

Religion, Democracy, and the Arab Spring

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ABSTRACT

There have been two transformative events over the last year. The first is the Arab Spring and the second is the global economic crisis in the US, Europe and the world, a third event may now in retrospect also be the EU project, democratic legitimacy, accountability, of the EU project. A lot is at stake, and over the next year what may turn out to be the case is a series of crises whose intersection and interconnection is increasingly evident in a globalizing world. This does not undermine the fact that the countries of North Africa, their neighbours both friendly and hostile, and the wider Middle East region are at a crossroads in which ideology, strategic relations, and sectarian divisions will influence the future. The outcome of these events will be crucial for our times.

Introduction

There have been two transformative events over the last year. The first is the Arab Spring, and the second is the global economic crisis in the US, Europe and the world; and, a third event may be if not the collapse, at least the transformation, of the EU project, with growing concerns with the democratic legitimacy, accountability, of the EU project whether the Arab Spring may lead less to an EU Spring ... towards

I want to begin with a few (only a few) theoretical points that are relevant to this discussion of religion, democracy, and the Arab Spring. The first brief theoretical point is on the evolution of the concept of *democracy*. Concepts like democracy, Islamism, or fundamentalism are contested, they are not entirely value-neutral and used to describe events or phenomena in a real world. How they are defined by political science is a product of the needs of politics, history,

and even foreign policy. Why was the concept of 'civil society' so marginalized in political theory until the European revolutions of 1989? So the concept of democracy which many people, scholars, and commentators now use reflect the triumph of a concept of '*procedural democracy*' (goes back to Joseph Schumpeter early 1940s, and elaborated by Robert Dahl in 1950s), with the emphasis on procedures - electoral process, free elections, free choice, and political freedom (which are all good things, especially when you are denied them). This concept of procedural democracy is what up until now - up until the worst global economic crisis since the Great Depression, and up until the spread of the 'occupy movements' from Tahrir Square to Wall Street, to London, to Madrid, and around the world, has dominated policy debates over democracy promotion and the religious freedom agenda advocated now by US foreign policy (so-called 'faith & freedom' agenda).

However, back in the late 1920s and 1930s - the Depression, the interwar years (1919-1939), some leading US political scientists held a definition of *substantive democracy*, which stressed the importance of more economic equality as a prerequisite of democracy and active citizenship.¹

'All human activity is closely interwoven and interdependent. If persons are denied the opportunity to earn an adequate living and social barriers are raised against them on all sides, the phrase that all men are created equal and are entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness become little more than a mockery. The existence of antagonism between rich and poor and of a rigid social stratification is a standing challenge to a democratic regime in politics Democracy is as much concerned with the eradication of poverty, with the guarantee of a living wage, with the alleviation of unemployment as it is with universal suffrage The weak need to be protected against the strong, by law if necessary. Only when individuals have enough to eat, decent clothing, adequate shelter, the sense of security which comes from savings, and a little leisure can they begin to demonstrate a civic spirit, a sense of civic obligation, and that interest in self-

¹ No doubt this wider democratic vision still influences European approaches to democracy - social democracy and Christian democracy, and this broader or deeper definition is relevant to the rise of what is called 'illiberal democracy' (Zakaria). Ido Oren, *Our Enemies and Us: America's Rivalries and the Making of Political Science* (Cornell, 2002).

development through education which is the mark of the intelligent citizen.²

This American textbook from the 1930s - which emphasizes the people and their government (and not only the institutions of government) does not seem so far away from the yearning for dignity and better governance in the Arab Spring, with demonstrators waving baguettes on the streets of Tunisia, Jordan, and Yemen. Charles Merriam (former professor of political science at the University of Chicago in 1930s, and worked on Roosevelt's New Deal), in his Walgreen lectures, 'what is democracy' (1940), gave a substantive definition of democracy, 'democracy is not a mere form, a mere mechanism' 'the form is not the end; it is the means towards an end,' fair participation in the gains of civilization, which meant for everyone access to minimum security, food, shelter, clothing, a job, a fair wage, protection against diseases.³ *Is this substantive definition of democracy, amid the worst global economic crisis since the Great Depression, now going to become more relevant to debates about democracy not only in the Arab Spring, but also to debates in Europe over democracy, austerity, fiscal discipline, economic growth, and employment - any chance of a European Spring, and substantive democracy is already becoming a part of the debate in the United States?*⁴

