

Post-Islamic Revolution

Olivier Roy

Events in Egypt confirm the recent movement in the Arab world away from belief in a theocratic Islamic state, according to Olivier Roy, an authority on political Islam. His most recent book on the subject – the ground-breaking *Holy Ignorance: When Culture and Religion Part Ways* – is available in English from the Columbia University Press. In a just-published article, he offers a magisterial analysis of developments in Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and also a larger view of the real political forces at work in the contemporary Arab and Muslim societies in the Middle East emerging without ties to *jihadism* or admiration for repressive Islamist regimes such as Iran and Salafism, the fundamentalist version of Islam derived Wahabism and present in radical movements in Arab countries. His perceptive insights capturing the trends at work in Egypt (and elsewhere) in a new generation of Arabs appeared in *Le Monde* newspaper in an article translated here by Georgio Comminos of the European Institute.

In trying to interpret the grass-roots revolts in Egypt and elsewhere across North Africa, European public opinion views the situation with a mindset that is 30 years old – essentially based on the Islamic revolution in Iran. So Europeans are now expecting to see Islamist movements – in this case, the Muslim Brotherhood and its offshoots in neighbouring areas – emerge at the head of these current revolts or at least waiting in ambush to seize power from them. People with these expectations have been surprised and worried by the Muslim Brotherhood's low profile and pragmatism so far. What are the Islamists up to?

Actually, if you look at the people who launched these revolts, it is clear that they represent a “post-Islamist generation.” For this generation, the great revolutionary movements of the 1970s and 1980s are history — something that mattered to their parents but not to them. This new generation is not interested in ideology, A their slogans are pragmatic and very concrete (like “*erhal*”, the Arabic word for “get out”). They do not invoke Islam like the older generation did in Algeria in the late 1980s. What they mainly express is rejection of corrupt dictatorships and the demand for democracy. Of course, this battle-cry does not mean that the demonstrators are demanding secularism. It does signify that they do not see Islam as a political ideology that can bring offer a better system for their societies. So the young generations are operating with the idea of a secular political arena. The same change is true for other ideologies: the younger generations are patriotic (as shown by the flag-waving) but they are not nationalistic. Even more surprisingly, they are not listening to conspiracy theories: they are not blaming the U.S. or Israel for what is wrong in the Arab world. (In Tunisia, they are even not blaming France for their problems despite the fact that Paris supported Ben Ali [the now-overthrown Tunisian leader] right to the end. Even “Arab nationalism” had disappeared from the slogans in the street, even though the existence of a “pan-Arab” political ethos can be seen in the copy-cat contagion that spurred Egyptians and Yemenis to revolt in the wake of events in Tunisia.

This generation of young Muslims has a mentality that wants pluralism – probably because they are also more individualistic. Statistics show that this generation is better educated than the previous one, is more inclined to live in a nuclear family in the place of the old extended one, and has fewer children; but at the same time these young people are more likely to be jobless and to feel that they have been slipping down the social ladder. This generation is better informed, and often has access to modern technology enabling individuals to connect with each other via digital networks instead of via political parties (which are banned anyway). These young people also know that the Islamist regimes have become dictatorships. They are not fascinated by Iran or Saudi Arabia. The protesters in Egypt are exactly the same kind of people who rose up against Ahmadinejad in Iran. (The Iranian regime is putting out propaganda pretending to support the Egyptian revolt, but in fact this only amounts to getting back at Mubarak.) The new revolutionaries are perhaps practicing or even devout Muslims, but they separate their religious faith from their political agenda. In that sense, it is a “secular” movement that separates religion from politics. Religious practice has become an individual act.

What we see are people whose demands are focused mainly on dignity, on “respect” – a motto that emerged in Algeria in the late 1990s. Protestors are making demands in the name of universal human values. But what is important is that today people are demanding democracy as a right that is no longer something imported from the West. That is what makes it so crucially different from what the Bush administration promoted as democracy in 2003, which was unacceptable because it lacked any political legitimacy in the region, and instead was associated with a U.S. military intervention. However paradoxical it sounds, the fact

is that the weakened position of the U.S. In the Middle East and the pragmatic posture of the Obama administration today have opened the way for an indigenous demand for democracy to emerge and take hold with its own legitimacy.

Of course, a revolt does not make a revolution. The protest movement has no leaders, no political parties and no apparatus to sustain it. This is natural given the circumstances, but it does mean that all the problems still have to be solved about how to institutionalize democracy. It is unlikely that the disappearance of a dictatorship will automatically bring about the emergence of liberal democracy in its wake – as Washington hoped it would in Iraq. The fact is that every Arab country, like countries in similar situations elsewhere, has its own political landscape – one that is all the more complicated right now because it has been hidden by dictatorship. Indeed, except for the Islamists and, in many places, labor movements (in a weakened condition); there is not much in the way of political entities.

