

After the Arab Spring: Islamism, Secularism, and Democracy

ELLEN LUST, GAMAL SOLTAN, AND JAKOB WICHMANN

Fears that the Arab Spring will become an Islamist Winter are exaggerated. Commentators are correct that Islamists play a major role in transitions in the region today. However, it is premature to conclude that Islamists are subverting democratic transitions and implanting theocratic autocracies. Islamism shapes transitions in the Arab world in important ways, but it does not foreclose the possibilities of democratization.

AN ENDURING CONFLICT

Struggles over the relationship between religion and the state, hardening into an Islamist-secularist divide, are not new. Conflict, sometimes violent, between secularists and Islamists has been a characteristic of Arab politics since the 1940s. Since the 1970s, Islamists have increasingly gained support, even as the region witnessed rising demands for democratization.

By 2006, Arab Barometer opinion surveys taken in six Arab countries found that three-quarters of citizens supported democracy, but that they were evenly split between those who preferred an “Islamist democracy” and those who wanted a “secularist democracy.” Dictators exploited this split to convince secularists and some Western governments, who feared an Islamist takeover or descent into an Algerian-style civil war, that the devil they knew was better than the one they didn’t.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the wall of fear between the two sides began to break down. Economic decline and broken promises of political reform led to deep, widespread disgruntlement, even among secularists. At the same time, coordinated actions between Islamists and secularists on initiatives such as protests over the

war in Iraq or the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, as well as protests against authoritarianism, eroded the distrust between the two sides.

In the heady days of the 2011 Arab uprisings, the Islamist-secularist rift was nearly buried, but it was never dead. Publics remain divided over the question of religion. Polls conducted by the Danish-Egyptian Dialogue Institute (DEDI) and the Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies (ACPSS) in August 2011 found that 44 percent of Egyptians want an Islamic state, 46 percent prefer a secular model, and 10 percent want a strong state even if it is not democratic.

Similarly, a March 2011 International Republican Institute (IRI) opinion survey found that 48 percent of Tunisians want a state based on religion, while 44 percent prefer a secular state, and about one-quarter of those on both sides have strong feelings about this issue.

Indeed, the secularist-Islamist conflict not only endures—it is taking on new dimensions. For the first time in modern history, the two sides face each other directly, without the intervention of a regulating state. For no matter how biased the modernizing state in the Arab world has been, functionally it has served the role of balancing and regulating the conflict between secularists and Islamists.

VOTERS WEIGH IN

Recent elections reflect these divides. Many view Tunisian and Egyptian elections as demonstrating an “Islamist tide,” but the results show that the Islamists have not entirely swept the region. Tunisia’s Al Nahda party in 2011 elections gained just over 37 percent of the vote, and its success was based as much on a division of votes among competing secularists as it was on support for the Islamist party.

In Egypt the Muslim Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice Party-led bloc (the Democratic Alliance of Egypt) and an Islamist bloc led by the

ELLEN LUST is an associate professor of political science at Yale University. GAMAL SOLTAN is an associate professor of political science at the American University in Cairo. JAKOB WICHMANN is a partner at JMW Consulting.

ultra-religious Nour party swept parliamentary elections, with 37.5 percent and 27.8 percent of the vote, respectively. Yet the Muslim Brotherhood presidential candidate, Mohamed Morsi, won only 51.7 percent of the vote in this year's runoff against Ahmed Shafiq, the last prime minister to serve under President Hosni Mubarak before he was deposed.

Religion was the key issue in these elections. Although campaigns touch on enormous concerns from economic conditions to foreign policy, religion grabs the public's attention in the Middle East. DEDI/ACPSS polls taken just before the parliamentary and presidential elections found that Egyptians had vague notions of the parties' and candidates' positions on the economy, foreign policy, and the extent of gradual or revolutionary change, but they had an acute sense of their positions on religion and the state.

This is not to suggest that Islamists and secularists form united blocs. Secularists have long suffered from infighting and splits, and continue to do so. Islamists at first seemed more unified, but, as Tunisian President Moncef Marzouki noted in a September 2012 New York Times op-ed essay, their newfound ability to participate in politics "rendered the divisions among Islamists more apparent than ever before."