Things are going to get worse before they get better. *New democracies with weak institutions might find it even harder to deal with the deeply rooted problems than the regimes they replaced, and they could be more vulnerable in return. It is to over state the case that food-price inflation pushed the students, middle class on to the streets, but climate change, the impact of the weather, and the global food crisis may have been a necessary, if insufficient factor - a threat multiplier, in the Arab Spring. Many analysts point to a global food security emergency into the future - bad weather, rising living standards in Brazil, China,*

² Arnold Lien (Washington University) and Merele Fainsod (Harvard), *The American People and Their Government: A Textbook for Students in Introductory College Courses and for the Active Electorate* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1934); *Our Enemies and US*, 107

³ *Our Enemies*, 122.

⁴ George Packer, 'Is American Over? Inequality and Social Decline,' *Foreign Affairs* (November/December 2011): 20-32.

India, the rest of the developing world, the increased use of food crops for bio-fuels in developed countries (this links Western lifestyles and consumption patterns with livelihoods in developing countries,⁵ which is also something Pope Benedict XVI has spoken about).

What I am not going to talk about is how the procedural approach to democracy was explicitly crafted during the early Cold War (at a time of rigid bipolarity) to sharpen the *distinction* between Western elections and plebiscite-style elections in the Soviet Union. So a concept of democracy was constructed to fit the political needs of the time, a concept which both reflected, and reproduced the political bipolarity of the Cold War - a world sharply divided between the 'free world' (democratic' countries) and 'totalitarian' countries (with the concept 'totalitarian' also an invention of political science).

The second theoretical point is about *religion, democracy, and the Arab Spring*: where was religion in the Arab Spring, and *what* would it look like if it was there? What if religion looks like *something else*, rather than what you were *expecting* to see (something in the West called Islamism or Islamic fundamentalism), does that mean that religion was not there? Those who say that religion was not (or is not) a part of the Arab Spring - are simply saying religion was not there because it was not the way they expected to see it, its about dignity, governance, which are entirely secular demands, etc. In Tunisia the labour movement was important for political change, in Egypt youth groups were important for the protests, with only some affiliated to existing political parties, so new groups found ways of organizing outside the mosque or factory.

However, they are still adopting a old-fashioned narrative, or a old-fashioned set of lenses through which to interpret politics - a binary opposition rooted in secularization theory - religion inherently declines with modernization, Islamists versus secular democrats, or Islamists versus secular liberals, i.e. a

⁵ Sarah Johnstone and Jeffrey Mazo, 'Global Warming and the Arab Spring,' *Survival*, 53, 2 (April-May 2011): 21-30.

narrative about how resurgent religion threatens the secular state, democracy, pluralism, and tolerance. We've been there, done that, and now its time to move on in how we understand the role of religion in the modern world. In our world there is a *co-dependency* between secular and religious discourses, rather than the opposition between the religion and the secular - the religious/secular binary, which is central to theories of secularization and modernization.⁶ We need new categories in which new pressures by civil society is combined with a profound transformation in Islamic politics - the secular/postsecular and Islamism/post-Islam to interpret what is now taking place.

Religious texts are what people make of them. What matters is 'lived religion,' i.e. the ways in which the faithful perceive, articulate, and live out, or live *through*, their faith in their daily lives, religion - beliefs, doctrines, rituals, and practices, are what shape the life-world through which reality is perceived and interpreted, *and* it is religion that is part of a global world of ideas, beliefs, values, and experiences, so how the religious tradition engages with globalization is a feature of the debate and experience of Islamism/post-Islam or evangelicalism/post-evangelicalism, etc. A dynamic religious tradition is a historically extended, socially embodied debate, dialogue, on what are the goods of that tradition how is it relevant to our lives today. Where can we this taking place?

