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RELIGION, IDENTITY AND DEMOCRACY
The Arab Spring: Transition to Democracy at a Crossroads

The International IDEA Democracy Forum
Madrid, Spain, 28 – 29 November 2011

Background note

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Acronyms

AKP	Justice and Development Party
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
SCAF	Supreme Council of the Armed Forces
WANA	West Asia-North Africa

Introduction

The recent drift toward democratization in the Arab world challenges experts to capture the diverse forms of democracy that will emerge. The Arab Spring, the much-heralded revolt to overthrow long-standing political tyrannies, took the world by surprise. But the far-reaching changes that the Arab societies need are social as much as political—and that will take time. An important aspect of this collective drive toward freedom has been the people's sense of a common Arab-Muslim identity. People became inspired by what was happening in neighbouring states and were motivated by it with regard to their own socio-economic misery. It was the Tunisian revolt that inspired the Egyptians to revolt against Mubarak's 30-year rule, which in turn inspired the Libyans to revolt against Gaddafi's 42-year-long rule.

Arabs who demonstrated are part of a broader historical pattern that includes the collapse of Communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and the end of military dictatorships in Central and Latin America. What the Arabs revolted against, moreover, are age-old authoritarian political modalities and traditions of rulership that created dictators such as the deposed Ben Ali, Mubarak and Gaddafi and legitimized their rule for such a long time. The drive to be part of the 21st century—rather than get stuck in the status quo of the 20th century or to revert to the 7th century—now consumes the countries of the Arab Spring and more generally the entire Islamic World (Wright, 2011).

Robert Dahl (1966) once observed that with revolutions, it is difficult to date their beginning and hard to chart their course; when they are established, it is hard to pinpoint what they have accomplished. Having said that, Arab countries could learn from earlier transitions to democracy that took place in Eastern Europe, Latin America and East Asia, not least Indonesia (a country that shares many commonalities with Egypt and Tunisia). Moreover, the public debate about elections tends to be cynical. People talk increasingly about 'freedom'. They are longing, first and foremost, for freedom to make their own choices and to put an end to corruption, political cronyism and repression. Democracy may be one way of working towards that, but it is rarely seen as a goal in itself. The young revolutionaries have their sights set on clearing out the whole systems, not just the cronies of the regimes.

The debate over whether religion has any 'public' role in a democratic transition is not limited to the question of electoral and legislative involvement by religious groups. The common idea about the Arab democracy deficit is that it must have something to do with the rigidity of the way religion functions in the socio-political setting of the region. Islam and Islamists might jeopardize the transition to democracy, yet answering the riddle of Arab democratic transition does also involve the 'failed state' discourse, especially in economic terms. By the same token, it advocates an analysis of the internal political structures of Arab societies.

This article explores the public role and the place of religion in shaping the public discourse of politics and democracy. The aim is also to highlight the association between religion and socio-political processes in a number of countries such as Turkey, Indonesia and Poland.

Within the framework of religious dogmas' encounter with worldly affairs, it is important to understand the significance of its impact on socio-political settings, and by implication, on how religion accommodates and fits into the social, economic and political schemes of the people concerned. The goal of the analysis, moreover, is to clarify the complex notion of the religion of Islam 'magnified, mirrored and roseate' (Lambton, 1988) in the modern world. Examining Islam (through the medium of the Arab language) is imperative in understanding the social, economic and

Religion, identity and politics in the Arab Islamic setting

political developments by virtue of its significance to Arabs' and Muslims' collective identity and self-image.

In the West Asia-North Africa (WANA) region, democratization will not come about by official decrees. Moreover, it will not be easily achieved, simply because the Arab Islamic historical and political discourse is unfamiliar with democracy in the modern liberal era. The Arab state and politics discussed below have essentially survived from the Middle Ages to the present day; this was one of the main triggers of the revolts throughout the Arab World. By the same token, there are components of the Arab political and religious traditions not easily matched with the principles of liberal and capitalist democracy, questions which will be explored below. The battle for democratization will require dispensing with these traditions and engaging their followers (i.e., the Islamists) in political and societal debates, which is happening in the countries of the Arab Spring.

In liberal democracies, the upsurge of public religion might appear compatible with democracy and political civility. Indeed Casanova (1994) argues that public religion can be taken as a significant counterweight to the otherwise hegemonic institutions of the market and the modern state. In the early 19th century, Alexis de Tocqueville noted that congregational Christianity was essential to the development of local democracy and democratic culture in America. De Tocqueville understood that the American separation of church and state took government out of the business of coercing conformity, but it did not take religion out of public life. Religion remains one of the most important institutions in American and other Western civil societies. In this vein, religion was characterized, not by the smooth consensualism of 'civil religion', but by vigorous denominational competition and ethical debate (Casanova, 1994).

But whether all public religion in different political settings is equally good at playing such a civility-enhancing role is another question. In light of recent developments around the world, we now realize this privatization may have had as much to do with the circumstances peculiar to modern Europe and Western Christianity as with any universal development tendency. By the same token, some scholars hold that a secular state may work well enough in many countries in the West, but that it is discordant within Arab societies, which remain non-secular at their core. As I will argue below, Islam has been transformed from a meaningful private belief system into a modality of pre-political awareness. Islam has become, for the great majority Arabs and Muslims, the most obvious formation and assertion of collective identity in the absence of modern institutions and vibrant civil society. Let me explain.

The Enlightenment and Western rationality inserted 'a harsh wedge between cosmology and history' (Anderson, 1991:36). In the Muslim discourse, such

a 'wedge' has not materialized, nor has there been the equivalent of the Enlightenment exegesis to deal critically with and help to demythologize the heroic perceptions and image of the Prophet and his immediate followers in early Islam in the way Enlightenment dealt with the biblical era and the Christian tradition (Djäit, 1985:53). It is a truism of comparative historical sociology of religion that the post-Enlightenment West was marked by widespread privatization, which is to say there was a growing tendency for religion to be seen as a matter of private personal ethics rather than public political order.

Although the Muslim world has its share of secular modernists, a stream of Islamist groups still look to their religion for principles of public order as well as personal spirituality. The political ideals they derive from their tradition, however, are not immutable, but vary in a manner that reflects competing views that relate more to how Muslims respond to the challenges of the late modern world than to rival visions of Muslim politics. Over the course of its long history, the Muslim world had experienced a series of religious reformations. The reformers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries gave the scriptualist imperative a new twist. For them, the message of Islam required that Muslims avail themselves of science, education and modern forms of association. This reformation was intended to give Muslims not just the purity of the Word, but the resources and aptitudes of political modernism (Keddie, 1986).

The great reformation movement of the late 19th century aimed at reforming Islam; redefining and integrating the religion into the modern world was not a success. By the middle of 20th century, however, the great experiment of Islamic modernism seemed to have settled into a stale orthodoxy. Muslim scholars during this period were unwilling or unable to 'scale up' these local precedents for pluralism and civic autonomy into an explicit theory of public freedom awaiting the great upheavals of the modern era (Hefner, 2001). Religious movements like the Muslim Brotherhood appeared to be reluctant to take the spirit of rational religious interpretation seriously and engage the terms of Muslim politics in a new and critical manner. The founder of the movement, Hasan al-Banna, was consumed with organizing an ideological movement in order to take over the post-colonial Arab states to re-establish the *Umma* (a community of believers) envisioned in Prophet Mohammed's Medina in the 7th century.

