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## Islamism or secularism: should that be the question?



The rise of political Islam that has been ushered in by the Arab Spring has turned sour so quickly that it is leading to debate over whether the region is already experiencing a post-Islamist era.

Tunisia, the birthplace of the Arab Spring, has been in turmoil since the assassination of opposition leader Chokri Belaid on Feb. 6. His family and supporters have blamed the elected government, which vehemently denies the accusation. Belaid's brother accused it of acting "worse" than dictator Zine el Abidine ben Ali, who was toppled in 2011.

A wave of nationwide protests has ensued, and Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali resigned after his offer to solve the crisis with an apolitical government of technocrats was rejected by his own Islamist Ennahda party. That exposed deep divisions not just between Tunisia's many political parties, but within the ruling coalition as well.

Neighboring Egypt has faced tumult since the ill-fated, short-lived decision in November by President Mohammed Mursi - the Muslim Brotherhood candidate who has only been in power since last summer - that all laws and declarations passed by him since taking office could not be appealed or revoked, and that the country's Islamist-dominated, constitution-drafting body and the Shura Council (upper house of parliament) could not be dissolved.

This has resulted in strikes, the resignations of government officials, and a surge in street protests that have at times turned violent. The crackdown on demonstrators, a controversial constitution that was approved in a referendum in December, and an opposition boycott of parliamentary elections due in April, have only exacerbated the situation.

While Morocco has not witnessed the same level of public discontent against its government - elected in November 2011 and headed by the Islamist Party of Justice and Development - such sentiment is growing.

Jordan's official turnout of 56.5 percent in January's parliamentary elections was higher than many expected, in the face of an opposition boycott spearheaded by the Muslim Brotherhood, by far the country's largest political party.

This has led to the questioning of the boycott's effectiveness, with many deeming it a failure. Although the Brotherhood disputed the turnout figure, it did not field observers. Turnout was 53 percent in the 2010 vote, which the Brotherhood also boycotted, and 54 percent in 2007, when it took part.

### **Reasons for Islamist ascendancy**

That Islamist parties in the region would be voted into power - either through regime change as in Egypt and Tunisia, or reform as in Morocco - is hardly surprising. They formed the oldest, largest, most organized opposition to decades of totalitarian, secular rule. The more persecution they faced as a result, the more popularity they gained.

Their electoral successes are not necessarily due to societies' increasing religiosity. Their efficient, charitable networks helped the struggling masses when their governments would not, or could not. Furthermore, some parties express themselves in nationalistic, rather than religious or sectarian language. Examples include Hamas in Palestine, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the Sadr movement in Iraq.

However, there is no doubting that religion has played a part. This has been the case in other regions worldwide where people face hardship, and where religious expression has been repressed, such as Christianity in communist Eastern Europe, and Islam in the Central Asian states of the former Soviet Union.

In the case of the Arab world, where public protest has traditionally been banned and violently suppressed, the mosque has often been the only place where dissent could be vocalized and organized.

In the wake of the Arab Spring, this dynamic has left limited choices: either established Islamist parties, newly formed movements, or those associated with the former regimes. It is little surprise, then, that people have opted for change, but from those they are familiar with.

### **Difficulties of regional governance**

It was fairly easy to predict that those voted into power would have a tough time of it, to say the least. The killing of Belaid in Tunisia, and Mursi's decree placing himself above the law (even if temporarily), were catalysts to public unrest, not the cause - discontent was evident prior to these events.

The argument that such difficulties stem from those in power being Islamists is debatable, and in my opinion, exaggerated or oversimplified. Governments formed since the start of the Arab Spring have inherited a host of severe economic, political, social and environmental problems for which there are no quick fixes. Furthermore, some of these issues are exacerbated by the global economic downturn, over which they have no control.

Taking on authoritarianism, as difficult as this has been, pales into comparison with the challenges of the aftermath: the very reinvention and rebuilding of states, infrastructure, institutions and societies. Such a mammoth task was never going to be quick or easy.

With freedom of expression long banned, opposition movements have had to spring up out of nowhere, organize and articulate themselves almost immediately, learn to govern and democratize with no prior experience, and cooperate with, or challenge, other groups with different, and sometimes contradictory, visions for the future.

Add to that populations that are understandably impatient for change and mistrustful of authority, and it is only natural, under these circumstances, that the road will be as long as it is bumpy. To the extent that public frustration has been expressed peacefully, this is part of the democratic process of checks and balances, of politicians and parties being held accountable for their campaign promises and subsequent performance.

In this respect, established Islamist movements that are now in power are realizing, hard and fast, that being in opposition can be considerably easier. However, elected secular, liberal parties and leaders have fared no better, and would be highly unlikely to do so in the countries that have voted in Islamists.

