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The Arab Spring: Religion, revolution and the public sphere

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What has emerged in the Arab world is a thoroughly modern mass democratic movement, writes Seyla Benhabib. Speculations that Islamic fundamentalists will hijack the transformation process are motivated by a cultural prejudice that forgets the contentiousness at the historical core of western democracies.

“Freedom is a great, great adventure, but it is not without risks [...]. There are many unknowns.”
Fathi Ben Haj Yathia (Tunisian author and former political prisoner), *New York Times*, 21.2.2011

The courageous crowds of the Arab world, from Tunis to Tahrir Square, from Yemen and Bahrain to Benghazi and Tripoli, have won our hearts and minds. Yet the winter of discontent in the United States and Europe is not yet over: the Arab Spring has not chased away the cruel wind of attacks by conservative politicians upon the most materially vulnerable in the United States; nor has the rise of a politely disguised neo-nationalism in Germany and France, whose governments are trying to impose their austerity measures on the wage earners of the European Union, come to an end. Nevertheless, new shoots of resistance are sprouting out of the frozen soil



even in some American states: in Wisconsin, Madison, public sector workers have been fighting against losing their collective bargaining rights, and similar actions are promised in Indiana, Ohio and other American states. The photo of a poster being held by an Egyptian demonstrator is making the rounds in the Internet: “Egypt supports Wisconsin workers: One World, One Pain,” it reads. A Wisconsonite writes: “We love you. Thanks for the support and congrats on your victory!”

Of course, the Wisconsin protesters and the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutionaries are battling for different goals: the first are resisting the further pacification and humiliation of a citizenry, nearly converted into docile and hopeless homebodies by the ravages of American and global financial capitalism visited upon them in the last twenty years. Arab revolutionaries are struggling for democratic freedoms, a free public sphere, and joining the contemporary world after decades of lies, isolation and deception. But in both cases, transformative hopes have been kindled: the political and economic orders are fragile and susceptible to change.

A new order of freedom

Yet we know that the spring of revolutions is followed by the passions of summer and the discord of fall. At least since Hegel’s analysis of the follies of the French Revolution in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, it has become commonplace to think that the Revolution will devour its own children. Such warnings were expressed not only by Hillary Clinton in the first days of the Egyptian uprising; the many commentators who have hidden their distrust in the capacity of the Arab peoples to exercise democracy are now rejoicing that the first signs of contention between religious and secular groups are breaking out in Egypt and Tunisia. The journalists and intellectuals of the European Right, who have spilt a lot of ink on whether or not “Islamophobia” is racist, are now attempting to cover their tracks, while Israel’s “pseudo-friends” among European conservatives are prophesying imminent attacks on Israel by Hizbollah in the north and Egypt cum Hamas in the south. [1]

None of this is inevitable. It is not inevitable, or even likely, that fundamentalist Muslim parties will transform Tunisia or Egypt into theocracies; nor is it inevitable that Iran will gain ascendancy and that the Arab states will conduct a new war against Israel. What we have witnessed is truly revolutionary, in the sense that a new order of freedom – a *novo ordo saeculorum* – is emerging transnationally in the Arab world.

Until very recently, it was often said that the political options not only in the Arab world but in the Muslim world, were restricted to three: first, corrupt autocracies whose authority either went back to military coups, as in Egypt and Libya, or royal dynasties buying off allegiance with wealth, as in Saudi Arabia and Jordan; second, “Islamic fundamentalisms” – a blanket category that wilfully obscures the history as well as the politics of these various groups both within the regimes and among themselves; and third, al-Qaeda’s “terrorism”, which was sometimes thrown into the same basket as Islamic fundamentalism. Historically, of course, the roots of al-Qaeda are in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, where Osama bin Laden was born; many thinkers of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, such as Said al-Qutb, have also been influential upon al-Qaeda. It is also well-known that Ayman al-Zawahiri, is an Egyptian physician.

What no commentator foresaw is the emergence of a movement of mass democratic resistance that is thoroughly modern in its understanding of politics, and sometimes pious, but not fanatical – an important distinction that is permanently blurred. Just as followers of Martin Luther King were educated in the black churches in the American South and gained their spiritual strength from these communities, so the crowds in Tunis, Egypt and elsewhere draw upon Islamic traditions of Shahada – the act of being a martyr and witness of God at the same time. There is no necessary incompatibility between the religious faith of many who participated in these movements and their modern aspirations.