Islam thereafter has been gradually but firmly transformed from a meaningful belief into a way of belonging, a symbol of identity and, more ostensibly, a means of forming and cementing an all-Arab and all-Muslim solidarity (Sharabi, 1970, 1988). Islamist groups, which arose from 1920s onward, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, were not interested in the reformation or modernization of religion. Modern Islamism is based on the assumption that the modern nation-state is a *de facto Umma:* that is to say, the ethical absolutism of the entire community is now extended to the nation (assumed to be a Muslim nation) as a whole. For Islamists, the mission facing the Muslim is first to reform individual hearts and minds, and on that basis to reform society; ultimately, a good society will install a virtuous state. A more recent advocate proclaimed that historically, Muslims could worship within their separate communities and ignore the state, which was external to their lives. Under modern conditions of state intrusiveness into all aspects of social life this is no longer possible: for society to remain Muslim, the state must be Islamized (Zubaida, 1989).

Islam, too, was transformed into a mechanism for deprivation, not only of basic economic and material necessities, but, most importantly, of the basic individual and political freedoms that generate protest at the grassroots level, which explains the success of Islamist movements to rally support and recruit throughout the Muslim world (Hassan, 1999:173ff.). Therefore, Islam is important in the analysis of political phenomena simply because it functions as a modality of pre-political awareness for the formation and assertion of identity in the absence of mature, modern social and political institutions.

There is almost a consensus among scholars that the Islamists worldview contradicts one of the central premises of democratic theory: namely, that for a society to democratize, religion must retreat from the public sphere to the privacy of personal belief, that is to say believing without belonging. However, others argue that the discourse of democracy in modern Muslim societies can take hold only if it responds to the criticism of conservative Islamists. Inasmuch as this is so, some of the emphasis on contemporary civil Islam shows a different mix of ideas and themes than those of contemporary liberals in the secular West. Muslim scholars such as Nasr Hamed Abu Zaid, in Egypt, Nurcholish Madjid, in Indonesia and Abdolkarim Soroush in Iran argue in different ways that democracy requires a tolerant culture of civility that encourages citizens to respect the rights of each other as well as to cherish their own. This public culture relies on mediating institutions in which citizens develop habits of free speech, participation and toleration.

On the face of it, Islam is viewed as ahistoric by the Wahabi Salafis, who are active in the political landscape in Egypt, Tunisia and elsewhere in the Arab world. The Wahabi-Salafi despises history and drains it of all humanity. Islam, as a religion interpreted in the lives and thoughts of Modern Islamists, is not something that unfolded in history with all its human strengths and weaknesses, but is a utopia that exists outside of time. Hence Islam has no notion of progress, moral development or human evolution. The history of the Prophet is not seen as a man living in a particular time and space that placed particular demands on him and forced him to act in particular ways. These Salafis seek to universalize and eternalize every act of the Prophet. For them, the context is not only irrelevant but dangerous. It has to be wiped out: the time of the Prophet has to be constantly recreated, both in thought and in action. It is perfect time, frozen and eternalized. Because it is perfect, it cannot be improved: it is the essence of morality, incapable of growth (Hassan, 2004; Zubaida, 1989).

The most active and powerful opposition—and even, in some cases, the dominant social forces—within the Arab and Muslim societies in the last few decades have been the Islamist groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and its offspring in the Arab world, Hizbi ut-Tahrir and a myriad of Salafis and Wahabi-influenced Salafi groups. As such, they could have been enlightening forces for democracy and justice against repression and corruption, but modern literature produced largely by Islamists focuses to the point of obsession on family-related matters—sex, dress and segregation of the sexes—rather than on matters of social justice, political freedom or disobedience to tyranny (Ayubi, 1991:44-51; Sharabi, 1988).

Since the early 1980s, one can argue that the Islamic world has been suffering a crisis of identity, as the crumbling of Islamic civilization in the modern age has left Muslims with a profound sense of alienation and injury. Challenges confronting Muslim nations—failures of development projects, entrenched authoritarian regimes and the inability to respond effectively to Israeli belligerence—have induced deep-seated frustration and anger that, in turn, has contributed to the rise of Islamist movements. In many respects, political Islam has filled a vacuum that resulted from the failure of Arab nationalism, socialism and other ideologies to free Islamic countries both from unjust political, social and economic systems and from Western imperialism. Just because radical Islamic movements have embraced tactics and ideologies reprehensible to most Westerners does not mean that the concerns giving rise to such movements are without merit.

In this vein, a typical Islamists' intellectual response to the challenge of modernity has been so far apologetic. It generally consists of an effort to defend Islam from the attack of Western Orientalism and what they perceived as secular enemies at home. Their strategy is to counterattack by simultaneously emphasizing the supremacy of Islam. Islamists respond to the intellectual challenges of modernity and globalism by adopting pious fictions about the Islamic traditions. For example, a common argument is that Muslims first invented any meritorious or worthwhile modern institution. According to Islamists, Islam liberated women, created a democracy, endorsed pluralism, protected human rights and guaranteed social security long before these institutions ever existed in the West. These claims were not asserted out of critical understanding or ideological commitment, but primarily as a means of resisting what they perceive as Western values and affirming their self-worth. The main effect of such discourse, however, was to contribute to a sense of intellectual self-sufficiency that often descended into unjustified self-importance and moral superiority. In the end what we have is a social life and cultural norms rife with duplicity and ambiguity (Abou El-Fadl, 2001; Al-Azmeh, 1993).

The pragmatic voices within the Muslim Brotherhood argue that democracy without religion will only result in confusion, since Arab people are naturally religious. With no absolute standard of right and wrong, the citizenry would lose the ability to self-govern, because they couldn't agree on what is right and wrong. Whereas with religion, everyone always agrees on what is right and wrong. In the Egyptian public discourse on politics, the Islamists in general and the Salafis in particular have created a huge space for themselves. They have succeeded thus far in directing the 'public debate' in Egypt as well as in Tunisia. So far there appears to be limited interest in Egypt or Tunisia in learning lessons from elsewhere in the world. During the last six months there has not been much talk about democracy as such. The public discourse is consumed by religious and often marginal issues that Islamists more or less put forward. The irony is that the Egyptian Constitution forbids the formation of political parties that make references to religion in their platforms.

Saudi-Wahabi ideas in particular have been growing during the last few months and are given a platform

through which they have influenced Egyptian political and religious thinking. Many 'mainstream' Muslim preachers believe that 'Wahabi money' has been flowing to Salafis[1] and other radical Islamists groups in Egypt in the wake of the ousting of Mubarak and more so during the last few months. In September 2011 the Egyptian Justice Minister, Mohamed al-Guindi, presented a report on the illegal flow of money that confirmed these suspicions. Sheikh Mazhar Shaheen, the Tahrir Square preacher, claims that funding Egypt's Islamists with Gulf money is motivated by an effort to countering the aims of Egypt's civil revolution and aspiration to establish a civil democratic state.[2]

1 A Salafi, an Arabic noun that translates as 'predecessor' or 'forefather', is a follower of an Islamic movement, a 'Salafiyyah', who is supposed to follow the path they believe was taken by the first three Muslim generations, which are collectively referred to as 'as-Salaf as-Saleh', or The Pious Predecessors. In contemporary times, Salafism has become associated with literalist and puritanical approaches to Islamic theology. In the West, the term Salafi has become particularly associated with Muslims who espouse violent jihad against civilians as a legitimate expression of Islam.

2 *Al-Ahram,* 10 October 2011.

