

Commentary

IS ISLAM COMPATIBLE WITH DEMOCRACY?

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The question raised by the ouster of Egypt's President Morsi is whether Islam is compatible with democracy or any form of government that empowers the people and limits the power of leaders to hold merely representative offices with limited terms of public service.

Islam is the most recent of the Abrahamic religions to emerge on the world stage. Monotheism in general, and specifically as it developed in the Dark and Middle Ages, in principle reflects extremely authoritarian regimes.

Theologically, it posits a cosmic or heavenly hierarchy with absolute authority in God, angels in go-between positions, and a fallen humanity in need of salvation at the base of the pyramidal power structure.

It is no surprise then that in the centuries wherein the Catholic Church was at its zenith of influence in the West, political power was held by kings, popes, emperors, and powerful nepotistic and despotic elite with huge economic chasms between the people and their rulers.

Obviously, these structures were not compatible with democracy.

Christianity and Judaism, being monotheistic, are no less inheritors of this stratified and centralized power paradigm, but unlike Islam these religions were effectively secularized and toned down during the century of the European Enlightenment.

Thinkers like Descartes, Locke, Spinoza, Kant, Voltaire, Rousseau, Hume, and Hegel paved the way for Marx, Schopenhauer, Buber, and Sartre to challenge conventional approaches to religious ideologies and political formations.

Traditional monotheism, with its highly categorized view of man and God, may not in itself be wholly compatible with democracy, but modern Western monotheism gradually molded itself to new ways of thinking during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, and was certainly forced to do so amid rapid scientific and technological advances.

The Islamic world enjoyed its own renaissance during the Islamic Golden Age (mid-8th to mid-13th century) with advances in the sciences, mathematics, and literature, yet the period declined and has never been restored to its former glory.

Where are Islam's corresponding great modern philosophers and scientists who can pave the way for a similar transformation of both radical and even secular Islam in the Arab world?

In the Arab world today, the majority of its intellectuals are clerics, imams, and thinkers emerging from the core of Islamic values. Radical Islam simply does not routinely nurture free thinkers willing to brave the fires of what might otherwise become an Islamic Inquisition.

Is it even possible to transition from hierarchical religious authoritarianism to a modernized and even secularized form of Islamic democracy – one that accepts the separation of church and state?

While the possibility and harsh eventuality remains, this is a tall order since Islam, perhaps more than other monotheistic religions, invites itself into every aspect of social life. More specifically, Islam is inherently and by definition inconsistent with the separation of church and state.

It is instructive that the seeming separation between the two occurred under ruthless secular dictators such as Iraq's Saddam Hussein, Hafez Assad's family in Syria, and Qaddafi's Libya. In all these instances, the authoritarianism seen in the rule of the Islamist Morsi was still there.

The Middle East is not the only place where religious ideology might compel people to vote against their own social, economic, and political interests. But history teaches that if there is any prospect in wedding Islam to democratic ideals, efforts to do so must concurrently work on religious, economic, and political levels.

Religiously, the concept of the separation of church and state has practically no hold in Islamic thinking. The idea is entirely foreign to most Islamic orthodoxy, and even if a political party were secular in name, they dare not forsake the basic tenets of Islam.

The strong religious identity currently imposed on the average citizen would effect a transposition of Islamic views on political affairs, thus nullifying this vital separation of powers and coloring political discourse.

Turkey provides us with a perfect example of the failure to wed Islam to democracy. While Erdogan was supporting economic advances and paying lip service to liberty, he was imprisoning journalists and drawing to himself more and more power, leading the country increasingly by Islamic ethos rather than democratic principles.

As such, Turkey under Prime Minister Erdogan's stewardship, who claims to have found the perfect formula that balances Islam and democracy, provides a poor model that deeply disappointed the liberal-minded Arab youth who are now fighting against Islamic despotism in Egypt.

Citizens of the Arab world first require a change from the ground up in the way their religion is approached and instituted socially, politically, and economically.

With the rise of free-thinking youth and exposure to new ways of interpreting Islam, a secularized and modernized Islam adapted to modern democratic principles must emerge.

