities, and freedom of expression were at best vague and tended to curtail rights.

However, to argue that constitutional limits on the popular will are “undemocratic” or potentially so is to misconstrue both the nature of modern democracies, which are essentially constitutional, and the very idea of the constitution. Setting limits on the power to legislate in terms of a given society’s values is the essence of modern constitutionalism, as well as what distinguishes modern

democracy from mob rule. In any case, the Shari‘ah provision, as Ibrahim notes, was present in the previous constitution and, we should add, is unlikely to be removed or watered down in the new era of the Guardianship of the Liberal. Morsi’s downfall was not, in fact, brought about by disagreements over the Shari‘ah, but was precipitated by the Brotherhood’s failure to work with other factions, especially its insistence on passing the constitution without allowing enough time for consultation or consensus building.

In his article on the rival American and Iranian narratives on the Egyptian and other Arab revolutions, Esmail Esfandiary highlights the regional competition that seeks to narratively appropriate these historical events for the purpose of enhancing status and furthering interests. This is in itself an indication of how these momentous events are regarded as both threatening and promising, a perception that forces both regional and international actors to compete in “framing” them in a favorable way, so much so that each side accuses the other of attempting to “hijack” the revolutions for its own despicable ends.

For the Iranian leadership, the Arab uprising was “an Islamic awakening,” a repeat of Iran’s own Islamic revolution that sought to overthrow corrupt regimes subservient to the West and institute authentic Islamic systems. For the American leadership, these were popular democratic revolutions inspired, like those in Eastern Europe and elsewhere, by the universal (“western”) values of freedom, democracy, and the “pursuit of happiness.” They were a sign that Arab Muslims had finally joined the rest of the world in wanting what everybody else wants. Each side saw the uprisings as a vindication of its doctrines and way of life, and as an extension of its influence. Each side therefore accuses the other of being hypocritical in celebrating the change, having in the past supported the dictators or acted dictatorially. The author ends by asking which side’s framing would resonate with local audiences and, consequently, determine the future course of events.

There is a sense in which this question is now largely “academic,” given the tragic turn of events in Egypt and the faltering course of the other revolutions. However, it is fair to say that both sides have lost because of Syria: Iran by siding with its own favorite despot there, and the United States by showing weakness, helplessness, and a lack of moral fiber. The future of the Arab world, whatever form it may take, will be shaped in the absence of both Iran and the United and will be a friend of neither of them.

On a related issue, Ali Aslan examines the Middle East’s other revolutionary force: Turkey’s Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (The Justice and Development Party [AKP]), whose accession to power in 2002 was depicted by some as a precursor and a major trigger of the Arab uprisings. Aslan, in a sense, echoes Ibrahim’s evaluation of Egypt’s Brotherhood, arguing that the

AKP combines both democratic and authoritarian tendencies, having worked to expand human rights and freedoms while simultaneously seeking to construct a “conservative-democratic society.” It thus represents “a popular, hegemonic political movement,” in contrast to more inherently democratic (e.g., feminist, anti-racist) social movements. More generally, any project of nation-building, such as the one in which the AKP is engaged, “involve[s] the fixation of the meaning of the social, which is unavoidably smeared with an initiative of closure, homogenization, and imposition in the final analysis.”

Some of the paper’s theoretical elaborations deserve a lengthy discussion, for which there is no room here. However, what it in fact reveals indirectly is that the AKP is actually an anti-hegemonic movement. The fears expressed by the Kemalist old guard against the AKP project are those of the former elite minority’s loss of hegemony, rather than a fear that a new hegemony will be imposed. This is at its clearest in the alarm expressed at the progress made toward a democratic resolution of the Kurdish problem, seen by the Kemalist elite as “the final blow to the Kemalist regime.” Overall, the position here is similar to that in Egypt, where the “dictatorship of the Kemalists” is projected as real “democracy” (even though it is not even liberal here), while the liberation of the Kurds or the Muslim majority from the clutches of this outdated elite is depicted as “hegemonic.”

