

REVISITING ARAB SPRING

Looking on the Bright Side

Ranjit Sau

[‘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.’ –Tariq Ramadan.]

WHAT ‘IF THE ARAB SPRING turns ugly’—asks Vail Naser, the author of *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam will Shape the Future?* ‘The Arab Spring is a hopeful chapter in Middle Eastern politics, but the region’s history points to outcomes. There are no recent examples of extended power-sharing or peaceful transition to democracy in the Arab world. When dictatorships crack, budding democracies are more than likely to be greeted by violence and paralysis. Sectarian divisions—the bane of many Middle Eastern societies—will then emerge, as competing groups settle old scores and vie for power.’ True it was in the past, but not necessarily it would be so in the future. After all, social formations are changing.

For centuries, Islam had represented the greatest military power on earth. In the medieval period, between the sixth and fifteenth centuries, Islam was the leading civilization in world, with its great and powerful kingdoms, industries, commerce, creative science, and letters. Its geographical expansion came in three main waves of successively: Arabs, Mongols, and Ottoman Turks.

Since the eleventh century, after the conquest of Mongols, Persians, and Turkish armies, Arab lands had been controlled by foreign powers. Most of the region was ruled by the Ottoman Empire for centuries. By the late eightieth century, as Ottoman power waned, European colonization set in, and for the next 150 years Arabia fell under the shadow of Western hegemony. It is a story of about one thousand years of foreign domination over Arab lands.

Now, Africa and the Middle East are in the midst of transformation articulated through people’s protests and demonstrations against the autocratic regimes of, for instance, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria. Causes of and factors behind this turmoil may be better understood in terms of three dimensions—economic, social, and political, as people aspire for a descent life process, humane governance, and inclusive justice and law. An elementary question is: What are the underlying contradictions, i.e. the internal and external conflicts, that is to be addressed.

In the first parliamentary election after Hosni Mubarak lost power, in 2012, a political coalition dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood has won about 47 percent of the seats. An alliance of ultraconservative Islamists won the next largest share of seats, about 25 percent. The military council leading Egypt since ouster of Mubarak in February has said that it will keep

parliament in a subordinate role with little real power until the ratification of the constitution and the election of a President, both scheduled for completion by the end of June. But the council has assigned parliament the authority to choose the 100 members of a constitutional Assembly, so it may shape Egypt for decades to come.

Two groups of Islamists together winning about 70 per cent of the seats indicates the deep cultural conservatism of the Egyptian public, which is expressing its will through free and fair elections for the first time in more than six decades. The two groups have very different visions and appear to be rivals rather than collaborators. The Brotherhood has said it intends to respect personal liberties and will focus on economic and social issues, gradually nudging the culture towards its conservative values. Among the remaining roughly 30 percent of parliamentary seats, the next largest share was won by the Wafd Party, a liberal party recognized under Mubarak and with roots dating to Egypt's colonial period. It was trailed by a coalition known as the Egyptian Bloc which included the Free Egyptians, business-friendly liberal party founded by a Coptic Christian businessman. A coalition of parties founded by the young leaders of the revolt won only a few percent of the seats.

Muslim Brotherhood (*Ikhwan al-Muslimun*) is the biggest and the most powerful religious organization of Egypt. 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, Jordan, 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.

Egyptian Muslims are Sunnis. 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—of the West and of the East—and thereby revive their own.

Throughout the Middle East there is a strong undercurrent of simmering sectarian tension between Sunnis and Shiites in the long arc that stretches from Lebanon to Pakistan, and the region’s two main power brokers, Shiite Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia, are already jousting for power. The global power brokers from abroad, too, are no less proactive.

Human beings are engaged in two primitive activities, namely, propagation of the species, and production of the means of subsistence, conducted respectively at two sites: family, and factory, respectively. Families get together to make a society; factories to organize an economy. In order to administer them, a polity comes into existence. These three branches of human social existence—society, economy, and polity—have their distinct laws of motion, subject to the consideration of overall equilibrium. Polity is agile and volatile; economy moves slowly; society is lethargic. These three branches are interconnected and interdependent; together they constitute a system which works with certain rules. Among the three branches, economy, being productive as well as most effective, could be the primary starting point for the Parliament of Egypt at the moment, to be followed by social and political concerns in due course.

Regimes that get rich through natural resources tend never to develop, modernize, or gain legitimacy. The Arab world is the poster child of this theory. Egypt is a small but significant exporter of oil and gas. It also earns some \$3 billion a year in transit fees paid by ships crossing the Suez Canal, and gets huge amount of dollars a year from the United States of America. In addition, it gets the same privilege from remittance—money sent home—from Egyptians who work in the Gulf States. All told, it gets a hefty percent of its GDP (annual total income of a

country as a whole) from *unearned income*. Egypt ought to invest resources in the economy so that facilities of employment are created, economic productivity and production rises, and people's education and technical skill improves. It has a middle class and a developed civil society. Egypt is ripe for significant political reform.

On January 25, 2012, tens of thousands of Egyptians rallied to mark the first anniversary of the country's 2011 uprising, with liberals and Islamists gathering on different sides of Cairo's Tahrir Square in a reflection of deep political divides that emerged in the year since the downfall of Hosni Mubarak. Groups like the Muslim Brotherhood and their liberal and secular rivals differ over the goals of the revolution and strategy to achieve them, in particular the relationship with the country's interim military leaders. Unlike many of the demonstrators, Mohamed ElBaradei, a Nobel Peace laureate, who led the protest with liberals, said that the immediate return of the military to the barracks was not a top priority. 'I don't think that [sending the military to barrack now] is the issue right now. What we need to agree on is how to exactly achieve the revolution's goals starting by putting down a proper democratic constitution, fixing the economy, security and independent justice and media and making sure the people who had killed those people are prosecuted'.

But the liberal and leftist groups maintain that the revolution must continue until remnants of Mubarak's 29-year regime are removed from public life and government, and until those responsible for the killing of protesters are brought to justice. Would only street protest do it?
□□