

RIGHTS FOR ALL

Million Men March In Cairo

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The people of tiny Tunisia at the lap of Mediterranean Sea, with their peaceful moral courage, overthrew the autocratic ruler on 14 January 2011. Inspired by that historic moment the people of Egypt did so within four weeks. Eastern Africa and the Middle East have felt the tremor; rest of the world is breathless watching the developments. Three enceinte civilizations have now awakened: China, India, and Egypt—a surprising resilience.

I

The seeds of the revolt were planted around the time of the uprising in Tunisia, and on January 25 the revolt was launched. They were young professionals, mostly doctors and lawyers, who touched off and then guided the revolt shaking Egypt. They were only about 15 of them, including Wael Ghonim, a Google executive who was detained in jail and tormented for 12 days. In time he emerged as the movement's potent spokesman. The protesters formed some unusual bonds that reflect the singularly non-ideological character of the Egyptian youth revolt, which encompassed liberals, socialists and members of the Muslim Brotherhood. Essam El-Errian, a member of the guidance council of the Muslim Brotherhood, wrote (*New York Times*, 9 February 2011) : his organization was committed to joining the national effort toward reform and progress. He aims to *achieve reform and rights for all : not just for the Muslim Brotherhood, not just for Muslims, but for all Egyptians*. 'We do not intend to take a dominant role in the forthcoming political transition. We are not putting forward a candidate for the presidential elections.'

Having said all that, Mr El-Errian had disqualified all that. The next paragraphs of the same article asserts: 'we envision the establishment of a democratic, civil state that draws on universal measures of freedom and justice, which are central *Islamic* values. We embrace democracy, not as a foreign concept that must be reconciled with tradition, but as a *set of principles and objectives that are inherently compatible with and reinforce Islamic tenets*.' (italics added)

II

Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhwan al-Muslimun) is the biggest and the most powerful religious organization of Egypt, but banned since 1954. Hassan al-Banna had founded the Ikhwan organization in Egypt in 1928, with the ambition of resurrecting the office of the Caliphate in order to resurrect the world of Islam in its pristine age, that is, as it was in the seventh century when the Prophet himself drew and administered the Constitution of the State of Medina. Such is its influence that Brotherhood has spawned offshoots in Algeria, Tunisia, Sudan, Libya, and Somalia in Africa; Syria, Lebanon, Jordon, Palestine in the Levant; across the Gulf States and further afield in places such as Pakistan.

The single most influential writer in the Islamic tradition, at least among the Sunni Arabs, is recognized to be Sayyid Qutb of Egypt. Qutb was born in 1906, the same year as Hassan al-Banna. In 1959 he enrolled in the Muslim Brotherhood (though al-Banna had been assassinated by then). And Qutb became the movement's leading thinker - the Arab world's first important theoretician of the Islamist cause. Gamal Abdel Nasser and a group of other military officers overthrew the Egyptian king, announced a nationalist revolution along Pan-Arabian lines, and turned to the Brotherhood for popular support. Nasser's Revolutionary

Council and Qutb's Muslim Brotherhood did not go along. The strongest affirmation of Qutb was: 'There is no God but Allah'. Nasser jailed him several times. In 1966, Qutb was hanged.

The son of al-Banna, Said Ramadan, was an ideologue of his father's organization, persecuted and exiled from Egypt for forty-one years until death. His doctoral thesis, *Islamic Law : Its Scope and Equity* (Cologne University, 1959), presented a synthesis between, (a), the fundamental positions of Hassan al-Banna on the subject of the Sharia, and law, and, (b), political organizations, and *religious pluralism*—a manifest and permanent open-mindedness, never once the slightest sanction of violence. Said Ramadan rejected the idea of 'an Islamic revolution'.

A former professor of philosophy and Islamic studies at the College of Geneva and at the University of Fribourg in Switzerland, and now at Oxford, Tariq Ramadan, is revered by some as 'a Muslim Martin Luther,' also named among the *Time's* 100 most important innovators for the 21st century. *Washington Post* (29 August 2004) considered his book, *Islam, the West and the Challenges of Modernity*, as 'perhaps the most hopeful work on Muslim theology in the past thousand years.' Tariq is the son of Said, and the grandson of Hassan al-Banna, the grandfather who had founded and nurtured the Muslim Brotherhood in the first place. It is, at this juncture, worth listening for Million Men Movement (MMM) and the people of Egypt as a whole what Tariq Ramadan has to say about the Muslim society.