Lyndall Herman tackles the troubles of the Palestinian Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas), yet another embattled Islamist group that trusted too much in “democracy” and thus found itself painted into a corner. Like Esfandiary, Herman also uses a media theory model to trace what she sees as Hamas’ evolution from the status of an activist outsider to integration into the “establishment.” According to this framework, Hamas is “a prime example of an Islamic social movement” that progressed through “the ascribed evolutionary framework of pioneer, activist, and official discourse.” This latter turning point came with its triumph in the 2006 legislative elections. Hamas was thus a “pioneer” of a new form of “Islamist” resistance from its emergence in 1988, and then an anti-establishment activist movement from 1994 to 2000, when it fought against the Oslo Accords. But when it decided to contest the 2006 elections, a process of integration into the establishment began. During this stage, especially after its forceful takeover of Gaza in 2007, even Israel recognized the movement as the “government” of Gaza, and Hamas accepted Israel as a de facto interlocutor, as indicated by agreeing to ceasefires with it and reigning in other groups. The movement also became more pragmatic and focused on serving its constituency.

This determination needs to be taken with some caution, however, since as the experience of Egypt, Turkey, and Tunisia indicate, Islamist movements

never cease to be “outsiders” even when in power. Hamas’ position is more complicated, since the whole Palestinian Authority lacks de jure sovereignty, the minimum requirement for genuine democracy. In addition, it remains alienated from major Arab countries that support its PLO rival. Its brief honeymoon following the Arab Spring only goes to prove the point, since that honeymoon came to an end with the collapse of the Brotherhood government in Egypt and the crisis in Syria.

In his reflection piece, Ziauddin Sardar sees the Arab Spring as a sign of our (“postnormal”) times, an era characterized by uncertainty, ambiguity, chaotic behavior, and rapid change. In postnormal times, there is no confidence in a society’s institutions, while legitimacy becomes elusive and no new narratives exist to replace the mythology of normal times. In such times, even secure democracies like Turkey, let alone fragile ones like Egypt’s, face serious challenges. The challenges of postnormal times need a more flexible, creative, and pluralist approach (like Tunisia’s) to better handle their endemic fragility. In contrast, no monolithic or authoritarian approach, Islamic or otherwise, can be imposed in such times, nor can uncertainty be eliminated. It needs to be managed through flexible systems based on constant dialogue and negotiation, as well as embodying the values of equality, humility, modesty, accountability, responsibility, and diversity.

In his forum article, with a title based on “a provocative play on the famous Muslim Brotherhood slogan: *Al-Islām hūwa ḥāl* (Islam is the solution),” Nader Hashemi appears to contradict Sardar’s argument by making the point that “religion does profoundly matter in the context of the struggle for democracy in the Arab-Islamic world.” This is so not only because negotiating the role of religion is crucial for any democratic transition, but also because secularism in the Muslim world remains discredited due to its association with colonial imposition and bankrupt elites, and corrupt, despotic, and failed regimes. Referring to the emphasis in democratic theory on the role of the middle classes in stabilizing democracy, and noting the severely polarized politics of Muslim societies, Hashemi perceives a “vital need of a mediating group ... to reconcile political tensions, find common ground and morally isolate the non-democratic elements in society who seek to use violence.” Moderate Islamist groups like Tunisia’s Ennahda Party look well suited to play this role and have done so. This confirms the findings of theorists like Asef Bayat and Vali Nasr, who have argued that “post-Islamist” groups or “Muslim democrats” can play a crucial role in “making Islam democratic.”

Thus Hashemi in fact ends up agreeing with Sardar that reformed and open-minded Islamist groups are crucial for democracy’s future, even if dog-

matic traditionalist Islamism continues to play a negative role, or maybe because of this negative role of old Islamism.