ISLAMISTS HAVE NOT DISAPPEARED: THEY HAVE CHANGED

By “Islamists,” I mean people who see Islam as a political ideology that can provide answers to solve all the problems confronting society. The most radical people in this group have left their countries to join the international jihadist campaign, so they are no longer on the domestic political scene. They are in the deserts of North Africa with the group Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, or in Pakistan, or in the suburbs of London. They have no social or political base in their own countries. Global jihad is completely disconnected from the social, political or geopolitical struggles of the local populations there. Naturally, Al-Qaeda tries to depict the jihadist movement as the avant-garde resistance movement for the Muslim world against Western oppression, but the propaganda doesn’t work. The young jihadists recruited by Al-Qaeda are “de-territorialized,” deracinated, cut off from their old neighborhoods, networks and even their own families. The Al-Qaeda remains locked in its own violent creed of “propaganda by the deed” and has never made the effort to build up a political structure of its own inside Muslim societies. Since Al-Qaeda concentrates its action on targets that are located in the West or defined as “Western,” it has no tangible impact on developments in actual Muslim societies.

Another optical illusion [in Western perceptions] is a linkage between the trend toward political radicalization in the Arab world and what many people see as massive “re-Islamization” of these societies over the last 30 years. But even if it is true that the Arab population have obviously become more Islamic than it was 30 or 40 years ago, how does one explain the absence of Islamic slogans in the current wave of events? This is the paradox of Islamization: the very success of the Islamic revival has largely de-politicized Islam. Amid all the evidence of Islam’s social and cultural return (the return to the veil, the number of new mosques and new imams, religious networks on TV) has occurred in a way that is unrelated to the Islamist militants. This shift has opened up what one might call a “marketplace for religions” where no competitor has a monopoly. And the trend fits with the new appetite for faith-based activity among young people, who are individualistic and also changeable in their allegiances. In other words, the Islamists have lost their monopoly in the public “market” for religious zeal that they had in the 1980s in the Muslim revival.

Most Arab dictatorships have identified with a conservative version of Islam (Tunisia is an exception) that has a societal profile, without political content, and concentrates on controlling public signs of social morality – with effects such as ensuring that women wear veils in public. This “state-ist” conservatism dovetails with the approach of the key fundamentalist Muslim school of “Salafis,” who emphasize the re-Islamization of individuals as distinct from control of larger social movements. The result, as paradoxical as it may seem, is this re-Islamization has had the effect of draining the [old] political meaning from Muslim religious symbols of political meaning. When everything is viewed as religious, nothing has any religious charge. In other words, what the West sees as “massive re-Islamization” really amounts to nothing more than the standardization and banalization of Islam. The term “Islamic” now arises in the context of everything from fast food to female fashion. In practice, piety has become individualized; people practice their faith in a more personal way; they want a guide who preaches in term of self-fulfillment, like the Egyptian [Muslim evangelist] Amr Khaled; they are losing interest in the utopia of an Islamic state. “Salafis” are focused on defending religious symbols and values, but they have no political agenda. They are not present in the ranks of protest movements: the female demonstrators don’t wear burqas and nowadays there are lots of women in the ranks of protest movements in the Arab world, even in Egypt). Moreover, other religious currents thought to be in decline such as Sufism are thriving now. Such diversification of faiths is bursting Islam’s dominant framework as the Arab world’s “established” religion: in Algeria and Iran, there has been a wave of conversions to Christianity.

Another mistake is to think of dictatorships as defenders of secularism against religious fanaticism. Authoritarian regimes have not “secularized” societies: on the contrary, these regimes (except in Tunisia) have accommodated a “neo-fundamentalist” brand of re-Islamization, featuring discussions about putting into effect Sharia law without asking the related questions about the real circumstances and nature of the “state” in modern times. Invoking a tired rearguard mood of Muslim theocracy, these Arab states have co-opted the Ulema (the corpus of recognized authorities on Islamic law) and other official Islamic institutions in their countries. For example, the traditional clerics trained at Al-Azhar are no longer in the loop about political issues or major social questions. They have nothing to offer the new generations who want new models for practicing their faith in a more open world. The result is that the religious conservatives of Islam are no longer in step with the popular protest.

A KEY FOR CHANGE

This trend also affects Islamist political movements embodied in the mainstream Muslim Brotherhood and their off-shoots such as the Nahda Party in Tunisia. The Muslim Brotherhood has changed significantly. The change starts with their recent political experiences: it includes apparent success (via the Islamic revolution of Iran) and also defeat (resulting in repression against them everywhere else). The new generations of militants as well as veteran activists such as Rashid Ghannouchi in Tunisia have drawn some lessons from this. They understood that striving to gain power after a revolution leads either to civil war or dictatorship. So, in their struggle against repression, they have drawn closer to other political forces. They have also learned from the Turkish model. In that country, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) have been able to reconcile democracy, electoral victory, economic development, and national independence with the promotion of Islamic values – or at least Muslim “authenticity.”