Weak state formation with authoritarian traditions

The state is not merely a system of rule but a political expression of socio-economic realities and a mode of production. The task of building and maintaining democratic institutions in a region of age-old authoritarian tradition, in a political culture where religion and ethics have been more concerned with duties than rights, in which obedience to political authority is presented as a religious obligation as much as a political necessity, is very challenging.

In the Arab world, the prime social values and moral responsibilities in both the private and the public domain are still located in the family and its social extension such as the tribe, a reality that is especially strong in the entire *Mashreq* (Barakat, 1993:219ff.). There are great variations between Arab states as regards natural resources, geography and even historical experience, including exposure to the West and colonialism, but since the creation of modern states following the advent of Western colonialism after the disintegration of the Ottoman empire, Arab leaders have conducted themselves in the way they govern with a striking conformity that makes their roles, in practice, so alike as to be interchangeable. This is the case irrespective of their title of sovereignty—marshal, president, Amir or king—and despite the fact that they usually have very different personalities and have no common denominator such as background or education that links them (Karawan, 1992; Hassan, 2010; Sharabi 1988).

For example, from the 1950s onward, the regimes in Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Libya, to mention only a few, degenerated from a theory of Arab Enlightenment to a one-man rule. In Syria as in Yemen, the family regimes are engaged in a fight to the finish. The Yemeni president, Ali Abdullah Salih, with his sons and brothers held out against the demonstrators who demanded an end to corruption, as well as freedom and democracy. He has succeeded in descending the whole country into an intra-tribal civil war with other

rival families within his own tribe Hashed, one of the four largest tribes in Yemen. Thusly viewed, it is common in the Arab world that, as Ibrahim Abduh (1982) argues, leaders surround themselves with an atmosphere of flattery, self-abasement and hypocrisy. Leaders are only told what they want to hear. Therefore, their ability to assess and judge reality with a realistic outlook in dealing with the outside world is ultimately distorted.

In Arabic political thought the term state, *dawla*, signifies a certain type of patrimonious institution that exercises power and authority, which is delegated by an over-natural entity *Allah*. Against this background, and except for works on law and ethics, the state has been discussed in a political context only as an abstract locus of order and disorder and, more importantly, as a God-given fait accompli. In the writings of various medieval Muslim scholars such as Nizam al-Mulk, al-Mawardi and Ibn Khaldun, *dawla* refers to the continuity over time of power exercised by a clique of successive sovereigns, over which a single sovereign exercises exclusive power. The conception of the state as an organization of domination over a given territory, in the Weberian sense (Weber, 1948), has not existed in Arabic political thought. Rather, *dawla* essentially connotes a body politic with three main components: a ruler, his troops and a bureaucracy that answers exclusively to him. What must be stressed is that *dawla* is distinct from society at large and from what has come to be known in modern times as the civil society (Al-Azmeh, 1993:90). In this context, politics and power relationships are defined not by abstract values, but by kinship and the regulation of social relations. Identity and loyalty are determined by every one's place in a scheme of a tightly knitted and vertically structured social network; it is the control over that network that guarantees the power basis for the political elite and the holder of power. Within this political order, where kinship is the principle that organizes political relations and determines identity; control over the means of production is central to political authority (Barakat, 1993:219-24; Sharabi, 1988; Al-Azmeh, 1993:71ff.).

Gerber (1987), inspired by Barrington Moore,[3] elaborates a series of hypotheses about the significance of the Ottoman rural structures—particularly the absence of a major landed aristocracy—for the nature of modern states, social transformation and revolutions in the Middle East. The absence of a landed upper class in the region up to 1900, and the weakness of this class when it finally did emerge, explains the absence of a coherent basis for the development of a democratic polity. The emergence of states in the Arab world among the ruins of the disintegrated Ottoman Empire in 1918 until the late 1970s could be characterized by the failure to develop to modern nation-states with mature political structures. During this period Arab states monopolized power not only through the penetration of civil society and coercion, but also by preventing the emergence of autonomous socio-political groups. The establishment of genuine political parties and independent trade unions was prohibited by a regulation of law or the regime's practices. Allowed, instead, were the rise of informal and (at times) semi-official corporatist pressure groups based on extended families, tribes, religious functionaries, extended families of the new middle class (technocrats and bureaucrats) and house trade unions. For example, under Egypt's three military rulers, the officers' corps became almost a separate caste, living in their own enclosed world of subsidized housing, education and recreational facilities, just as political independence led to modern-day institutionalization and politicization of families and social networks of friends, tribes and religious or ethnic constellations.

The project of building a sovereign state and a 'nation' out of diverse ethnic and religious groups remains to be done. The emergence of a common nationhood through civil society and citizenship in Arab societies involved a messy process of continuous manipulations among different ethnic groups with complicated relationships permeated by religious and historical bitterness between different ethnic and religious groups. The classic way to solve this problem was/is that the family or the group that holds the economic resources and political power bribes others who are smaller or weaker (Hassan, 2004).

Arab states lack the capacity to penetrate their societies to extract financial and other material resources to be used for implementing social policies and, ultimately, integrating civic institutions with the state polity. One reason that explains the spread of Islamization is the ability of the Islamist groups to do on the social front what the state has failed to do. In the Arab world, however, leaders resort to repression because they cannot extract compliance through primordial institutions and cannot create effective new ones. Oil wealth has not been used to create a self-sustaining industrial society; instead, a society of corrupt *rentiers*, who over time have become more and more radicalized Islamists, has emerged. Luciani and Belblawi (1987) used the term 'rentier' politics, whereby regimes use the state's wealth to bribe a part

of their society to purchase the support of allies in order to strengthen their power base at home. This has always been the pattern in Gaddafi's Libya, Iraq, Algeria, Sudan, Saudi Arabi and other smaller Gulf states. On the regional level this policy is pursued to buy the goodwill of rivals, which often are stronger regimes. But when religious, ethnic and historical enmities are deep and economic growth is slow, the classic (and often practised) pattern is to rely on dictatorial solutions to the problems of social, political and economic development.

Since 1970 many Arab regimes have remained in power and have created stable, or rather solid, organizational structures around them, though one could only agree with Luciani (1990:xiii) that 'the state is a house of cards, its stability more apparent than real'. Despite the pan-Arab/or pan-Islamic vocation of Arab states it is ironic that they pursue a remarkable policy isolation that 'makes it difficult to cross an inter-Arab border, to call another Arab city by telephone, to get a work permit here, an export licence there, and a travel visa to almost everywhere' (Luciani). Thusly viewed, the project of building a sovereign a state and a 'nation' out of diverse ethnic and religious groups remains to be done. The emergence of a common nationhood through civil society and citizenship in Arab societies involved a messy process of continuous manipulations among different ethnic groups with complicated relationships permeated by religious and historical bitterness, due to the deliberate Ottoman policy of favouring the Sunnis in the state administration.

Therefore, Arab societies today exist in a state of social and political turmoil, in which the entire social life—the body politic, economic and cultural activities—is changing more in reaction (under pressure) to external influence than due to processes and mechanisms within the society itself. The state emerges as an artificial entity that becomes disarticulated in the face of any political crisis (e.g., Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon, Somalia and Sudan to mention only a few). Politics becomes a reign of coercion and a direct administrative intervention by regimes, rather than rule through mutual consent. The state itself becomes the embodiment of a family or an ethnic network (e.g., Iraq, Syria, the House of Saud and other families in the littoral Gulf Sheikhdoms) based on a social web of cousins and friends of friends (Al-Azmeh, 1993:72-73; Hassan, 2004). Such circumstances constrain the choices open to the elite by limiting the information available and the knowledge necessary to formulate and execute rational political decisions. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that civil society, embattled and defunct, would seek to assert itself against the context in which the state operates.

