

The Role of Religion in the Arab Spring

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MOHAMMAD ZAMAN, DEC 16 2011

Religion has returned to global politics with ferocity and international relations theory has little to say about it.
(Shah and Philpott, 2011: 24)

It has now been a year since those first protests took place in Tunisia that ultimately saw the fall of the Ben Ali government and kicked off a series of protests and demonstrations against dictatorial regimes across North Africa and the Middle East. The Arab Spring has now entered its second phase with democratic elections taking place in Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco. All three election results have revealed a similar pattern with Islamist parties coming out on top. And not only have they come on top, they have done so with a wide margin.

In Tunisia, the Ennahda Movement took 41% of the seats; in Morocco, the Justice and Development Party more than doubled its number of seats in the Assembly of Representatives to 27%; and in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafi Al Nour Party have won 69% of the seats in the first phase of the elections.

There are several reasons behind the electoral success of the various Islamic political parties in the above-mentioned countries. These are all long established parties with a strong history of opposition to the dictators in their respective countries (apart from the Egyptian Al Nour Party). They have strong membership bases and a presence in local communities and neighbourhoods, and leaders that are well known to the general public. They have been active in providing social services to the masses where their governments were lacking. The Islamic parties thus had the right formula: brand awareness (long established parties and well known leaders), legitimacy and popularity (history of opposition to dictators and providing social services to the masses), and finally resources (both financial and human resources that could be mobilised).

Yet some commentators have become alarmed by the dominance of Islamic political parties in the elections, going as far as to claim that the Arab Spring has been hijacked by Islamists. Countless articles and editorials have been written as to how the hard won victories of the secular-minded revolutionaries are being usurped by the freeloading Islamists (FP, The Hindu, Europe's World, The Economist). Just how true is this assertion?

When people took to the streets against the regimes across North Africa and the Middle East, the demonstrations were attended by people regardless of sex, race, age, or religious affiliation. They all had a stake in the outcome of the uprisings, as the issues that brought them out on to the streets affected them all. Unemployment, poverty, corruption, restrictions on freedoms, all these were reasons why people revolted against their governments. Groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Ennahda have a long history of opposition to the regimes in their countries; it would be foolish to think that they did not have a strong presence in the anti-government protests. It is not a case that they stayed at home during the protests and only came out afterwards to reap the rewards.

I believe it was the focus that the media had on the younger tech-savvy activists that gave us this distorted picture. The role of the internet, in particular social media and networking websites, was seen as being crucial to the success of the protests, a point that is heavily contested though (The New Yorker, Washington Post). The internet was used by these activists to call for demonstrations and coordinate activities; but more importantly, as a platform to broadcast their views to the wider world. In effect they became spokespersons for a revolution that was largely leaderless.

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A false impression was thus created where the largely urban, middle class, young activists were seen to be representative of the larger protest movements. Secondly, their modern means of communication was somehow seen as credentials of secularism. This was the English speaking Twitter and Facebook generation, with laptops and smart phones at hand to communicate with the world; surely this meant that they all shared a similar secular outlook.

The ideas of modernity and secularism have been discussed by Scott M. Thomas in his book *The Global Resurgence of Religion And The Transformation Of International Relations*. He makes a similar observation about the Iranian Revolution of 1979:

'The Islamic Revolution is one of the most vivid examples of how the impact of culture and religion was ignored or marginalised in the study of international relations. According to modernisation theory – the dominant framework for understanding the politics of developing countries – secularisation was considered to be an inevitable part of modernisation. The saliency of religion in social and political life was supposed to decline with economic progress and modernisation.' (Thomas, 2005: 2)

This points towards a more worrying issue that has far more implications than just our understanding of the Arab Spring. The problem is that the role of religion is a largely marginalised one in the wider academic study of international relations, where it is seen as being privatised and having little to do with political life. The two main positivist international relations theories – realism and liberalism – treat religion as a non-issue which has little bearing on how international events are to be understood. The leading post-positivist theory, constructivism, which emphasises shared ideas, norms, culture and identity, does offer a role for religion in our understanding of international affairs. In reality however, as Fox and Hurd show, the leading proponents of the constructivist theory offer little guidance on how to integrate religion into the conceptual framework of the theory.

There needs to be a greater understanding in international relations theory of the role that religion plays in different societies and countries, and specifically how this shapes the politics, both internal and external, of these countries. Unless the different theories of international relations can accommodate religion in their frameworks, we will be unable to fully comprehend important geopolitical events.

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