Second, the Arab world needs egalitarian economic development that distances itself from tribal, clannish, and centralizing hegemonic models and seeks to build a strong middle class provided with basic social support in education and health care.

Third, the Arab world needs, perhaps more than anything, time. We must bear in mind that it took centuries for the Western world to free itself from the bondages of religious ignorance and the divine right of kings.

But it won't take centuries for Arab states to emerge from the past and grow into functioning democracies because unlike the West, it does not need to wait for the concurrent advances in social, physical, and political sciences that paved the way for the industrial revolution and the information age.

The Arab youth are already exposed to new technologies, thus accelerating their ascent to democracy and the supremacy of reason, not revelation, in political discourse.

But that acceleration comes with its own pitfalls, making the current situation doubly serious and potentially calamitous for millions of innocent men, women, and children who are already suffering heavy fallout.

Hence, it is not enough, in the long term, for a country to have just economic development, like Saudi Arabia, or just elections, like Egypt and Iraq. Without balanced development, extremism in even one of the three social institutions will, left unchecked, color the other two.

Even if elected democratically, radical Islamic parties invariably presume upon themselves forms of power reminiscent of tyrannical kings. They simply have few other models for their political might or personal manliness other than monarchical rule. Egypt's Morsi and Iraq's Maliki provide telling examples.

I disagree with the notion that the ouster of the freely-elected Morsi will encourage opposition Islamic parties throughout the Arab world to dismiss democratic forms of governing and violently pursue their socio-political agenda in the streets as they lose faith in a free electoral system.

On the contrary, Islamic parties that seek power will do well to learn from the Egyptian experience. Being elected democratically does not bestow authoritarian

powers, and governing must be inclusive, representing all the people while equally caring about their welfare, regardless of any political affiliations.

Morsi was not ousted because he is a devout Muslim; everyone who voted for him knew that only too well. Rather, by acting from a radical Islamic bent, he betrayed the premise of a freely-elected leader, which requires accountability, inclusiveness, and the responsibility to live up to the spirit of the revolution.

Moreover, Morsi failed to separate between his Islamic instincts and the democratic principles by which he was empowered to govern.

Morsi repeatedly rejected appeals from the military, the U.S., and even the Salafists to form a new inclusive government to end the crisis.

Intellectuals as well as ordinary Egyptians want their country to be modern, pluralistic, and outward-looking, and do not wish to replace one dictator with another, albeit elected.

Indeed, the blame falls squarely on Morsi's shoulders; he subordinated politics to religion and succumbed to the conservative and religious branch of Islamists who view political Islam as the answer to centuries of deprivation and of injustice.

He worked tirelessly to consolidate his powers while doing next to nothing to save the economy from pending collapse. He placed himself above judicial review and largely appointed fellow Brothers into key posts while allowing Brotherhood hooligans to beat up liberal opponents.

If this was not enough, he undermined the core of freedom of speech by intimidating the media and failing to build democratic institutions. Moreover, he pushed for a new constitution fully reliant on Sharia law, expanded blasphemy prosecutions, and supported discrimination against women.

To be sure, Morsi surrendered to Islamic siege mentality and authoritarianism in a time when the nation was demanding inclusiveness and political freedom, which was the essence of the revolution against his predecessor in the first place.

Yes, political Islam and democracy can work, but not by pushing for early elections. A transitional government, led by a respected leader who is not shackled by a strong ideology and who can cultivate consensus and has wide public appeal, must take at least two years to allow secular and Islamic parties to develop their political platforms and make the public fully aware of their socio-economic policy and other urgent issues facing their nation.

In the interim, a new constitution should be written based on freedom, democracy and equality with separation of church and state constitutionally enshrined. Any new constitution written in Egypt that does not clearly separate church and state will be doomed to fail, potentially ushering in yet another revolution.¹

Brighter days will yet come to Egypt as long as Tahrir Square remains true to its name, "Liberation Square." The Egyptian people have now acquired the ultimate weapon that prevents despotism--be that military, religious, or secular--from rising to power. Those who seek to lead will do well to remember that.

¹ *This point will be expanded in a following article, which will model a separation of church and state in Egypt that still provides a prominent role for religion in daily life.*