- in Egypt, Hizb al-Wasat, breakaway faction from MB, disassociated itself in the late 1990s from violent strategy of Gama'a al-Islamiya (which would eventually renounce violence and opt for peaceful activity - privilege modern democracy over Islamic shura - Quranic notion of 'consultation' in public affairs, Rafiq Habib, primary ideologue of Hizb al-Wasat, Coptic Christian
- In Morocco, Adl wal-Ehsan (Justice and Benevolence) not claim any exclusive understanding of Islam, reject imposing Sharia, and the hijab on Muslims, endorses human rights, pluralism, democracy, and separation of powers; Morocco's Justice and Development Party spearheaded post-Islam participating in multi-party competition

⁶ Arvind-Pal S. Mandair, 'Modernity, Religion-Making and the Postsecular,' in Markus Dressler and Arvind-Pal S. Mandair (eds.), *Secularism and Religion-Making* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, 3-36.

- o Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP), transcended the Islamism of its earlier versions - Virtue and Welfare parties, embracing a self-conscious, post-Islamism that advocates a pious society within a secular democratic state

The Arab Spring in exciting ways is showing how dynamic Islam can be as a type of religious tradition that engages with globalization. There is the dark side that has dominated debates over international security - Islam, terrorism, and globalization. The Arab Spring (although it existed before this time) is bringing out, or emphasising, the brighter side of Islam and globalization - the rise of post-Islamic debates - moving away from the titles - imposed by West, 'Islamism' or 'political Islam' as set ideology towards a wider debate about civil rights, human rights, gender equality, faith and freedom, pluralism, etc. for these are efforts to bring together religiosity and rights, faith and freedom, Islam and liberty.⁷ The diversity of civil society is being reflected in the diversity of approaches to how Islam, civil society, and democracy are or can be related in modern society.

However, two points are noteworthy. The first is that given what I already have said about a substantive definition of democracy - dealing with poverty, inequality, and democracy, it is noteworthy that the Arab uprisings are *not* demanding a smaller state, but a bigger, more effective one (at odds with the IMF/World Bank prescriptions). It might be that a comparison with Christian Democracy in Europe is not out of place. Arab publics still expect national governments to provide basic services, housing, offer employment, stable prices (especially food prices), have infrastructure projects, regulate the economy, and ensure social justice. Discontent was partly fuelled by cuts in subsidies, slimming bureaucracies, etc. What could be worrying is if the private sector, in Egypt, for example, becomes a scapegoat for economic misery.

The second is the transformation of Islamism. Tunisia's An-Nahda party and the Muslim Brotherhood now recognize that peoples in North Africa no longer desire an 'Islamic state' or 'Islamic rule' in so far as those concepts meant a very specific type of political formation, and so Islamists are adapting they policies, discourse. Rachid Ghannouchi, leader of An-Nahha has asked, 'If the Islamic spectrum goes from Bin Laden to [Recep Tayyip] Erogen [Justice & Development Party in Turkey] which of them is Islam? Why are we put in the

⁷ Asef Bayat, 'No Silence, No Violence: A Post-Islamist Trajectory,' in Maria J. Stephan (ed.), *Civilian Jihad: Nonviolent Struggle, Democratization, and Governance in the Middle East* (Palgrave, 2009), 43-52.

same place as a model that is far from our thought, like the Taliban or Saudi model, while there are *other* successful Islamic models, that are closer to us, like the Turkish, the Malaysian, and the Indonesian models, models that combine Islam and modernity?' Can or *how* can a prosperous, democratic, Muslim state, led by a party that is deeply religious but operates within a system that protects civil liberties? (sounds a bit like in the US, the Republican Party under George Bush or a possible Rick Perry?). This is why the divide between the Freedom and Justice Party and the Salafists is as important as that between the religious and secular parties.

