

Forum

Why Islam (Properly Understood) Is the Solution: Reflections on the Role of Religion in Tunisia's Democratic Transition

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Abstract

This paper is a provocative play on the famous Muslim Brotherhood slogan *al-Islām hūwa al-ḥāl* (Islam is the solution). While critics of the Muslim Brothers rightly criticized them for the simplicity of their worldview in thinking that religion was a panacea for all of the problems confronting Muslim societies during the late twentieth century, an argument can be made that religion does profoundly matter in the context of the struggle for democracy in the Arab-Islamic world. In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, democratic transitions in North Africa and the Middle East will be dependent on democratically negotiating the question of religion's role in politics. Here I provide some reflections on this topic with a focus on Tunisia's transition to democracy.

Why Religion Matters for Democracy

Religion matters for the development and consolidation of democracy in three important ways, each of which is relevant for the ongoing debate in Tunisia and the broader Arab-Islamic world.

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First, in the historical development of democracy on a global level, democratically negotiating religion's proper role in a new political system is an inevitable part of the process of creating a just political order. This applies especially to those societies in which religion is a marker of identity and thus a highly politicized topic of debate.

Alfred Stepan has argued, convincingly, that *all* emerging democracies face political conflict and struggle over the normative role of religion in politics. Thus, any objective reading of the history and development of democracy will reveal that, for many long-standing western democracies, this dispute was a major source of protracted conflict. Stepan, who is critical of a non-historical approach to the study of democracy, has shown that virtually "no Western European democracy now has a rigid or hostile separation of church and state." Instead, most western countries "have arrived at a democratically negotiated freedom of religion from state interference and all of them allow religious groups freedom, not only of private worship, but to organize groups in civil society." It is in the dynamic of what he has called the "twin tolerations," whereby state institutions and religious authorities learn to respect certain minimum boundaries of freedom of action, that an understanding of the relationship between religion and democracy must be rooted.¹

Given this enveloping context, what is happening in Tunisia today is both natural and normal. The public debate on religion's role in politics is part of the growing pains of building a mature and stable democracy. Rather than sounding the alarm and decrying this state of affairs, from the perspective of the history of democratization, this aspect of Tunisian politics should be both encouraged and celebrated. Those hardline secularists in both Tunisia and Europe who think differently on this topic need to overcome their historical amnesia about democracy's long history and development especially with respect to the role of religion in politics. Doing so will better sensitize them to events in the Arab world today.

The second reason why religion matters is related to an argument I made in my book *Islam, Secularism, and Liberal Democracy: Toward a Democratic Theory for Muslim Societies*.² In the Muslim world, I argued, the "road to democracy, whatever twists and turns it makes along the way, cannot avoid passing through the gates of religious politics." I meant several things by this claim. One point that I made was that religious-based parties and religious intellectuals/activists could play a critically important role in democratizing their societies, provided that they reconciled their political theologies with universal standards of human rights and the modern demands of democracy (understood as political legitimacy being rooted in popular sovereignty).

We can clearly see this happening in Tunisia with the Ennahda Party. As the only truly national political party with support throughout the country, its leaders are at the vanguard of overseeing Tunisia's democratic transition. Its role is unique and critically important to the transition process' success, and no other party can play the role that it is currently performing. This raises a question, however: Why is Ennahda's contribution to Tunisia's democratic transition so important and unique? The story begins with rise of the post-colonial state in the Islamic world and the brutal legacies and traumatized populations left in its wake. A comparative treatment of political secularism in Europe and the Islamic world helps to clarify this point.