Egyptian Muslims are Sunnies. The Brotherhood is an organization of laymen. It has always had a tense relationship with Al Azhar, the great Sunny seminary of Cairo. It has gone through several ideological phases—for example, from the assertions of Qutb to the conceptions of Tariq Ramadan. The Brotherhood had resisted so long the seductive challenge of democracy, given the fact that the Egyptian faithful like the idea of voting for their leaders. In 2007 it released, withdrew, and unofficially re-released a political platform defining its philosophical stance with the idea of parliamentary supremacy, given the probability that faithful Muslims may legislatively transgress Holy Law. Today, in Egypt and elsewhere, the *hurriya* ('freedom') cannot be understood without reference to free man and woman voting. The Brotherhoods are trying to figure out how to integrate two civilizations and thereby revive their own. This evolution is not pretty. But it is real. Tariq Ramadan wrote: 'The West has given us a particular form of modernity, it partakes of its history and points of reference. Another civilization can, from within, fix and determine the stakes in a different fashion. This is the case of Islam.'

Freedom in the modern sense had come into Arab thought through European influence, French in particular. Riffa al-Tahtawi (1801-73) of *Egypt* was the first to refer to the idea of freedom and connect it with justice and equity in the Islamic heritage. To him, freedom was an essential condition for the progress and civilization of the nation. His Moroccan contemporary Ahmed bin Khalid al-Nasseri put forward a contrary position that 'the notion of freedom is undoubtedly the work of heretics', and that it disregarded the rights of humanity. Evidently, the tradition of struggle between thesis and antithesis had found deep roots in Arab discourse.

Throughout the 20th century, freedom in Arab culture represents strong desire, a vital need, a major demand, and a powerful slogan - promoted, most notably, by the proponents of 'free thought' as well as those of 'national independence'. An overwhelming wave of interest in the quest of freedom inspired by the philosophy of existentialism swept the Arab cultural scene. Abdul Rahman Badawi, Zakariya Ibrahim, and Mutta Safdi were at the forefront of the movement. A Moroccan philosopher Mohammad Aziz al-Habbabi in his outstanding work *Liberty and Liberation* introduced an innovation known as 'realistic personalism'; it marked a progress in the concept of freedom to be summed up in the phrase 'from freedom to emancipation'. This was a move from freedom as a psychological, spiritual, metaphysical experience and total independence of the self to a 'militant, practical and social

experience'. It brought emancipation from natural constraints and all kinds of oppression, deprivation, and exploitation. It consists of 'real freedoms' — social, economic, and political.

The Muslim community had bypassed the flairs of Renaissance, Reformation, Enlightenment, and modernity. Tariq Ramadan now urges the Muslims to produce a true intellectual revolution in the sense of the 18th century Copernican revolution - the revolution that showed the earth was not at the centre of the universe, but only a small planet moving around the sun at a corner of one of the innumerable galaxies of the universe. It is hard to claim that living in such a remote planet, Man had the cosmic significance.

'When the Renaissance, humanism, and Reformation worked together in the West to start the process of secularization and to set free the power of reason that has become more and more autonomous and scientific, Muslim civilization seemed to freeze. Grippled by the ethical teaching of Islam, increasingly incapable of renewing the dynamic link between the moral frame of reference and the autonomy of reason, and feeling that they are in danger vis-a-vis the dynamism and expansion of Europe, the ulema were bound to the supreme authority of religion and preferred to sacrifice 'the other knowledge' [i.e. natural science], rather than the norms of religion.' 'Behind this sustained nostalgia and idealized dream,' Ramadan continues, 'a deep malaise lies hidden, because we do not know, we no longer know, how to reestablish the connection between religion and science such that religion's ethical teachings give science a dignified finality [status] without perverting its implementation or impeding its advances.'