In a fascinating study of the role of officially designated female “religious guides” in Morocco in transforming religious authority, Meriem El Haitami sheds vital light on some of the issues highlighted by Hashemi, in particular the limitations of imposed state secularism in contrast to the vitality of grassroots religious activism, even when the latter is state-sponsored. In its campaign to counter the resurgence of Islamism, the decidedly secular but religiously legitimated Moroccan state was forced to abandon “elite liberal state feminism” in favor of a more grassroots-focused approach. Since 2006, the government has been appointing female religious guides (*murshidāt*) who offer religious counseling and education, a move that the opposition has criticized as a crude attempt to manipulate religious authority. And indeed this was part of a general regime strategy to counter “subversive” and violent Islamist group, as was reviving and endorsing Sufism.

However, integrating these women into the structure of religious authority did have unintended consequences, which helped democratize religious authority and increase women’s involvement in public religious debates. This trend was enhanced by Morocco’s success in weathering the tsunami of Arab uprisings by engaging in pre-emptive constitutional reform and conducting elections that were won by pro-regime moderate Islamists. The monarchy is thus having its Arab Spring cake and eating it too by projecting Morocco as “as a model country due to its moderate increment of Islamic democratization and its resilient protection of human rights,” yet ceding none of its powers or hegemonic position.

The impact of the Arab Spring has transcended the region, with its impact felt as far New York and London with “Occupy Wall Street” and similar movements. In his article, Afif Pasuni examines its impact on Malaysian Islamism. This was an occasion to remind us that Malaysia had experienced its own minor “spring” (or “autumn,” rather) with the *reformasi* agitations of 1998 (in turn influenced by the popular revolution in neighboring Indonesia). Malaysia’s oldest (and rather conservative) Islamist party, the Pan Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), tried to take a leaf from the Arab Spring, calling for anti-government marches in the summer of 2011. This was part of a long campaign by the opposition coalition, led by former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim, to bring down the entrenched Barisan Nasional (BN) government, which has not lost an election since Malaysia became independent in 1957.

But unlike its Brotherhood counterpart in Egypt (that had indirectly influenced the party’s ideology and politics), PAS had in fact made an earlier significant about turn. After its poor showing at the polls in 1999, when it

staked out a radical Islamist platform against the more liberal government, PAS decided to join secular opposition parties, which meant officially endorsing a position that was even more liberal than that of the BN. The policy paid dividends, and the opposition alliance won 50 percent of the vote in the 2013 general elections. Pasuni says that the Brotherhood could take a leaf out of PAS's book and moderate its position and join broader coalitions. That is easier said than done, however, given the different contexts.

Conclusion

In spite of tackling a wide variety of topics from a range of different perspectives, the various articles collected in this issue seem to point to surprisingly similar conclusions: "Moderate" and flexible Islamist movements are key to stabilizing political systems and enabling progress toward democracy, while Islamist intransigence could increase polarization, worsen instability, and obstruct democratization.

But this raises an even more fundamental question: Why have Islamist groups become so central to the region's politics?

This remains one of the great mysteries of our times. Most of the explanations offered for their ascendancy frankly border on the nonsensical. The only explanation that has some plausibility is the one that points to the moral and intellectual bankruptcy of Muslim states and their traditional elites. But that in itself does not dictate an Islamist alternative. More interestingly, this trend also remains a mystery for the Islamist groups themselves, which did not anticipate being thrust into the frontline of politics in countries such as Algeria, Sudan, Palestine, Tunisia, or Egypt. The FIS was barely two years old when it swept to successive landslide electoral victories in Algeria in 1990 and 1991.

It is probable that large sections of the dispossessed have elected to use these movements as vehicles to get their own back against entrenched post-colonial establishments. And yet this is an insufficient explanation, given the multiplicity of Islamist alternatives. In other words, why FIS and not the Algerian HAMAS (the local Brotherhood branch)? Why Hamas and not Islamic Jihad in Palestine? Why the Brotherhood in Egypt and not the Salafis or the more moderate al-Wasat or Strong Egypt parties? And why did Ennahda do so well in Tunisia while its Algerian counterpart did so poorly?