3 Moore (1967) argues that the way 'the agrarian question' was resolved in each of his case studies is the key to the failure to build a democratic society, as the cases of Germany, China and Russia demonstrated; or the success of democracy, most notably in England, France and the United States. The agrarian elite, he argues, remained strong enough to retain labour-repressive agriculture in alliance with a strong state. As he persuasively illustrates in the cases of the German Junker, Russia and Japan the bourgeoisie was weak and dependent on the state, and therefore, fascism was the outcome.

The fragility of nation-building in the Arab world

The idea of nation and nationalism—comprising an ethnic group of people defined by language, culture and real or imagined descent—which crystallized in Europe gives a geographic imperative and a spatial dimension to a preconception of culture (tradition, habit, faith, pleasure and ritual) that is dependent on enactment in a particular territory (Malley, 1996:30). Moreover, territory is the place that nourishes rituals and contains people like oneself, people with whom one can share without having to explain. Territory thus becomes synonymous with identity, and in an even deeper sense it also encompasses the morality of kinship and the capacity, in Anderson's sense (1991), to imagine kinship beyond its immediate concrete manifestation: the family, the clan and the sect.

A national identity is manifested in the idea of a nation-state, which is predicated on political discourse that serves as the vital cement of continuity and coherence of any state. However, it is not merely through the appeal of nationalism that a collective national identity becomes articulated, but rather through the ability of equally like-minded individuals all dedicated to the idea of loyalty to a shared 'imagined community'. Liberal nationalisms are often considered durable and perennial processes of human progress because they represented an articulation of a broad range of movements in a quest for liberalization that was rational, and also provided a humane definition of the framework of political power that seeks to guarantee continued progress towards the objective of creating rational, mature and viable social and political institutions (Hassan, 1999:67-8). The lack of similar social and political developments within the Arab context draws attention to the weak and incoherent politics in the Arab world. This state of affairs is reflected in political systems that lack the ability to create an open and equitable public sphere that embraces all citizens, recognizes their rights and makes them feel equal. This has always been the hurdle that Arab states have been unable to overcome due to their superficial approach to the questions of governance and nationalism (Tylor, 1988:114; Hassan, 1999:68).[4]

Therefore, the concept of the nation-state—a sovereign with an imagined/real territory as the cradle of national identity and the sole object of loyalty—has no history in the Arab world, because it has had to compete directly with a much more powerful ideology: namely, the deep and ever-renascent cultural identity and loyalty towards Islam and Arabism. Arabism is not a feature of a state but rather the attributes of a people—the Arab people. Understanding this distinction is a necessary exercise in the comprehension of the powerful psycho-political perception and emotions that reverberate time and again across the frontier of the Arab countries (Naber, 2005).

Having said that, what does the shift from local belonging (family, tribe, ethnic or regional) to a pan-Arab and Islamic identity imply? It is a decisive shift from relations to images. The transition to images requires and, indeed, leads us to expect one radical difference between local social relations and their large-scale embodiment in terms of cultural identity and interests. The Arab world formed out of a long history that creates a shared past (Naber, 2005). In most of Western Europe these shared histories have been bound together by common languages, religions and cultural norms. Thus, while the Italians and French were both Catholic, the growing awareness of their differences became an expression of nationalism. According to Anderson (1991), the process of constructing nationhood in Europe depended essentially on the rise of the mass book-reading public and of print capitalism. Conversely, the process of imagining being an Arab/Muslim, and the emphasis on the scale of nationalism's appeal, is related exclusively to Arabic linguistic unity cemented with Islam.

How can religion accommodate democracy?

Arab societies lacked independent urban centres, an autonomous bourgeois class and a Weberian type of bureaucracy, legal liability, personal property and a cluster of rights that embody bourgeois civic institutions (Migdal, 1988). Without these institutional and cultural elements, there was nothing in Islamic history to challenge the dead hand of the despot. Social structures were characterized by the absence of a network of institutions mediating between the individual and the state. This social vacuum facilitated the circumstances in which the individual was often deprived of any protection against arbitrary rule. The absence of civil society explained the failure of capitalist economic development of political democracy (Turner, 1994:23). The nation-state in the Arab world and the Middle East came about as a by-product of the colonial arrangements played out in the Third World. At independence, their status as nation-states meant no more than membership in the United Nations.

John Stuart Mill, in On *Liberty*, argued that a state has no right to coerce an individual's choices unless it is required to eliminate or reduce harm. This principle is universally accepted today in all democracies. Equally well accepted is that in a democratic civil state the government may not penalize citizens because they profess or convert to a faith that is not shared by a majority of their fellow citizens. It is also settled that in a liberal democracy citizens enjoy the freedom to express their religious views, and to form institutions consistent with those views, without fear of punishment or civic repercussions.

The 'religiousness' of a government or political party is more a matter of consensual perception than formal acknowledgment or even legal documentation. Every state administration involves some degree of politics that becomes religious only in response to broader religious tensions within the society at large; the distinction between religion and secularism is itself blurred, especially if religion is defined more sociologically than theologically in terms of the sacred. This model often involves state support for religion in an effort to co-opt and weaken it as an independent power base (Demerath and Straight, 1996).

A critical component in the future of democracy in the region involves recognition of the special role of Islam in society. In a number of Islamic states in the Middle East, including Pakistan at various points in its history, religion is an important source of state legitimacy, and no alternative religious views are tolerated. By the same token, the state controls the political world very tightly and embraces religion more to control it than to submit to it. This also applies to several countries in Southeast Asia, such as Buddhist Thailand.

Those who favour a greater role for religion in politics sometimes do so because they perceive the world in a platonic way—there is religion and there is anti-religion. Their worldview leaves no room for

4 Terms like *watan* (homeland) and *qutr* (country) for states such as Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, to name only a few, usually symbolize sentiment and nostalgia but not loyalty, allegiances or even a source of the individual's self-identity (Lewis, 1993:157).

secular[5] society in a civil state, which neither favours nor limits religion. There is one important principle that can be stated about the role and place of religion in democracies. In a democracy, citizenship is not dependent on adherence to an official religion or even a state approved religion. In a civil state, therefore, religion is not a constitutive element of citizenship.

In Palestinian society and public life, there is more a difference of emphasis than a sharp opposition on many issues related to the role of religion. Hamas has a deep long-term interest in Islamizing Palestinian law far more than most in Fatah would like. Religious institutions are a scene of political conflict between Fatah and Hamas far more than they are a venue for doctrinal disputes. Fatah's Islamist roots never completely disappear; both Fatah and Hamas are more or less the offspring of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. The deepest divisions between Hamas and Fatah probably lie as much in the political sphere as in religious issues. The differences between the movements might be bridged by the emergence of strong democratic institutions. The two sides would then be able to address their disagreements on various public policy issues, and settle them through normal constitutional and electoral channels. This can be explained by the fact that both Fatah and Hamas combine national and religious claims with some great differences in emphasis but not generally in absolutely incompatible ways.

In Egypt, Jordan, Algeria and elsewhere in the Middle East region, society as a whole seems to be a battleground between a coercive and anti-religious (as opposed to neutral) state 'secularism' on the one hand, and a number of Islamist groups (led by the Muslim Brotherhood). This scenario is not uncommon and has surfaced in a variety of other states that are unsuccessful in their efforts to suppress religious opposition—e.g., Indonesia, Malaysia, Turkey and Thailand. Of course, a variety of factors are involved, and 'democracy' itself is not always a remedy or even always understood in the same way (Raspini and Sahrasad, 2010).