Over the past 200 years, the Muslim world's experience with modernization and secularism has been largely negative. It is important to appreciate that modernization in Europe was an indigenous and gradual process that evolved in conjunction with socioeconomic and political developments while being supported by intellectual arguments and, critically, by religious groups that eventually sunk deep roots within its political culture. By contrast, the Muslim experience (of which there were several) has been marked by a perception of secularism as an alien ideology synonymous with atheism/anti-religion and imposed from the outside first by colonial and imperial invaders and then kept alive by local elites who came to power during the post-colonial period. In short, the development of secularism in the West was largely a bottom-up process that was intimately connected to debates and transformations from within civil society, whereas in Muslim societies it was largely a top-down process driven first by the colonial state and then by the post-colonial state.³ As a result, the form of secularism that emerged in the Middle East suffered from weak intellectual roots and, with few exceptions, never penetrated the mainstream of society.

Furthermore, by the end of the twentieth century most states in the Muslim world were developmental failures. A pattern of state-society relations unfolded in the post-colonial era that further impugned secularism's reputation. An autocratic modernizing state, often with critical external support, suffocated civil society and thus forced oppositional activity into the mosque, which inadvertently contributed to the rise of political Islam. A set of top-down, forced modernization, secularization, and westernization policies by the state, within a short span of time, generated widespread social and psychological alienation and dislocation. Rapid urbanization, as well as changing cultural and socioeconomic relationships coupled with increasing corruption, economic mismanagement, rising poverty and income inequality, undermined the state's legitimacy. These developments reflected negatively on secularism,

because the ruling ideologies of many post-colonial regimes in the Muslim world were openly secular and nationalist.

Thus, for a generation of Muslims growing up in the post-colonial era, despotism, dictatorship, and human rights abuses came to be associated with secularism. Those political activists who experienced oppression at the hands of secular national governments logically concluded that secularism is an ideology of repression. This observation applies not only to Tunisia under Bourguiba and Ben Ali, but also to Iran under the shah, Egypt under Mubarak, Iraq under Saddam Hussein, Yemen under Saleh, Syria under the Assads, and many other Muslim-majority countries in the latter half of the twentieth century. Summarizing this trend, political scientist Vali Nasr has noted:

Secularism in the Muslim world never overcame its colonial origins and never lost its association with the postcolonial state's continuous struggle to dominate society. Its fortunes became tied to those of the state: the more the state's ideology came into question, and the more its actions alienated social forces, the more secularism was rejected in favor of indigenous worldviews and social institutions – which were for the most part tied to Islam. As such, the decline of secularism was a reflection of the decline of the postcolonial state in the Muslim world.⁴

One of the key legacies of the post-colonial state's failure in the Arab world is brutalized, traumatized, and deeply polarized societies. This polarization is a result of the state's top-down authoritarian policies that were internalized and accepted by some segments of society (mostly the affluent urban sectors) but rejected by the vast majority. The absence of a democratic public sphere also contributed to this polarization. This is how the political landscape looks in the Arab world today, including Tunisia. Due to this legacy of failed secular modernization paradigms, deep distrust and suspicion exists among different political and ideological camps along a secular-religious/Islamist axis.

Adding to this polarization is the shocking rise of a new ultraconservative Salafi movement.⁵ In the aftermath of the Arab Spring revolutions, its members are playing a significant role in the politics of their countries and thus pose a serious challenge to prospects for a democratic transition. Thus, political conflict is not simply between Islamists and secularists, a third variable is in play, one that adds a new dimension to the current social polarization. In this context, it should be pointed out that neither camp is monolithic and that deep divisions exist within each group. The process and prospects for electoral politics suggests that they are in the process of transforming and evolving in directions yet unknown.

One challenge facing Tunisia and other Arab societies is how to overcome this polarity and keep democracy on track. One answer to this question is that these societies are in vital need of a *mediating group*. Such a group can try to reconcile political tensions, find common ground, and morally isolate the non-democratic elements who seek to use violence. In other words, the creation of a political constituency of the “moderate center” is needed, one in which both religious and secular groups can unite under a broad democratic agenda based a set of universal democratic principles and a commitment to respect a process of democratization.