Political parties do not have to be 'hardened' - they can change, they can be flexible in relation to specific contexts and pressures, this is especially true if we consider the cultural dimensions of politics. Turkey is playing down the idea that it is a model of mixing religion and politics for the Middle East, but it is a persistent comparison, particularly among Western commentators.⁸ A key question is whether regional developments of the Arab Spring, and in the wider Middle East region could 'reconfigure' the AKP in a more 'Islamist' direction and it is unclear what this would mean for EU relations or relations with the West generally. The 'Islamist wing' of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's AKP political constituency urges support for the Palestinians against Turkey's former ally **Israel**, and for the Syrian opposition, in particular the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, with which it shares a similar ideology. Ideology, religious communalism or nationalism are not main source of Turkish-Syrian tension but it does have a role in relations.

These are not debates or not only debates about what ought we to do; rather they are debates - and this is why there can be such anger, passion, commitment, they are debates about what kind of people, states, and communities do we want to be or become; so they are at some level also about what it means to live faithfully in a global age.

Some Indicators for Future Developments

⁸ Anthony Shadid, 'In Riddle of Mideast Upheaval, Turkey Offers Itself as an Answer,' *New York Times*, 26 September 2011.

Now let me briefly give some possible indicators of future political developments. **First**, the Arab Spring is about the *return* of politics 'watching the 'news' is now different in the Arab world. Leaders are now not only the news makers, the Arab peoples themselves, as subjects of their own history, rather than being the objects of history by dictators, autocrats or at least this is a possible interpretation (the comparison with the 'African renaissance' in the early 1990s might be worth making).⁹ The labour strikes in Alexandria, on-going 'pro-democracy' struggles in Syria, Yemen.

Second, the Arab Spring is a return to the politics of authenticity and development. The Arab capitals are frustrated by the dominance of non-Arab powers in the region – Iran, Israel, and Turkey. The Arab Spring is or appears to be so far a movement towards democracy, good governance. However, it is also a movement towards authenticity and development in regional politics and in world politics. In domestic politics authenticity and development is a recognition that oil has been a kind of resource curse, oil has distorted the development of the region - people now want the benefits of development to come down to the masses, and they want oil to be only one part - not the whole part of economic development.

Oil wealth distorts rulers, governments, who may begin with their peoples' interests in mind, but oil wealth can help turn rules, leaders into dictators - Gaddafi (let us remember that at the time Gaddafi's bloodless coup d'état was widely welcomed as an Arab nationalist reaction to the humiliating defeat of the Arab armies in the Six Day War with Israel in 1967, and to King Idris's pro-Western policies and the corruption of the monarchy).¹⁰

⁹ Colin Legum, *Africa Since Independence* (Indiana University Press, 1999).

¹⁰ Some of Qaddafi's early policies, such as those on promoting education were positive contributions to development (country's literacy rate rose from 10% to 90%, life expectancy rose from 57 to 77 years).

Third, the US-led invasion Iraq (2003) permanently reordered relations between **Shia and Sunni** across the region, and the Arab Spring now intersects with the politics of Shia-Sunni communalism. It has an impact on many states throughout the region, and distorts regional politics, forcing states to take a either Shia or Sunni side in the region. **Saudi Arabia** took the lead in standing for Sunni Arab opinion, and so the Saudis intervened in **Bahrain** to crush the uprising by the Shia majority and support the Sunni monarch. The US Fifth fleet is based there, and the US has not spoken a lot about democracy and repression given what the Saudis have done because of their strategic links there.

Syria's communal politics is becoming regionalized with its neighbours taking either the Shia/Alawite side or Sunni side of the majority of the population, and other minorities – Christians, Druze, and Kurds are examining their options (prospect of Spanish civil war in 1930s, foreign powers Soviet Union supported the Republicans while the German Nazi-led Axis took the side of Nationalists, so the possibility of Syrian crisis turning into a regional crisis - who would side with whom, and on what basis exactly, would US or European interests be determined?)