Libya's National Forces Alliance prevailed over Islamist parties in elections last July, bucking a regional trend. However, the country has experienced tribal and regional tensions, culminating in lawlessness, open combat, and a movement for autonomy in the oil-rich east - the birthplace of the revolution against Muammar Qaddafi - with accusations of economic and political marginalization. The government is struggling to disband and co-opt the myriad tribal militias into the national army, amid increasing public frustration at the lack of security.

The secular Fatah has proven as incapable as Hamas of bettering the lot of Palestinians, and there has been no discernible improvement in Lebanon's problems, whether it is governed by the March 14 alliance led by Saad Hariri, or the March 8 bloc which includes Hezbollah.

## Image problems

Moderate Islamists face an image problem in being wrongly conflated with extremist political and militant elements. "The open politics spawned by the Arab Spring have stretched the term 'Islamist' to its limits, covering everyone from hip moderate young Muslims to long-bearded hardliners bent on imposing a

There has certainly been a rise in Islamist militancy in countries that have experienced the Arab Spring, particularly Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Syria and Yemen. Arguably the most headline-grabbing incident was the murder in September 2012 of the American ambassador and other staff in an attack on the U.S. embassy in Libya's second city of Benghazi, described in media reports "as a hub for jihadist groups." Elected Islamist and secular governments alike have shown a willingness, if not necessarily the ability, to tackle such militancy.

On the political front, ultra-conservative Salafis surprised many by taking more than a quarter of seats in Egypt's last parliamentary elections, second only to the more moderate Muslim Brotherhood. And Salafis in Yemen have agreed to form a union - al-Rashad (Righteousness) - which will take part in elections, signalling the community's first organized involvement in the country's politics.

Observers have suggested that the effectiveness of the call to boycott Jordan's recent parliamentary elections was hindered by public concern over the upheaval witnessed under Muslim Brotherhood rule in neighboring Egypt.

Such developments are as much a concern to moderate Islamists as they are to liberals and secularists. Indeed, the former are under fire from both sides of the spectrum, either for trying to Islamize the countries they are governing, or for not going far enough in this regard. Egyptian cleric Mohammed Abdullah Nasr has gone so far as to call Mursi a Zionist.

Although policies have been implemented or proposed that have caused legitimate concern among secularists, Islamist governments would argue that they cannot ignore the wishes of those who elected them. This sentiment is valid as long as there is no infringement of people's human rights, but that has not always been the case. Crucially, however, we have not seen the kind of theocratic rule that scare-mongers have predicted.

Ennahda, which won Tunisia's last elections, entered into a coalition with the liberal Congress for the Republic, and the left-of-centre Ettakatol party. It did not have to bring in both parties to form a parliamentary majority, and did not have to choose left-leaning allies. Ennahda said it did so to make the government broadly representative.

In Mursi's cabinet, only four ministers (in charge of higher education, housing, youth and information) are from the Muslim Brotherhood, which won Egypt's elections and from which he hails. Many are technocrats, some served in the Mubarak regime or are military figures, and two are women (one of whom is a Christian).

Morocco's PJD is in a coalition with three other parties close to the king, who holds veto power over government decisions despite a new constitution curbing his power (albeit to a limited extent). Lebanon's Hezbollah is allied to the Christian Free Patriotic Movement, which holds the second-largest number of seats in parliament, and Hamas fielded Christian candidates during the parliamentary elections which it won.

Secularists also have an image problem, being unfairly associated with the regimes that have been overthrown or are under threat. This highlights the fact that the Arab world that is emerging from its revolutionary movements has not had the time to develop a varied, mature polity.

This is to be expected after decades of one-party rule, but it will eventually invalidate the perception that the people of the region are perpetually doomed to live under either secular dictatorships or Islamist theocracies.

## Looking to the future

The current instability, while deeply worrying, can be seen as part of the process of these countries finding their way amid their diverse communities and ideologies. Such profound change is seldom smooth, however much we would like it to be, and the recent past has shown us that stability, if it is to be lasting and genuine, must be achieved via consensus and inclusion, not an iron fist.

Unfortunately, given the large demonstrations for and against the region's new rulers, as well as claims and counter-claims, it looks like governments and opposition movements are digging in their heels, for the time being at least.

This reveals a belief by each side in their own strength, popularity and legitimacy, while ignoring or downplaying that of their opponents. This is lamentable and dangerous, because there are too many supporters of both secularism and Islamism for either to be sidelined.

Arab dictators have shown us what can happen when popular ideologies are suppressed. That this must never happen again should be the over-riding lesson and warning for those who, while currently facing off against each other, joined forces to challenge and overthrow tyranny. The sacrifices and achievements of the Arab Spring will be for nothing if national unity, dialogue, pluralism, democracy and human rights give way to a repetition of recent history.

This article was first published in The Middle East magazine in March.

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