What is certain is that the (successful) appeal to religious authority has become the only real threat to entrenched despotic regimes and their allied status quo elites. We may not know why certain groups succeed in cornering the "spiritual capital" and translating it into political capital, but when they do the elites are so alarmed that they resort to desperate measures.

The strategies adopted to cope with the “Islamist menace” varied from the genocidal tactics adopted by the Baathist regimes in Iraq and Syria; through the “eradicationst” policies of the Algerian, Turkish, and (former) Tunisian regimes; to the “containment” policies of Egypt and some Gulf states; and, finally, the co-optation policies of the Moroccan, Jordanian, Malaysian, and Kuwaiti establishments. However, these strategies have backfired badly. The last one has been the most successful so far, but even here it has its limits. The dual use of religious legitimacy (Prophetic lineage) on one side and subtle alliances with “moderate” Islamists on the other has kept the regimes afloat, but quickly hit a ceiling, as happened when Jordan’s Islamists rejected peace treaties with Israel. Morocco’s experiment with the *murshidāt*, as innovative and proactive as it may be, is also likely to backfire. Empowering women may back-foot the more radical Islamists (who have any way been a step ahead in this field), but it is not likely to buttress autocracy in the long run.

In fact, it can be argued that the Arab regimes’ flawed “containment” or “eradication” policies were the main triggers for the Arab Spring. For under the pretext of the need to eliminate the Islamist challenge, the regimes had adopted progressively more repressive policies that became ultimately self-defeating. While they managed to sell these to their western allies and local “liberal” elites as a “necessary evil,” all they succeeded in doing was to discredit the secular elites and then turn on them, causing universal disaffection and an eventual popular explosion.

The post-Arab Spring chaotic politics, which thrust the Islamists into the center, have also revived the fortunes of the secular elites, mainly through an alliance with elements of the old order (remnants of the former ruling parties, the military and *mukhābarāt*, corrupt business and other vested interests). This was an alliance born out of fear and a desperate attempt to reverse the revolutions’ course and establish “liberal dictatorships,” a contradiction in terms if ever there was one.

It is a supreme irony that the Egyptian “counter-revolution” chose June 30 as its D-Day, for this is the same date when the Sudanese Islamists swept to power in 1989. But that was not the whole story. The Sudanese coup was preceded by another “coup” of which Field Marshal Abdel Fattah al-Sisi’s Egyptian coup was almost an exact replica. In Sudan, then, as in Egypt over two decades later, the Islamists were in power as junior partners in a democratically elected government. But on February 20 of that year, the army issued an ultimatum to the elected government: set up a more broad-based government, reverse policies that contributed to Sudan’s “international isolation,” and take the war in the South more seriously, either through a more effective

war effort or a more credible peace process. These tasks had to be completed within one month, or else.

As in Sisi's successive ultimatums, their demands were not unreasonable and their situation was far more desperate than that of Egypt's military. However, the demands could not be fulfilled within the period given, and all that was achieved was the Islamists' eviction from power. As in Egypt, they mounted a few street protests and complained vociferously. Behind the scene, however, they worked to execute their own coup a few months later. The generals who had authored the memo were all sacked, and the politicians who had supported them were imprisoned. At least in the Sudanese case, the reliance on state power proved not to be a one-way street.

The Sudanese case also proves another point: Most Islamists, including coup master-mind Hassan al-Turabi, lived to regret that move. The "dictatorship of the Islamists" did not prove that beneficial to the Islamist cause or to many "Islamists." It is unlikely that the "liberals" who applauded Sisi's coup will fare any better than their Islamist adversaries in the southern part of the Nile Valley did.

The problem with *wilāyat al-librālī* is that it is destined to become less and less liberal, just as *wilāyat al-faqīh* has tended to become less and less Islamic (even before Khomeini made this official by developing his "absolute" *wilāyah* doctrine in 1988, arguing that it was the prerogative of the Leader to override any Islamic rule at will). Thus the first thing the Egyptian "liberals" did was to put an end to freedom of speech and muzzle the media. It is *Animal Farm* all over again, but without the humor.

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