One of Syria's most important foreign relationships is with **Turkey**, and the roots go back to how Syrian Arab nationalism emerged, and how Turkey responded to the break-up of the Ottoman Empire (this was more difficult with French colonial authorities in Syria who hand over in 1939 the strategic port, 'Sanjak of Alexandretta' on the Mediterranean coast to Turkey, and so it is now the Turkish province of Hatay (which the French did to keep it from siding with the Axis powers). Why does this matter now? Alexandretta-Hatay is the spiritual home of two key Arab nationalist thinkers, such as the Zak al-Arsuz, part of the Alawite (Shia) minority in Syria, who strongly opposed the territory going to Turkey, and along with Orthodox Christian Michel Aflaq, were theoreticians of

Arab nationalism, and founders of the Ba'ath Party,¹¹ (even today the province has a mixed population of 20% Alwaite and many Arab Christians). The fear is that the current communal conflict in Syria could spill over the Syrian-Turkish border and it did in Lebanon when serious sectarian Sunni-Alawite fighting happened in the northern city of Tripoli in 2008. However, Ankara and Damascus until this year reached a growing rapprochement, economic agreement in 2007, partly driven by new Anatolian tiger economy, and Turkey has expanded successfully into Middle East regional markets, including Syria.

In addition, is the **Tehran-Damascus-Hezbollah** relationship that has influence in Lebanon and fuels the fires of opposition to Israel. A change in the regime in Damascus, for example, bringing a Sunni coalition to power, would have serious repercussions for Iran, as *Syria is an important bridge (for Iran) to the Arab world* and give it an ability to strengthen and support Shia causes across the region. Tehran has been a significant supporter of Damascus, maintaining an 'ecumenical' relationship with the (Shia) Alawites, who are considered to be a part of the Shia branch of Islam. The Alawites, who have gained power, but not always wealth, will be resistant to any political threat that would return them to religious or social marginality.

Fourth, is the fate of Middle East Christian minorities amid the Arab Spring's Islamist renaissance. I have tried to emphasize the actual *inter-mixing* of Muslims and Christians in the Arab Middle East, and in the formation of Arab nationalism, something that can get lost in Muslim-versus-Christian/Islam-versus-West narrative to demonstrate something of the more complicated world religion, politics, and democracy in the Middle East.

Egypt's freest elections in living memory, with mass turnout in major cities. Copts are dismayed at the rise of Islamist parties and see election results as

¹¹ Let us remember that the Ba'ath Party, was about the resurrection (*ba'th*) of Arab heritage. Hanna Batatu, Hanna, *The Old Social Classes and New Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* (London, al-Saqi Books, 2000).

indicator of their future cultural freedoms. The Freedom & Justice Party has soothing words about respecting Egypt's minorities, although many Copts remain suspicious. Egypt's churches have moved to mobilize voters. Coptic patriarch Orthodox Church, Pope Shenouda III urged Copts to vote for candidates who best served the country's interests regardless of religious. Egypt's minority Copts (about 10% of 80 million population) made common cause with secular liberal parties against Muslim Brotherhood in the first elections. A lot is at stake to take a peaceful stand against the Islamists, The *Kotia Masreya or Egyptian bloc*; most prominent are the Free Egyptians a business-friendly party by Naguib Sawiris, a Copt telecoms tycoon and one of Egypt's richest men; Social Democratic Party - a member of the bloc and is running 18 Coptic candidates. While the country's most free parliamentary elections in decades are under way – with Islamist parties so far winning easily the future course of Egypt's revolution remains highly uncertain.¹²

Looking on from the sidelines of the Syrian conflict is the country's significant **Christian** population, between 7-10 percent of the total population. Christians are worried about taking sides in an intra-Muslim conflict, from which it is unlikely they would emerge unharmed. The Iraqi narrative of inter-communal conflict, which led to approximately half of all Iraqi Christians going into exile, is a terrifying prospect for Syria's Christian population. As a result, Christian hierarchies have all called for managed reform and change to safeguard stability, and do not want any regional interference, especially from Turkey.