Democratic Theory and the Middle Class

One early theory of politics put forth by Aristotle (384-322 BCE) is that of the middle class has a causal link with democracy. According to him, a large prosperous middle class can mediate between rich and poor, thereby creating the structural foundations upon which democratic political processes may operate. In his view, the middle class is less apt than the rich or poor to act unjustly toward its fellow citizens. A constitution based on the middle class is the mean between the extremes of rule by the rich and its converse, the rule by the poor. “That the middle [constitution] is best is evident,” Aristotle observed, “for it is the freest from faction: where the middle class is numerous, there least occur factions and divisions among citizens.”⁶ Political systems in which the middle class is strong, therefore, are more stable, more just, and more secure than many other forms of government, he suggested.

Beyond Aristotelian theory, the middle class’ specific commercial nature is also believed to be very important. The democratic institutions that deal with the law, power limitation, and electoral participation were staffed and run by a commercial middle class. More recently in a widely influential book by Barrington Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*,⁷ the author made a similar point: The middle class is the key historical actor in the processes that ultimately lead to democracy. For example, Moore emphasized the bourgeoisie’s importance but broadly construed this to include what we refer to today as the “middle class.” He suggested that only societies with a sufficiently strong bourgeoisie would become democratic. In societies where landowners were strong, the emerging bourgeoisie had to enter into an alliance with them, an arrangement that eventually could turn into a dictatorship. “No bourgeoisie, no democracy” was the most famous line from Moore’s classic study of the topic.

Ennahda as Tunisia's Middle Class

The Ennahda Party is perfectly situated to serve as Tunisia's mediating group during the country's democratic transition process. As Stefano Torelli has observed, the rise of new forms of radical Islam, most of which have an ideological antipathy toward the basic principles of liberal democracy, has changed the party's outlook. To its credit, Ennahda has taken the wise and pragmatic decision to mediate between secular forces on the one hand and Salafi groups on the other. According to Torelli:

This is the most interesting aspect to underline concerning *al-Nahda* strategy in the new Tunisian political landscape. What we are witnessing in Tunisia is the capacity of a political party to mediate between different instances. The role that *al-Nahda* is playing could be crucial in the new Tunisia where several political and social actors are vying for supremacy.⁸

What we are witnessing in Tunisia today, therefore, is the capacity of a religious-based political party to mediate among different polarities within society. This function is absolutely crucial in the new Tunisia, where several political and social actors with deeply ideological worldviews are vying for supremacy and are currently at loggerheads.

Torrelli considers this to be a very interesting development because historically, Islamist parties in the Arab-Islamic world were never mediators. On the contrary, the Islamist factor in politics has often been depicted as the one party responsible for producing internal rifts and creating ideological polarity. In the new political landscape, however, old actors are performing new roles. According to Torelli:

The sudden emergence of the Salafists as a new visible and increasingly important political and social actor has instead resulted in an almost natural redefinition of *al-Nahda*'s role itself. Although some scholars think that the mediating role of *al-Nahda* is only tactical – in order to avoid confrontation that could serve the interests of secular camp ... *al-Nahda* is the only actor able to communicate and to mediate with the new Salafism, while at the same time trying to make concessions to leftwing parties and the secular forces.⁹

It should be stressed that no other political party or movement can perform this important mediating task. It is primarily for this reason that the prospects for Tunisian democracy depend on Ennahda's ongoing stewardship of the Tunisian revolution and democratic transition process. If it were to be removed from the equation, the entire house of cards would likely collapse.

Ennahda's Post-Islamist Turn?