Thus viewed, *we have to make a clear distinction between democratic elections and a democratic state*. In addition to regimes that constrain electoral democracy to uphold nominally democratic state governance, there are certainly opposition movements that see electoral democracy as merely a stage in the ultimate suspension of democratic governance in the name of religion itself. The choices are not easy. For example, in Nigeria, Bangladesh and Pakistan, to mention only a few countries in this context, the process of elections functions more or less as a ventilation mechanism to release socio-economic pressures from time to time.

Indeed, reporting about a process of democratization needs a deep panoramic view into the given country or region. Such a view into Turkey, Indonesia and other countries that experienced similar transitions such as Poland is a rarity in the local Arab media and is a product of mainly foreign experts, publicists and columnists. The public debate during the last few months about political reforms and transition to democracy in Egypt and Tunisia lacks interest in any country or region that has experienced comparable development, such as Eastern Europe or Latin America, let alone Indonesia, which shares many similarities with several Arab states. This can be explained by the domination of the public discourse on politics by Islamists, with their long tradition of triumphal 'exceptionalism'.

The fact that Indonesia's transition to democracy has had a very limited presence in the Arab public debate stands in sharp contrast to the continuous reverberation of Indonesia's name in the background. Whereas expectations are often expressed both in Indonesia and outside to see its transition to democracy as a model for other Muslim countries, this idea does not seem to have been embraced by those seeking a democratic transition in Egypt and Tunisia. Indonesia, as a contemporary complex of society, polity and culture, seems to be perceived in the Arab region in ambiguous and abstract terms when, instead, it could be taken as a case of learned lessons.

One important finding within this variety of experiences from all over the world involves the very different relations between religion and politics, on the one hand, and religion and the state on the other. Few will be surprised to learn that campaigning politicians everywhere tend to invoke local religious themes and symbols as sources of legitimacy and what Demerath and Rhys Williams have called 'cultural power' (1992). What may be more surprising is the frequent tendency for governmental regimes and their officials to try to keep religion at arm's length. While religion is often an ally in the pursuit of power, once power has been secured, religion can become an unwelcome constraint

5 Secularism here is taken to be a naturalistic worldview or a philosophy diametrically opposed to mainly Abrahamic religions' worldview. The basic premise of the secularization paradigm—that the more a society modernizes, the more secular it becomes—seems to be a widespread.

in the quite different processes of state administration (Marty and Appleby, 1991-95).

Turkey

Turkey is often referred to as a comparative anchor point when we discuss religion and democracy in the Arab world. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) has shown it is loyal to the West, to NATO and to development of democratic transition in Turkey. If an Erdoğan can be found for Egypt or Tunis, the West will have every reason to be satisfied at the exchange for Mubarak and Ben Ali (Anderson, 2011). There is little understanding, or rather willingness to understand, among the political and social forces of the Arab Spring of the real dynamics of Turkish society and politics. The AKP and its leader are very popular in the Arab street, not because they have remarkably transformed Turkey politically and economically, but because of Erdoğan's somewhat populist stand against Israel and his defence of the Palestinians, mainly Gaza's population, and by implication Hamas.

It is tempting to see the central conflict in Turkish society as pitting secularism against a growing religious influence. This can obstruct understanding of the core issues of the social and political transformation in Turkey. Turkey is by no means in danger of sliding into Islamist rule. Turkish society has defences that most Arab societies lack: generations of experience with secularism and democracy, a growing middle class, a booming export economy, a still-lively press, and a strong civil society based in universities, labour unions, business associations, and civic, human rights, and environmental groups. The emerging conflict in Turkey is not over religion but over the style of power (Kinzer, 2011).

Turkey has been tilting toward the West since the latter days of the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century, when the Young Turks attempted to revitalize the 'Sick Man of Europe'. Kemal Atatürk was also fascinated by the French secular ideology of laïcité. He was very interested in sociologist Emile Durkheim's vision that an ethical society and effective political culture could be sacred without being religious. Therefore, he banned religion from both government and politics, just as he attempted to sever the culture, social and political link to the Ottoman world (Anderson, 2008).[6]

The dream of Kemal, 'Father of the Turks', of begetting a modern Western secular republican Turkish nation-state modelled after French republican laïcité has proven not easily attainable, at least not on Kemalist secularist terms. But the possibility of a Turkish democratic state, truly representative of its ordinary Muslim population, joining the European Union, is today for the first time real (Yesilada 2008). The 'six arrows' of Kemalism (republicanism, nationalism, secularism, statism, populism and reformism) could not lead towards a workable representative democracy. Ultimately, the project of constructing such a nation-state from above was bound to fail because it was too secular for the Islamists, too Sunni for the Alevis and too Turkish for the Kurds (Anderson, 2008a; Yesilada 2008). A Turkish state in which the collective identities and interests of those groups that constitute the overwhelming majority of the population cannot find public representation cannot possibly be a truly representative democracy, even if it is founded on modern secular republican principles. But Muslim democracy is as possible and viable today in Turkey as Christian democracy was half a century ago in Western Europe. The still Muslim, but officially no longer Islamist, party in power has been repeatedly accused of being 'fundamentalist' and of undermining the sacred secularist principles of the Kemalist constitution, which bans 'religious' as well as 'ethnic' parties, religion and ethnicity being forms of identity that are not allowed public representation in secular Turkey (Anderson, 2008b).

For the most part, the political reforms and the establishment of vibrant democratic institutions remained to be achieved until the Welfare Party and AKP won a landslide election and assumed power in 2002. The military had to step in to preserve the secularity of the state from time to time.

The AKP has shown loyalty to the Turkish secular tradition. The AKP received 46.7 per cent of the votes in the July 2007 national elections. This is very important, since any political party that wants to be system-oriented has to abide by the unchangeable secular characteristic of the Turkish Republic. Since

6 In an interview with *Al-Ahram* newspaper (11 October 2011), Rached Ghannouchi claimed that by banning religion from both government and politics, Bourguiba and Atatürk misunderstood Durkheim's argument that an ethical society with an effective political culture could be sacred without being religious. The French Jacobin republicanism of laïcité is a secular tradition that makes the state anti-religious. This would not work for the rising Arab democracies, claims Ghannouchi. He believes that 'an Islamic state is not a religious one, meaning that it is the state of a Muslim people who are keen for the policies and laws of the state not to contradict the beliefs and values of the citizens, but to enforce them. But no one is saying they can be the sole interpreters, or that they speak in the name of Islam'.

the AKP has its roots in the anti-secular Islamic fundamentalist Welfare Party, a significant portion of secular state institutions and elites (military, judiciary, etc.) and the populace looks at the AKP with suspicion, suspecting that it has a hidden political religious agenda (Yesilada 2008).