Similarly in Egypt, parliamentary proceedings have exposed divisions among major Islamist parties on various issues, including the role of religion in politics.

It is also not the case that Arab politics is devoid of political forces other than secularists and Islamists. Centrist forces are present, and the vast majority of the population does not hold extreme views. In fact, the DEDI/ACPSS polls in Egypt show that the proportion of the electorate harboring deep-seated values concerning the influence of religion on government is much smaller than the electoral support for Islamist parties. While more than 65 percent of Egyptians voted for Islamists in the recent parliamentary elections, only 25 percent of the survey respondents agree or strongly agree that religion should have influence on government.

Moreover, Arabs do not care about religion only. Internal security and economic issues consistently rank as top concerns for Egyptians and Tunisians, according to various surveys. How-

ever, citizens generally agree on these issues. It is the role of religion in politics that divides the polity.

FUNDAMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

This fact has enormous consequences for the transition process. In Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, and sub-Saharan Africa, economic policies—at times shaped by ethnic politics—took center stage in democratic transitions. Compromise was easier to attain where economic issues were a priority. And where ethnic identity played a role, the sides were relatively fixed and identifiable. In Rwanda, there was no fear that a Hutu could become a Tutsi, or in Kenya, that a Kikuyu would become a Luo. For all the difficulties that ethnic politics raised (and the violence it provoked), it did not create anxiety that the other side might use freedoms of speech or association or other underpinnings of democratic participation to gain adherents to its cause.

In the Arab world, where transitions are shaped by religious, not ethnic, politics, compromise is difficult, membership of the two sides is malleable and unpredictable, and the potential impacts of liberal freedoms are more threatening.

In Egypt and Tunisia, compromise is difficult both for those who prefer

a strong relationship between the state and religion, and for those who eschew that goal. For Islamist parties, compromise requires giving up attempts to legislate in arenas related to religious morality—giving up on the very assurance of the community's moral development that their followers demand.

For secularists, compromise means, at a minimum, allowing the state greater control over personal life in arenas considered private. For the remaining followers of Habib Bourguiba, the founder of the Western-oriented secularist Tunisian Republic, it means a regression from forward-looking politics.

The debate over religion in the Arab world thus raises fundamental questions about liberalism. For those who see themselves as guardians of the community—whether staunch secularists or committed Islamists—compromise positions undermine their *raison d'être*. And while IRI polls suggest that nearly three-quarters of Tunisians do not feel strongly about the question of religion and

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politics, the quarter that does is equally divided between secularists and Islamists.

The threat that both sides feel is made more palpable by the fact that religiosity is not clearly identifiable. No one is entirely sure how many harbor either pro-secularist or pro-Islamist sentiments. Indeed, Tunisians consistently express surprise (and for many secularists, dismay) at the spike in headscarves and other religious observance since the downfall of President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in January 2011.

But the number of citizens supporting Islamist or secularist positions can change over time, perhaps quite dramatically, as each side is given the opportunity to spread its message. Polls conducted by ACPSS ahead of Egypt's May 2012 presidential election revealed that an average of 35 percent of voters who had voted for the Freedom and Justice Party would not vote for it in a

coming election. And the very underpinnings of democracy—freedom of speech, freedom of association, and other liberties—may help the other side win converts.

While the division between secularists and Islamists complicates democratic transitions in the Arab world, it does not make them impossible. The very hot “family feuds” that persist in the Arab world, as Dankwart Rustow pointed out long ago, may in fact foster a democratic transition. As long as both sides fear that they cannot defeat the other, they may be drawn to institutions that allow them to resolve their differences peacefully, accepting defeat today for the possibility of running again tomorrow.

The political outcomes will ultimately depend on the ability, or lack thereof, of the two blocs to work out their terms of coexistence, and of centrist forces to gain strength, mitigating the polarization. All is not lost, even if tensions run high. ■