Ramadan proceeds to explore how to reestablish the connection between religion and science. He would do it virtually by comprehending the universal messages of the Mecca period of the Prophet as opposed to his subsequent contemplation on the Medina state. So, a distinction should be made, in the case of the society of Medina, between the fundamental principles on which it was established (e.g. the rule of law, equality, freedom of conscience and worship) on the one hand, and the form in which that society historically appeared on the other. Faithfulness to principles cannot involve faithfulness to a particular historical model, because times change, societies and political and economic systems become more complex, and in every age it is in fact necessary to think of a model appropriate to each social and cultural reality. Ramadan gives an example: although the principles of democracy are identical, the models of democracy in Europe and also in the United States vary widely.

In the matter of Islamic practice, the text of the Holy Book is the authentic point of reference because the rites are sacred and not subject to human intervention. Whereas in the wider area of human and social affairs, the established methodology is the exact opposite, i.e. *everything is permitted except that which is explicitly forbidden by the text*. Thus, the scope of exercise of reason and creativity is immense, and people have complete discretion to experiment, make progress and reform as long as they avoid what is forbidden by the text of the Holy Book.

The basic, inviolable core of timeless principles consists of three doctrines relating to respectively: faith, practice, and spirituality. The first and most important element of Muslim identity is faith—faith in the oneness of the Almighty. It is the purest expression of the essence of Muslim identity beyond time and space. The faith is naturally embodied in religious practice (prayer, zakat, fasting). Closely connected with these two realities (viz. faith, and practice) is the fundamental dimension of spirituality, which is the remembrance of Almighty. The timeless three elements of Muslim identity and culture are: monotheism; the practice of prayer, zakat, and fasting; and the remembrance of Almighty. This is ordained in the scripture. Beyond this, reason has its full freedom, in the perception of Ramadan. Knowledge, innovation, and application of natural science and technology are indeed approved as they belong to the domain of free reason.

III

Aspirations of the Million Men March in Cairo were summed up in a sign: 'Tahrir [Freedom] Square—closed for constitutional changes.' What would the Constitution write? Cairo University law professors in their black robes filed past to declare that Egypt must become a nation of laws because that's the only kind of nation that guarantees people's rights. What is 'people's rights'? 'My generation grew to think we can accept anything,' said El-Shamy who had worked for 23 years at Pfizer. 'But the youth, they refresh us, remind us of dignity, fairness, freedom'. Wael Ghonim described in a TV interview his ordeals in Mubarak's jail, and added: 'I am ready to die for freedom.' What is freedom? People demand freedom — social, economic, political, all.

Blessed by the Prophet, the Constitution of the State of Medina adopted in the year 622 has 47 Articles. Here are two quotations from the Constitution of Medina of 622 : (25). The Jews of Banu Awf are a community (*ummah*) along with the believers [Muslims]. To the Jews their religion (*din*) and to the Muslims their religion. (37). It is for the Jews to bear their expenses and for the Muslims to bear their expenses. Between them is sincere friendship and honorable dealing, not treachery.

Nobody can deny the great vision of the Prophet and the sagacity of the Constitution which the Prophet wrote. Will the Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhwan al-Muslimun) of Egypt, in the twenty-first century, accept a similar secular Constitution for the modern Egypt?

The former director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, a Nobel Laureate for Peace, Mohamed El Baradei, expressed his view 'on a new Egypt': 'The new leaders will have to guarantee the rights of all Egyptians. They will need to dissolve the current Parliament. They will also need to abolish the Constitution, which has become an instrument of repression, and replace it with provisional Constitution, a three-person presidential council and a transitional government of national unity.

'The presidential council should include a representative of the military, embodying the sharing of power needed to ensure continuity and stability during this critical transition. The job of the presidential council and the interim government during this period should be to set in motion the process that will turn Egypt into a free and democratic society. This includes drafting a democratic Constitution to be put to a referendum, and preparing for free and fair presidential and parliamentary elections within one year.'

'We are at the dawn of a new Egypt', El Baradei feels. 'A free and democratic society, at peace with itself and with its neighbors, will be a bulwark of stability in the Middle East and a worthy partner in the international community. The rebirth of Egypt represents the hope of a new era in which Arab society, Muslim culture and the Middle East are no longer viewed through the lens of war and radicalism, but as contributors to the forward march of humanity, modernized by advanced science and technology, enriched by our diversity of art and culture and united by shared universal values.

'We have nothing to fear but the shadow of a repressive past.' □□□

Source:

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