Erdoğan never misses an opportunity to emphasize time and again the secular nature of the Turkish state and always plays down the religious origin of the AKP. He has distanced himself from the Islamist parties in the Arab world. During his tour of the Arab Spring in September 2011, he approached all political groupings in an equal manner. During his recent a visit to Cairo in September, he gave a speech at Cairo University whereby he made a clear distinction between his personal faith as a Muslim and his party, and defended the secular system of the Turkish Republic. This was welcomed by Tunisian Islamist party Ennahada; Rached Ghannouchi subscribed to Erdoğan's views.[7] The Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt was angered by the Turkish Prime Minister's remarks and accused him of attempting revive the Turkish domination of the Arab world. Two days earlier, they had prepared a welcoming committee at Cairo Airport with a youth parade.[8]

Rached Ghannouchi is the most enlightened Islamist compared to his counterparts in Egypt, Jordan, Palestine and the rest of the Arab world. Ghannouchi is one of the few Islamists who has studied in the West and who is fairly familiar with the European debate on religion and politics. In an interview with the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Ahram*, Ghannouchi claimed that Ennahda has many women on the party lists. The first on the list is an unveiled woman, who also does not share many of the features of the party's ideology. This is not the case in the Muslim Brotherhood, and certainly not for the Salafis in Egypt. The Egyptian media reported that the Salafist al-Noor Party would not show the face of one of their female candidates on the poster for the parliamentary election in November 2011. The poster included a picture of a flower, and beneath it, the woman's name.[9]

Like Erdoğan, Ghannouchi said that he is open to the concept of a secular state that 'stands at the same distance from all religions and ideologies'. Ghannouchi prefers the British model of a secular state that is tolerant to all forms of belief. He dismisses Bourguiba and Atatürk before him as secular fanatics. Secularism, Ghannouchi says, 'does not necessarily mean that it opposes religion, but in many cases it co-exists with religion such as the Anglo-Saxon culture. The French roots of secularism, however, have a heritage in opposition of religion which makes it biased'.[10]

One could argue today that because there are two centres of power in Turkey—the deep state and the democratically elected (by an overwhelming majority) AKP government—the transformation process of Turkish society and politics is in full bloom. On the other hand, the rise of political Islam in the country, which has coincided with the coming to power of the AKP since 2002, implies for many a manipulation of the reform process to challenge the secular nature of the state (Yesilada 2008).

In Turkey's case, according to the Economist Intelligence Unit, real gross domestic product (GDP) growth between 2003 and 2007 has averaged 6.9 per cent; real demand growth was on average 8.5 per cent for the same period, while foreign direct investment inflows averaged 2.1 per cent of GDP (Yesilada 2008). Though other emerging markets have performed better over the same period, the numbers have been impressive if one considers that they coincide with the rise of political Islam and a fundamental re-evaluation regarding Turkey's relations with its neighbours—especially the United States given the divergences over policy on Iraq—as well as the issue of Iran's nuclear programme and, lately, worsened relations with Israel.

Indonesia

The Indonesian example illustrates in a striking manner the varied ways in which a universal religion has been adapted to local worlds. In this vein, Western scholars, such as Geertz (1971) and Hefner (2001), to mention only two, believe that the Javanese form of Islam, to which most Javanese still adhere, is far superior to its Arabian variant. The example also illustrates that, just as was the case with democratization in the West, the outcome of this contest between democratic and anti-democratic forces in the Muslim world will have as much to do with dissolving political monopolies and achieving a 'pluralistic' balance of power in society as it will the doctrinal reformation of religion itself.

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7 Al-Fajr, 14 September 2011.

8 Al-Shorouk, Al-Ahram, 13 September 2011.

9 See Al-Masry al-Youm, 2 November 2011.

10 See the interview with Ghannouchi in Al-Ahram, 11 October 2011.

The most distinctive quality of Indonesian Islam has long been its remarkable cultural pluralism (Geertz, 1971). The archipelago that in modern times became Indonesia and Malaysia was never conquered by invading Muslim armies, smothered under a centralized empire or supervised by an omnipotent clergy. Certainly there was a religious despot who aspired to religious absolutism. But the striking feature of political organization in the early modern archipelago is that it was organized around a multi-cantered system of mercantile city-states, inland agrarian kingdoms and tribal hinterlands. Viewed comparatively, regional organization here did not resemble the great empires of China or India, but the pluralized polities of early modern Europe (Hefner, 2001).

Without overplaying the comparison between Egypt and Indonesia on the one side and Pakistan on the other, Saigol (2010) argues that Pakistan was deliberately de-secularized by the elites in order to maintain hegemony over a feudal society, through the promulgation of an intolerant, orthodox and fundamentalist version of Islamic ideology at the expense of tolerant, syncretic versions. The paradox is that there are Islamist groups in Egypt and elsewhere in the region that will compete in the coming elections and, by the same token, reject democracy. Their main argument is that the truth and the good cannot be dictated by the vote of the majority. The truth and the good should come from God, who is the final measure of truth. According to these groups, human beings did not understand the truth and what is good until God revealed them through His prophet.

Like Indonesia following the fall of Suharto in May 1998, the political and societal landscape in Egypt and Tunisia threatened that the coming political elections will probably co-exist with religious chauvinism, feudal economic structures and militaristic culture (Raspini and Sahrasad, 2010). The dysfunctional nature of the political landscape in the Arab world was essentially generated by the vicious nexus between dictatorship and Islamic extremism, through both support and oppression (Hassan, 2004). The political order, as it has evolved since approximately the end of World War II, has failed to achieve minimal levels of genuine power sharing or accountability in governance in any of its constituent sovereign states, much less to create self-governing parliamentary institutions operating within democratic forums and constraints.

The similarities between Egypt now and Indonesia after Suharto are striking, in the sense that traditional political parties with their different ideologies found in democracies elsewhere in the world are absent in both countries due to Mubarak's and Suharto's three-colour political spectrum: militarism, stagnant statism and Islam (Hefner, 2000). But Muslims in both the Middle East and North Africa are much less knowledgeable about Indonesia; for most of them it is almost a *terra incognita* that stretches far beyond the horizon. Hence, though Indonesia is deeply engaged in a decades-long process of building the third-largest democracy in the world, which is strongly and widely encouraged and supported by the Muslim mainstream in the country, this impressive process has not caught any attention in the Arab world.

Poland and Chile

The transition to democracy was helped in Poland by the interaction with other secular and democratic states in Europe. Like the case of Turkey, the regional interaction and internal dynamics of a vibrant civil society within age-old political constellations have been essential to the Polish transition to democracy. This has happened relatively swiftly and in a short time, in comparison to other East European countries such as Romania and Bulgaria. These characteristics also apply to the Czech Republic, for different reasons, however. Indeed the interest in democratic foundations and prospects for transition to democracy, particularly in Eastern Europe and elsewhere, has focused on civil society and civic culture as the bulwarks against authoritarianism and as a reliable path in pursuit of democratization.

It is worth noting that Arab Spring countries such as Tunisia and Egypt were initially interested in learning from the experience of Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and other countries in Eastern Europe. Some activists and politicians from Poland and Hungary offered their help to the Egyptians and were invited to seminars and workshops. Moreover, the Polish government gave delegates from Tunisia, Egypt and Libya an insight into the lessons of Poland's democratic wave that drove out its communist regime in 1989. A handful of members of the electoral commissions from Tunisia and Egypt were invited by Poland's electoral commission to follow the day's voting in a selection of polling stations.[11] There has been little genuine interest in learning about and interacting with the experiences of Poland and other East European

11 See Al-Ahram October 9, 2011; see also Al-Sabah (Tunis), 10 October 2011.

countries, however. The debate has degenerated from the people's need for freedom, democracy and social justice to 'Arab Islamic identity' and 'religion'.