Crucially, the Muslim Brotherhood is no longer defined by having its own separate economic or social model. It has become socially conservative and economically liberal. This is probably the key development. In the 1980’s, Islamists (especially Shi’ites) claimed to be defending the interests of the oppressed classes, and so they advocated national-ization of the economy and redistribution of wealth. Today, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood has endorsed economic counter-reforms launched by Mubarak, notably the agrarian liberalization that allows landowners to raise the rents for tenant farmers on their lands and also to fire their tenant farmers. As a result, Islamists are no longer influential in agrarian social movements instead; there is a return of the “left,” meaning trade-union organizers and activists.

This change among Islamists to embrace Western-style middle-class political values is beneficial to democracy. If the Islamists are no longer going to play the “Islamic Revolution” card in national politics, it means that they will be pushed toward conciliation, compromise and alliances with political foes. The question today is no longer whether dictatorships are the best bulwark against Islamism or not. Islamists have become players in the democratic game. They will certainly weigh in the direction of more control of social behavior, but without relying on a system of repression (as in Iran) or the religious police (as in Saudi Arabia). Instead, they will have to cope with demands for freedom – including freedoms not confined to the right to free parliamentary elections. The dilemma for the Islamists is they will have to identify themselves with the Salafist, conservative traditional ideology -- thereby lose their claim to believing in an Islam that can thrive in the contemporary world -- or else they must make an effort to rethink their conception of the relationship between religion and politics.

One reason the Muslim Brotherhood will be a key for change is that the young generation leading the revolt is not trying very hard to create political structures for itself. We remain in the realm of a protest style of revolt, not the imposition of a new type of regime. Arab societies remain conservative, but the middle classes that economic liberalization has produced in these countries want political stability, and they oppose dictatorships and their predatory nature, which often borders on the Tunisian regime’s kleptomania. The comparison between Tunisia and Egypt is enlightening. In Tunisia, the Ben Ali crew weakened all of its potential supporters, by refusing to share not only power, but mostly wealth. The class of businessmen was literally cheated by the family constantly, and the army was not only left out of politics, but most significantly, excluded from a share in the new distribution of wealth. As a result, the Tunisian army was poor and therefore had a “vested interest” in a democratic regime which would probably allot it a larger budget.

In Egypt however, the regime had a broader social base, and the military is not only associated with political power, but also with the management of the economy and its profits. In the Arab world, demands for democracy will therefore depend on how deeply rooted the regimes’ patronage is in social networks.

There is an interesting anthropological question here. Is the demand for democracy capable of surpassing the obstacles posed by complex networks of allegiances and membership in national networks (such as armed forces, tribes, political patrons, etc)? To what extent can regimes rely on traditional allegiances (e.g. Bedouins in Jordan, tribes in Yemen)? How can these social groups tap into (or not) this demand for democracy and become players? How will the dimension of religion become more diverse and adapt to new situations? The process will be long and chaotic, but one thing is certain: we are no longer in a mindset of Arab-Muslim exceptionalism. Current events suggest a deep change in the societies of the Arab world. These changes have been occurring for a while, but were also overshadowed by the deep-rooted stereotypes that the West ascribed to the Middle East.

Twenty years ago, I published *The Failure of Political Islam*. Whether or not it was read has no importance, but what is happening today shows that local actors have drawn lessons from their own history. We are not yet finished with Islam, and liberal democracy is not “the end of history” either. Now we must now think of Islam in the context of its independence from a stereotyped “Arab-Muslim” culture, which today is no more turned in exclusively on itself than it ever was in reality.

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Olivier Roy received an "Agrégation" in Philosophy and a Master's in Persian language and civilization in 1972 from the Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales (INALCO), in Paris. In 1996, he obtained his PhD in Political Science from the Institut d'Études Politiques de Paris (IEP), and is now Professor at the European University Institute in Florence (Italy). He was previously a research director at the French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS) and a lecturer for both the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences (EHESS). From 1984 to 2008, he has acted as a consultant to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and in 1988, he served also as a consultant to the United Nations Office for Coordinating Relief in Afghanistan (UNOCA). Professor Roy is the author of numerous books on subjects including Iran, Islam, Asian politics. These works include *Globalized Islam: The search for a new Ummah*, *Today's Turkey: A European State?* and *The Illusions of September 11*. He also serves on the editorial board of the academic journal *Central Asian Survey*. His best-known book, *L'Échec de l'Islam politique* (1992) (*The Failure of Political Islam*, 1994) is a standard text for students of political Islam. His most recent work is *Secularism Confronts Islam* (Columbia, 2007). He is presently working on “Islamic norms in the public sphere”, conversions and apostasy and comparative religions.