¹² In the first round of voting Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party won the majority of the seats in Egyptian elections - 36.6% of vote. Salafist al-Nour Party won 24.4% of the vote, secular Egyptian Bloc came third with 13.4% of the vote, the liberal Wafd Party with 7.1% and the moderate Islamist al-Wasat Party with 4.3%. The Revolution Continues, a group formed by youth activists behind the uprising that ousted Mr Mubarak in February, won 3.5%. The voting for the 498-member parliament is staggered over three stages, finishing in March, with two-thirds of the country yet to cast ballots. Islamic party 'takes majority in Egypt elections' The Independent, 07 December, 2011.

Fifth, the fate of Middle East Christian minorities is increasingly becoming an international issue for the global Christian community.¹³ One of the most significant Christian interventions was the recent visit by Patriarch Kirill, primate of the Russian Orthodox Church to Syria and Lebanon in mid-November 2011, when he met with the heads of each country's government, Bashar al-Assad (Syria) and Michel Suleiman (Lebanon) * Patriarch Kirill delivered several messages, most importantly was that there must be political change but that this must occur peacefully and be based on internal dialogue without outside interference, and that the future of Christians in Syria had to be guaranteed in any discussions.

The visit of the patriarch highlighted an increasing concern about the plight of Christians in the Middle East, something the Orthodox Church shares with the Vatican (a growing area of Vatican diplomacy with the Orthodox Church). So the idea of holding an ecumenical grand council for the Middle East, similar to the synod for the Middle East held in Rome in October 2010 is gaining wide support in many ecclesial groups.

Also, during the Russian patriarch's visit to the Middle East (Syria and Lebanon) Patriarch Kirill emphasized that there should be a renewed sense of dialogue between Muslims and Christians in the Middle East, and he especially noted that up to now the relations between Muslims and Christians in Syria had been a good one. He also said he wanted to support his fellow-patriarch, Ignatius of Antioch,* with whom he is in communion. He emphasized this both patriarchs opened an important exhibition in Damascus on the historical and contemporary relevance of their relations with each other. The Russian patriarch Kirill launched the Arabic translation of his book, *Freedom and Responsibility*.

¹³ This is not only because the issue of religious minorities is a key part of the religious freedom aspects of US foreign policy, and now Canadian foreign policy (one of the election policy programmes of the Conservatives in Canada), and with the EU now wondering if and how it should join supporting religious freedom as a part of EU foreign policy.

The Russian Orthodox Church has always considered itself to have a privileged role with the Orthodox patriarchates of the region and Eastern Christianity more generally across the Middle East. The **Russian state** was not doubt fully informed and generally supportive of the patriarchal visit to Syria. President Medvedev, who visited Damascus in 2010 wants to have an important say in the political future of Syria.

Finally, major political changes take time, it may be a bit early to talk about seasonal changes - Arab Spring - to Arab Winter It was a decade from first strikes in Gdansk Shipyard and fall of communism in Poland. Chile's struggle against Pinochet regime took three years between first major protests and referendum that forced dictator from power. People Power movement in Philippines in 1986 ('Yellow Revolution') overthrew Ferdinand Marcos result of several years of popular struggle against martial law regime. The civil rights struggle in the US South took many years. However, even if governments have the monopoly of military power, and the support of a superpower, power ultimately is with the people and if the people refuse to recognize the government's authority, its legitimacy - general strikes, mass refusal to obey official orders other forms of non-violent resistance.

Conclusion

A lot is at stake, and over the next year what may turn out to be the case is a series of crises whose intersection and interconnection is increasingly evident in a globalizing world. This does not undermine the fact that the countries of North Africa, their neighbours both friendly and hostile, and the wider Middle East region are at a crossroads in which ideology, strategic relations, and sectarian divisions will influence the future. The outcome of these events will be crucial for our times.