Suffice it to say that in Poland, throughout the communist era, Catholicism went through an extraordinary revival at the very same time that Western European societies were undergoing a drastic process of secularization. The reintegration of Catholic Poland into secular Europe can be viewed, therefore, as 'a difficult challenge' and/or as 'a great apostolic assignment'. Anticipating the threat of secularization, the integralist sectors of Polish Catholicism have adopted a negative attitude towards European integration. Exhorted by the former Polish Pope, the leadership of the Polish church, by contrast, has embraced European integration as a great apostolic assignment. The anxieties of the 'Europhobes' would seem to be fully justified since the basic premise of the secularization paradigm—that the more a society modernizes, the more secular it becomes—seems to be a widespread assumption in Poland as well. Since modernization—in the sense of catching up with European levels of political, economic, social and cultural development—is one of the goals of European integration, most observers tend to anticipate that such a modernization will lead to secularization in Poland, putting an end to the Polish religious 'exceptionalism'. Poland becoming at last a 'normal' and 'unexceptional' European country is, after all, one of the aims of the 'Euro enthusiasts' (José Casanova).

Although one might suppose that post-1989 Poland is doubly Catholic as a reflection of both its dominant cultural religious alignment and the oft-chronicled role of the Church that sided with Solidarity on the eve of the revolution, this has already begun to shift. Two decades after the transition to democracy, Poles have become more cultural than religious Catholics, and the old patterns of opposition to ecclesiastical authority are resurfacing, especially as the Church pressured successive governments to outlaw divorce and abortion. The response is especially apparent in the 1995 defeat of President Lech Walesa by the 'post-communist' candidate Aleksander Kwaśniewski, who was ideologically opposed by the Church, and was re-elected for a second term. This defeat might have occurred because of (or rather in spite of) the intercession of Cardinal Glimp and Catholic officialdom on Walesa's behalf (Borowik, 2008; Borowik and Mikós, 2001).

That seems to have been a very bitter lesson in democracy for the Church hierarchs. Moreover, it was accompanied by a growing pluralism and heterogeneity within the Church itself: a lack of subordination on the part of the ultra-conservative Radio Maryja (a very active commentator and actor in the field of politics) on the one hand, and demands for clarity and lustration (vetting of priests regarding collaboration with the previous system) on the other. The ferment surrounding the internal affairs of the Church proves the real diversity of its community. Increasingly obvious is that preservation of homogeneity and unanimity within such a big social body is not possible under democracy. And not long ago, the government enacted a liberalization of the church-backed abortion prohibition of 1993 (Borowik, 2008; Demerath and Straight, 1996).

As Irena Borowik observed, the deeply rooted historic and symbolic contribution of Roman Catholicism to the national identity of Poles is still important even after the transformation toward democracy. The impact of the Church is still substantial in the mobilization of religious rhetoric in the field of politics. Nonetheless, it should not be ignored that, in general, the most recent years have opened a new approach to examining both the possible roles of religion in public life and religious vitality and the significance of religion in a world that is steadily leaning toward secularization (Borowik, 2008).

There are differences between the two national congregations in Poland and Chile due to the different historical and political experience of their respective countries. However, the two congregations share many commonalities when it comes to the struggle against authoritarian regimes and during the transition to democracy after the overthrow of the regimes of Wojciech Jaruzelski in Poland and Augusto Pinochet in Chile. It is important not to exaggerate the role of the Catholic Church in the decisions and lives of all Poles and Chileans. Despite opposition from members of the Church hierarchy to the military dictatorship of Pinochet and communism, there was significant support among Poles and Chileans for Pinochet's government and the communist party in Poland (Rector, 2005; Borowik and Tomka, 2001).

Unlike its Polish counterpart, the Catholic Church in Chile established an office for the defence of human rights in the wake of the military coup of September 1973. The Chilean Church cooperated in this regard with some leaders within Protestant and Jewish communities. The Church's lawyers presented literally thousands of writs of habeas corpus, in all but a few

cases to no avail, and provided for the legal defence of prisoners. The Church also supported popular and labour organizations and called repeatedly for the restoration of democracy and for national reconciliation (Loveman, 2007).

During the papacy of John Paul II the Chilean Catholic Church, like other Catholic congregations around the world, became more conservative in outlook. However, this conservative outlook did not affect the Church's advocacy of human rights and democracy during the military regime of Pinochet. The Church has continued to champion human rights issues related to the dictatorship since the return to democracy, and although the country remains largely conservative, recent political events indicate a decline in the power of the Church (Davis, 2007).

Epilogue: the Arab Spring at a crossroads

The WANA region has almost no tradition of political affiliations; real political parties connected to grassroots movements and with viable political programmes are a rarity. In this political landscape, Islamist groups will be important players in post-revolutionary politics in ways that were not possible under the old dictatorships. Tunisia is leading the field, with more than 100 parties having competed in landmark free elections in October and a new constitution in the pipeline. The advantages of having a developed civil society are clear. In contrast, the absence of independent institutions is equally striking in Libya, where regime change would not have happened without NATO's intervention, an intervention that is unlikely to be repeated elsewhere. However, the National Transitional Council in Tripoli is effectively under the protection of the Islamist rebel group led by Abdel-Hakim Belhaj. The other three powerful Libyan rebel groups are led by Islamists, who are in ongoing conflict with non-Islamist technocrats and politicians over the future of post-Gaddafi Libya.

In Tunisia, the Islamist party Ennahda won 41.5 per cent of the seats in the October 23 elections. Tunisians, Libyans, Egyptians and other Arabs are, for the time being, committed to making Islam a central tenet of their daily life. However, a majority of them would not necessarily vote for Islamists.[12] From the time Islam swept into Egypt in the 7th century, Egyptians have always been able to combine an omnipresent religiosity with a certain light-heartedness and

12 The latest poll, conducted by TNS, one of the world's largest research companies, involved 1000 people living in urban and rural areas and attempted to find an answer to one of the question that has been driving wedge between Islamists and secular political forces: is Egypt heading towards Islamic rule or a civil government? The poll showed that an overwhelming 75 per cent of the Egyptians are in favour of a civil government, with 24 per cent respondents favouring Islamic rule and only one per cent approving of military rule. See Al-Ahram Weekly, 17-23 November 2011.

tolerance about their faith. Religion has been always visible everywhere one goes, but Egyptians handle religion and faith like they do their furniture. This is what the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafis want to dispense with.

The Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist Salafi parties will probably show the same electoral support. This has less to do with popularity or high approval ratings, and more to do with organization and strategy. The old parties were created under Mubarak's regime and with the conditions he put forward. Therefore they do not have grassroots bases or contacts. The newly formed Liberal and Leftist parties that were formed after the revolution are unknown to the public and are effectively starting from scratch (Hamid, 2011).

I

Throughout a great part of Islamic history, religious order has been imposed in the WANA region to repress what is perceived to be religious disorder. States and elites construct their own religious discourse to quell and overwhelm political mobilization by their opponents. The election campaigns in Tunisia and Egypt have degenerated into a clash of ideology rather than policy. Serious issues such as dragging Egypt out of an economic slump, tackling widespread poverty and reforming an age old authoritarian state bureaucracy are reduced by Islamists to 'public morals issues', 'the preservation of Egypt's Arab and Islamic identity', and 'we will not accept an alternative to the laws of our God'. That is to say, the foundation of the election process and transition to democracy has become about 'religion' rather than about 'the citizen'.

