Islamic liberalism: Mission impossible?

Written by Mustafa Akyol

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https://www.e-ir.info/2011/12/29/islamic-liberalism-mission-impossible/

MUSTAFA AKYOL, DEC 29 2011

At a time when many Western liberals are concerned with the rise of Islamist parties in the post-revolutionary Arab states such as Tunisia and Egypt, it is worth remembering a key observation made by Leonard Binder, a professor of the history of the Middle East and the author of *Islamic Liberalism*. "Without a vigorous Islamic liberalism," he argued in his 1998 book, "political liberalism will not succeed in the Middle East."

Binder, in order words, had realized that liberal democracy would not take hold in Muslim societies unless the liberal idea was somehow reconciled with, and even supported by, Islam.

Admittedly, this might make some readers pessimistic, for in their minds the words "liberalism" and "Islam" can come together only to form an oxymoron. And there are plenty of famous illiberal Muslims — from Mulla Omar of the Taliban to Ayatollah Khamenei of Iran — to vindicate their judgment.

However, this was not the case a century ago. The Islamic world was still much less open and democratic then the West, but most intellectuals and statesmen of that world were self-declared liberals.

One of the vanguards of this forgotten trend, which I disclose in my book, was an intellectual group in the late Ottoman Empire — which then covered almost the whole Muslim Middle East — called Young Ottomans. (Not to be confused with the later Young Turks, who were more secular and nationalist.) The Young Ottomans were both pious Muslims and committed liberals, who believed that the only cure to Muslim societies was to import the liberal democracy of the West and re-articulate it in Islamic terms.

The most prominent Young Ottoman was Namık Kemal, who saw liberty as the secret of the West's ascendance, but also believed that Islam had the same ideal in its core. "Being created free by Allah, man is naturally obliged to benefit from this divine gift," he wrote in his journal *Hürriyet* ("Freedom") in 1868. "[Thus] state authority should be realized in the way which will least limit the freedom of the individual."

Thanks to such idealistic calls, and also the pragmatic need to keep the multi-religious empire intact, the Ottoman State, the very seat of the Muslim Caliphate, realized very important reforms in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The powers of the sultan were limited by law, while citizen's rights were guaranteed. Non-Muslim peoples of the empire, who used to be "protected" but unequal according to classical Islamic law, gained the status of equal citizenship. The Ottomans accepted a liberal constitution in 1876, and then elected a parliament, which welcomed many Greek, Armenian or Jewish deputies, along with Turkish, Arab or Albanian ones.

In the same era, the Arab intelligentsia was also living what Arab historian Albert Hourani called "the liberal age." One of the prominent reformists, the Egyptian scholar Muhammad Abduh, who traveled in Europe, famously said that in Paris he saw "Islam without Muslims," and on his return to Egypt he saw "Muslims without Islam." He felt, in other words, that all the good things Muslim societies should have were in the West but not in Islamdom. He and his followers were only proud that Islam did not share Europe's virulent anti-Semitism, which then was rampant in countries such as France.

Most of these late 19th or early 20th century Muslim liberals — who are commonly known as "Islamic modernists" —

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looked back at the formative centuries of Islam, and discovered some liberal themes buried under the weight of stagnant traditions. First of all, they found tolerant references in the Quran — verses declaring, "there is no compulsion in religion." Besides, they noticed that some of the troubling *hadiths* (sayings attributed to Prophet Muhammad) might not be authentic, and could be representing only the misogyny and the bigotry of some medieval men. They, therefore, wanted to re-read the Quran in the light of the modern age.

Quite notably, this was the dominant intellectual trend in the Muslim world a century ago. Yet, again quite notably, it failed. Instead, the authoritarian ideology called "Islamism" gradually dominated the scene, to establish reactionary political parties, tyrannical regimes and even some terrorist offshoots.

But why? Why Islamic modernism failed and gave floor to radical Islamism?

My short answer to that big question, which I explore more deeply in my book, is the change in political context: At the end of the first quarter of the 20th century, the Ottoman Empire fell, giving rise to more than a dozen nation-states, almost all of which were colonized by European powers. Colonization inevitably led to anti-colonization, and replaced liberalism with a reactionary collectivism. The question, "How can we be like the West?" got replaced by "How can we resist the West?"

For worse, the post-colonial regimes in most Muslim nations turned out to be secular dictatorships, which oppressed the Islamic pious, only to push them further toward Islamism. In Iran, for example, the "modernist" Reza Shah, banned the veiling all women, ordered his police to patrol the streets to tear the chadors off, and executed the ayatollahs who protested his measures. As a response, the first modern Islamist terrorist movement, the Fadayan-e Islam (Devotees of Islam), was born, and it began assassinating the Shah's men. Secular violence had created its Islamic mirror image.

Unfortunately, these two extremes – secular authoritarianism versus Islamic authoritarianism – created a vicious cycle in the modern Middle East, whose latest byproducts even hit the West.

Fortunately, though, we might be at the dawn of a new era, in which the vicious cycle can be broken. The Arab Spring, at least in Tunis and Egypt, offers an important ground, by bringing Islamist parties to power, making them responsible, and forcing them to abide by demands for more democracy and freedom that are gaining ground in the Arab world.

Meanwhile my country, Turkey of the new century, which defeated its own secular authoritarianism without falling prey to Islamic authoritarianism, offers an important example. The Justice and Development Party, which has been in power since 2002 by winning three elections in a row, is proving, despite all its flaws, that pious Muslims can work with secular liberals in order to advance the rights of individuals and minorities. And, as Ayatollah Hashemi Shahroudi, the former judiciary chief of Iran, said in August quite disapprovingly, "Turkey is using developments in the region in its own favor by promoting liberal Islam."

If we are lucky, more democracies can soon emerge in the Middle East, and Islamic liberalism, which is actually not that much of an oxymoron, will be reborn.

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