Ennahda's current leadership role, in particular that of a mediator and situating itself in the middle of Tunisia's political spectrum, suggests that the party is undergoing its own political transformation. Sociologist Asef Bayat has described this phenomenon as "post-Islamism."¹⁰ Post-Islamist groups are "not anti-Islamic or secular; a post-Islamist movement dearly upholds religion but also highlights citizens' rights and is trying to reconcile faith with freedom, Islam and liberty; religiosity with rights. It aspires to a pious society within a democratic state."¹¹ In many ways, post-Islamism is undermining the very principles of early Islamism (1960-70s) by "emphasizing rights over duties; plurality instead of a single authoritative voice; historicity rather than a fixed reading of religious texts, and the future instead of the past." Post-Islamists want "to marry Islam with individual choice and freedom, with democracy and modernity ... to achieve what some termed an 'alternative path to modernity.'"¹²

Early examples of such movements include Iran's late 1990s reform movement and Green Movement, Indonesia's Prosperous Justice Party, Egypt's Center Party (Hizb al-Wasat), Morocco's Justice and Development Party, and Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party. Each originally began as a more hardline political Islamist party that underwent a gradual internal transformation and came to critique Islamist excesses, violation of democratic rights, and use of religion as a tool to sanctify political power. All of these groups eventually opted to work within the framework of a democratic state when given the opportunity to do so. Recent developments in Tunisia, both leading up to the revolution and afterward, suggest that Ennahda is moving in this post-Islamist direction, if it has not already arrived there.

Vali Nasr on Muslim Democracy

What is interesting about events in Tunisia today, from the perspective of Islamic political theory, is that they confirm an earlier theoretical claim that I made in 2009: The path to democracy in Muslim societies will be led not by secularists/liberal forces, but rather by reformed Islamists or post-Islamists (in Bayat's formulation). This development is extremely important, for it challenges much of the received wisdom on political progress and democratization subscribed to by western social scientists and intellectuals.

Over five years before the Arab Spring, Vali Nasr noted that this trend was already taking place in countries like Turkey and Indonesia. In an important essay entitled "The Rise of Muslim Democracy," he argued: "Since the early

1990s, political openings in a number of Muslim-majority countries – all, admittedly, outside the Arab world – have seen Islamic-oriented (but non-Islamist) parties vying successfully for votes in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan ... and Turkey.” He perceptively noted that unlike

Islamists, with their visions of rule by Islamic law or even a restored caliphate, Muslim Democrats view political life with a pragmatic eye. They reject or at least discount the classic Islamist claim that Islam commands the pursuit of a *shari’*a state, and their main goal tends to be the more mundane one of crafting viable electoral platforms and stable governing coalitions to serve individual and collective interests – Islamic as well as secular – within a democratic arena whose boundaries they respect, win or lose.¹³

Recent events in Tunisia now confirm that these developments are also occurring in the Arab world. This is both noteworthy and profoundly important for the development of democracy and people around the world who genuinely care about the success of democracy in Tunisia and throughout the broader Islamic world should welcome these trends.

The above analysis highlights the third way that religion is tied to democratization. At the level of both theory and practice, the debate on religion’s role in politics and the leading role being performed by some reform-minded religious actors in advancing democratization reminds us that the struggle for democratization in Muslim societies is deeply tied to this religio-political interaction. While similarities exist in the history and development of democracy in the West, this development in Europe and North America took place over a long period of time. In the case of the Arab-Islamic world, this process is far more concentrated in terms of the timing of these developments.

Conclusion

In short, as I have tried to demonstrate in this paper, religion matters in the context of democratization theory for the Arab-Islamic world. The case of Tunisia is a perfect illustration of why and how religion, properly understood, is an important factor in the processes of democratic transition and consolidation. The following three points are worth emphasizing in the context of the emerging debate on Islam and democracy the post-Arab Spring period:

1. The history of democracy involves debates/conflict over religion’s normative role in politics (this is natural, normal, and to be expected).

2. The road to democracy in Muslim societies will be led by reformed Islamist groups and post-Islamists, not secular/liberal forces. This is deeply tied to the post-colonial state's traumatic history and failure in the Islamic world.
3. In Muslim societies, the processes of democratization and liberalization cannot be artificially delinked from debates about religion's normative role in government. The two go hand in hand and are deeply intertwined and interconnected.

Endnotes

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