

Is political Islam on the losing side of the Arab Spring in Egypt?

Written by Afshin Shahi

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AFSHIN SHAHI, JAN 9 2012

Since the early days of 2011, the notion of the “Arab Spring” is becoming a household name across the globe. Not a single month passed without some leading stories capturing our imagination and thoughts about the “Arab Spring” and its possible repercussions. Although the term “Arab Spring” is becoming ubiquitous, it is still hard to identify its ideological parameters and define it. The debate over the causes of this mobilizing phenomenon is nowhere near to its end and undoubtedly volumes will be produced to elucidate it for years to come. The winds of the Arab Spring has reached many countries with unique socio-political particularities and clearly its impact has not been the same for every Arab state in the region.

Although it is too early to have any certainty about any inevitable scenario, it is likely that Islamic forces will reach into the centers of power, at least in the affected countries. In recent elections in Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt, Islamic parties have gained the majority of the votes. Although in the short term these Islamic forces appear to be the winners of the Arab Spring in the long term they are likely to be the losers. Like many other ideologies, Islamic political narratives flourish faster in opposition. From the mid twentieth century, repressive governments, dire economic situations and corruption have created a breeding ground for Islamic political movements across the region. Now, after many years of being in opposition these are finally reaching the corridors of power. However, the empowerment of Islamic forces in countries such as Egypt which face some fundamental economic and social problems will only discredit them since they cannot resolve the situation any faster than any other forces.

This short term lack of success in delivering what they have historically promised will discredit them in long term. It is likely that many of their followers will be disillusioned once this religio-political mandate is put to the test. Although many observers have spoken about the paradigm shift and the return of Islamic control in the region, the irresistibility of political Islam will be seriously challenged once they fail to implement their promises.

In the case of Egypt, for decades these Islamic forces such as the Muslim Brothers have been banking on the ‘politics of hope’ to attract more supporters and broaden their sphere of influence. When vertical and horizontal corruption was widespread and the politics of the iron fist was in place their suggestions for a “remedy” was attractive to various social classes, in particular the deprived masses in the margin of Egyptian society. Arguably, this simplicity of narrative was part of their attraction. They proved to be good at providing a simple answer for a difficult question. Their recipe was Islam, a religion which the majority of people adhered to and their motto was, “Islam hooah al-hal” (Islam is a solution).

The Muslim Brothers were successful in constituting sharp binaries of the religious versus the secular in which the latter represented corruption while the former promised social justice. The dire socio-political situation, which was seen as the dark legacy of Mubarak and his seemingly secular order was a breeding ground for grassroots forces which could inspire the masses with the soothing politics of hope framed in an Islamic context. As the state took more repressive measures to maintain the status quo, the narrative of the Muslim Brothers in opposition sounded almost irresistible to the disfranchised masses.

These binaries of secular versus religious created a zero-sum game in which the more the secular order lost

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legitimacy, the more religious narratives gained popularity. In opposition the Muslim Brothers did not have to deliver their promises of reinstating Islamic values, social justice and fairness in one of the most socially divided societies in the Arab world. Hence, the prevailing political realities in the Mubarak era was a blessing in disguise for the Muslim Brothers to penetrate deeper into the grassroots and gain recognition.

Today, for the vast majority of Egyptians, the economy is the single most important issue and there is an expectation that the downfall Mubarak will elevate the economic standards of the country. This is the very reason which will undermine the credibility of Islamic forces like the Muslim Brothers once they gain any share of power in Egypt.

In many ways, the socio-economic situation is much worse today than it was last year under Mubarak. Before the Arab Spring's arrival in Cairo, a Reuters survey of analysts anticipated a 5.4% GDP growth in 2011, which would have been the fastest rate of growth for an Arab country after Qatar. The Egyptian government predicted 6% growth. Now most analysts predict only 1-2% growth for this year, which is an indication of some serious problems in the Egyptian economy post-Mubarak. The deterioration of the national economy, which has badly affected various social classes is increasingly mounting pressure upon the ruling system. Thus, any government coming to power in the near future, will find the economy the single most difficult issue to address.

The uprising to overthrow Mubarak has proved to be very costly for the Egyptian economy. There are various estimates, but some available analysis goes as far as suggesting that each day of the eighteen day protests in January cost Egypt's economy \$1 billion in capital outflow, as external investors withdraw their money fearing further insecurity in the country. The political instability has also affected tourism, which accounts for 11% of GDP and 10% of jobs in Egypt. Many sectors in the private sphere are suffering for lack of foreign investment. Banks estimate a total loss to the Egyptian economy of over \$30 billion. The recent electoral results have not inspired a lot of confidence in the market. The economic conditions have resulted in many other social problems such as insecurity and instability. Any emerging government in Egypt will face impediments due to increasing insecurity in the country. Unless the new order can perform miracles, facts and figures suggest that, any emerging government will face some fundamental problems in addressing social and economic issues. Resentment will certainly rise to the surface as the economic conditions become more difficult.

The other issue which is not as important as the economy but has a lot of symbolic significance for Islamic forces, such as the Muslim Brothers, is foreign policy. While in opposition, the Muslim Brothers never hesitated to criticize Mubarak's foreign policy, focusing on his subservient relations with the United States and the "Jewish State" in the Middle East. However, if the Muslim Brothers reach the centers of power they have almost no choice but to continue Mubarak's foreign policy for economic reasons, at least in short term.

With this backbreaking economy, any rational government will depend on significant foreign investment either from the Persian Gulf States, the United States or from western led organizations such as the IMF. As Egypt will be more dependent economically, it cannot afford to actively jeopardize its relations with its current and future creditors. Hence, Egypt in the post-Mubarak era cannot afford to antagonize Israel too much. Therefore, warm relations with Washington and its key allies in the region are likely to continue for economic reasons. In the eyes of many Egyptians this will tarnish the image of the Muslim Brothers.

Of course, the Muslim Brothers are aware of these impediments and may not wish to form a government on their own, but even if they share a segment of power they will be seen as part of a system, which contradicts the values they promoted in opposition. As long as there is no Iranianisation of the Egyptian political system so that structurally religio-political pluralism is denied, Islamic forces such as the Muslim Brothers are likely to suffer in the long term. Egyptian progress towards democracy is still in doubt. Providing effective democratic structures are created and upheld, it is likely the Muslim Brothers and other Islamic forces will lose support.

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