The modernism of the democratic movements

In what sense though are these movements “modern”? First, because they aim at constitutional reform, securing human rights, increasing transparency and accountability. They seek to end the crony capitalism of corrupt elites like Libya’s murderous Gaddafi family, who plunder their own countries in alliance with foreign oil companies and privatize, as in Egypt, their countries’ precious resources. The youth of these countries have themselves have been students or workers in Europe, Australia, Canada and the USA, and their parents, cousins or relatives have been guest workers in these countries, as well as in the rich Gulf states of the region. They therefore know very well what lies beyond their borders and have revolted in order to join the contemporary world, not to turn their backs upon it. The transnational media revealed the lies that the state-owned televisions and some newspapers in these countries had been spewing for years. Much has



been made of the force of the new media such as Facebook and Twitter in these revolutions, and this is undoubtedly true. A particularly poignant example of this new transnationalism occurred when the head of Google in Egypt, Wael Ghonim said, "I will shake Mark Zuckerberg's hand when I meet him!" He undoubtedly knew, although no one commented upon it, that Mark Zuckerberg is Jewish. But so what?

Most importantly, the modernism of these movements has exploded al-Qaeda's sectarian secrecy and rendered it politically irrelevant. Al-Qaeda is the biggest loser of these revolutions; it has little legitimacy or following on the Arab street, which does not mean that it may not become more dangerous in the near future. In fact, it is likely that al-Qaeda will attempt to recapture some of the glamour it has lost by engaging in some spectacular actions; but for the time being, the solidarity of Muslim and Copts in Egypt, of Shi'a and Sunni potentially in Bahrain and the resistance against tribal sectarianism in Libya despite all the machinations of the regime have given the lie to al-Qaeda's sectarian violence.

Why are we not celebrating this? Why are we so incapable of seeing that al-Qaeda will end up in the dustbin of history? Although it will surely cause some additional pain and violence, it will expire not because of American bombs and troops, but because Arab peoples have rejected its reactionary and nihilist politics.

Isolation of the radical Islamists

What about Islamist movements and parties in these countries? It is remarkable that many commentators already pretend to know the outcome of these political processes: they give all credit behind the scenes to the Islamist groups and none to the demonstrators. They are convinced that these revolutions will be hijacked and transformed into theocracies. These are not only deeply partisan speculations, motivated by entrenched cultural prejudice against Muslims and their capacity for self-governance. They are also deeply anti-political speculations, made by weary elites who have forgotten the civic republican contentiousness out of which their own democracies emerged. In Egypt as well as Tunisia, hard negotiations and confrontations will now start among the many groups who participated in the revolution. By showing up in numbers on the streets, the young men and women who are still guarding their public spheres in these countries show that they are quite aware that respect for the past suffering and resistance



of members of the older generation of Muslim Brothers, may “hijack” their revolution.

What are the institutional alternatives, then: Malaysia, Turkey or Iran? Nobody seems interested in emulating the Iranian model, and given the differences between the theological-political role of the Shi’ite versus Sunni clergy in politics, it is anyway hardly likely that countries such as Tunisia and Egypt will do so. However Malaysia, with its more authoritarian and closed Islamic society, which controls women and the public sphere, is a real example for these societies, as, conversely, is Turkey, with its Muslim majority, pluralist society and a vibrant multi-party democracy (albeit with its own legacy of state-authoritarianism) The historic bonds between countries such as Tunisia and Egypt (and also Libya) that were part of the Ottoman Empire, some of whose elites and cities still bear Turkish names, are deep and extensive. Indeed, the example of Turkey has been mentioned many times by Egyptian youth. In recent years, in order to retain its growing influence upon these countries Turkey itself has been silent about human rights violations in these countries. Now, however, the indefatigable foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu has promised institutional as well as intellectual help in enabling the transition to democracy.

Islam and democracy

A further unknown in this process is the role of the military, particularly in Egypt. Will it exercise restraint in the constitutional process currently underway and not misuse it? Will it peacefully hand over the reins of the country to the civilian political parties when the time comes? Much of this answer depends upon the vigilance and political savvy of those who initiated the revolution to keep watch over it.

There are thus multiple historical and institutional models to choose from in reconciling Islam and democracy. Rather than shying away from the contentious debate which will now break out in these countries (with the exception of Libya, which is likely to be mired in violence for a while), we should celebrate it as an aspect of pluralist democratization. There is no single model for combining religion and democracy, nor is there a single model for defining the role of faith in the public square. Just look at the remnants of political theology in the public culture of the United States as opposed to the institutionalized support of religion through the Church tax in Germany, not to mention Israel’s own continuing struggles to develop



secular law, as opposed to the Rabbinic one which is now in force, to define civil rights of marriage, divorce and alimony. It is altogether possible that these young revolutionaries who stunned the world with their ingenuity, discipline, tenaciousness and courage will also teach us some new lessons about religion and the public sphere, democracy and faith, as well as the role of the military.

Despite his pessimism about the course of the French Revolution, Hegel never stopped raising his glass to the revolutionaries on 14 July, the day of the storming of Bastille. I intend to follow his example and toast the young revolutionaries every 11 February: *Mabruk* - congratulations!

This article is first published in Transformations of the Public Sphere.



Footnotes

1. For a particularly egregious example of this thinking see Richard Herzinger's, "Der strategischen Gewinner der Umstürze", 20.02.2011, <http://www.perlentaucher.de/artikel/6748.html>