On the eve of the Egyptian election, there is a feeling that the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) would not welcome a Tunisian scenario for Egypt, where the Islamist Ennahda has become the largest party in the Constitutive Assembly. Although instinctively conservative, the SCAF would rather see non-religious parties in power. The Military Council's desire to tie the Brotherhood's hands has, very recently, manifested itself in a largely unnoticed decree introduced by the president of the elections supreme commission, Councillor Abdel Moaz Ibrahim. He has forbidden the use of religious slogans in the election process, suggesting that he will require the High Court of Justice to ban any candidate who uses such slogans as the Muslim Brotherhood's 'Islam is the solution'.[13]

There are some concerns that Ghannouchi and Ennahda might reverse the favourable status of women and other secular laws established by Habib Bourguiba, laws that are unmatched in the Arab world. Bourguiba, the founding father of modern Tunisia, outlawed polygamy, granted women equal divorce rights and legalized abortion. Indeed, Ben Ali has continued Bourguiba's work by expanding parental, divorce and custody rights for women and promoting education and employment.[14] There might be reasons to worry about Ennahda winning the election in Tunisia. Ghannouchi is one of the few Islamists who have studied in the West and who is fairly familiar with the European debate on religion and politics. After winning the election, he gave assurances that he would preserve the progressive status of women (by the region's standard), tourism, dress, alcohol and cooperation with European countries. Ennahda is negotiating now to form an interim government with the Congress for the Republic, an essentially secular party, led by Munsif al-Marzouqi, a respected intellectual and long-time opponent of Ben Ali.

II

But no one in the WANA region can be indifferent to Egypt. As a Libyan politician put it to me, if it goes well in Egypt it will go well everywhere in the region; if it goes bad it will be likewise also.[15] This was the year when Cairo—affectionately known in Arabic as 'umm al-Dunya' (mother of the world)—regained its old role as a proud beacon to the Arab world, not for its unifying Nasserist inspiration or the quality of its cinema but because of the gripping drama, and promise, of Tahrir Square.

The mood has soured because of the slow pace of change and the erratic and inexperienced policies of the SCAF. There is a qualitative change in the Military Council's posture in its relationship to the public. A number of prominent youth organizations of the Tahrir and liberal politicians declared that the partnership between the people and the military has come to an end. The tremendous prestige that they had for bringing about Mubarak's exit has gradually worn off. Moreover, they have put off time and again their promises to hand over power to a new civilian authority. What we have now in Egypt is a volatile

13 The Muslim Brotherhood claim that they obtained a ruling from the Supreme Administrative Court in 2007 to the effect that 'Islam is the solution' is not a religious slogan. See *Al-Ahram*, 10 October 2011.

14 *The Washington Post*, 16 October 2011. See also the report on the status of woman in Egypt and Tunisia in *The Economist*, 15 October 2011.

mix of people who are impatient with the protests, impatient with the military for not bringing about stability and impatient with the military for not getting out of the way. Moreover, there is frustration among the youth of the revolution and liberal political forces over the dominance of the Islamists, who were absent in the initial phase of the revolution.

Real political parties are a rarity in Egypt, Tunisia and other Arab countries in general for several reasons. First, many tend to have a clear social profile and ideological line—they are Islamist, liberal, left of centre and so on. Second, each ideological group is becoming increasingly fragmented; Islamists in particular appear to be splintering in ways that in the past were typical of left-wing parties. Third, with the partial exception of Salafist parties and some on the extreme left, they have quite similar, essentially centrist, party platforms. Most remarkably, even Islamist parties describe themselves as civil parties and call for a civil state, while liberal and leftist parties accept Islam as the religion of the state and advocate state intervention to moderate and correct the failures of markets and to promote social justice.

As Egypt approaches its first free election in more than 60 years, the SCAF's policies have proven weak and confusing, and at times even erratic. Instinctively conservative and buffeted by the swirling politics unleashed by the revolution, the SCAF has seen its reputation fade. Many critics of the army always make the distinction between the SCAF member and the army as a national institution.[16]

Indeed, the Egyptian army is a national institution with the best-organized group in the country and is highly respected in civil society and in social ranks as an institution. The Egyptian army was established in 1805. Thereby it is one of the world's oldest military institutions and certainly the oldest in the Middle East. The Pakistani army, however, is essentially a Punjabi army, with its core recruitment from southern Punjab province. Thus, it excludes the Pashtun, Baluchi, Sindi and other minorities that constitute around 50 per cent of the population. The Pakistani army projects itself as 'a deep state' that has always acted openly to influence politics. Like its Turkish counterpart, the Pakistani army has managed several coups d'état or simply has taken over the government several times since independence, mainly on the pretext of a lack of good civilian leadership, who most Pakistanis regard as corrupt and inefficient. It is uncertain whether the Egyptian army would do likewise. In my view, the Egyptian people would not allow such a scenario to happen.

Unlike the Turkish army, in its heyday of coups d'état against democratically elected governments, the Egyptian army is uneasy about its openly political role and would like to surrender it. It is less clear, however, whether it is willing to relinquish its 'behind the scenes' role. With the exception of the years 1952-1956, the Egyptian army has never had the political role that it has for the time being. The Military Council has shown a tendency to make unilateral decisions without consulting the youth of the revolution, political parties or other civilian organizations. For example, after the March referendum approved a narrow set of constitutional amendments, the military took it upon itself to incorporate the amended articles with articles culled from the old constitution to produce an interim charter; in July, it amended the election law without public consultations.

The Military Council has made concessions to the demands of the major political groups, which threatened to boycott the polls if their demands were not met. For example, parties are allowed to nominate candidates to all the seats of parliament instead of two-thirds, as stipulated in the initial electoral law. It has also decided to stop trials of civilians in military courts except for certain cases. However, this does not mean the Military Council has the full support of the public. Instead, many activists and political forces have been pressing it to transfer power to a civilian government as soon as possible. Six potential presidential candidates even set the deadline of April. According to the general timetable, the parliamentary elections will last some four months and a constitution will be drafted before presidential elections. This means the president will be elected at the end of next year or even early 2012. It is true that when political parties and movements protest, the military usually meets with them and responds to some of their complaints, but it is clear that the Council members remain, at heart, military elites who are comfortable with issuing orders, not consulting.

15 Jalal Al-Jallal, in conversation with the author in Tripoli, Libya on 3 November 2011.

16 See The Economist, 14 October 2011.

III

One of post-Mubarak Egypt's biggest challenges, besides the transition to democracy, is to put an end to ethnic conflict between Islamists and Copts.[17] Religious violence is nothing new in Egypt, even though there are strict laws against it and severe punishments for those who incite such violence. Islamic extremism has throughout the years engendered Coptic extremism. The state's discriminating policy and clumsy attitude toward ethnic tension have even worsened the problem. It was alarming enough in May when riots in a poor suburb of Cairo pitted Salafis against Copts. The SCAF's role in these riots needs to be clarified. It is clear the latest fatal clashes between Salafis and Copts could serve as a new excuse state of emergency to continue. As elections draw near, the language of Egypt's Salafis is becoming more confrontational, threatening and worryingly confident, allegedly bankrolled by the Wahabi establishment in Saudi Arabia. Some argue that the rise of Salafis after the revolution is not all bad, and that it is better to have them in public and reason with them, instead of pushing them to resort to violence underground as was the case from 1950s until the fall of Mubarak.

The problem of ethnic strife is two-fold, as the Coptic extremists have become also part of this conflict. In a country where religion has become the most visible expression of identity, and where extremists, both Muslim and Copts, have succeeded in enclosing people in a narrow, rigid religious framework. Indeed, in his masterpiece *Mr. Biswas*, V.S. Naipaul asserts that absorption in religion rendered a person incomplete and mindless because it habitually fed on distortion and, by ignoring the larger reality, sought to escape from reality.

The Salafis have been playing with using one of the Coptic Church's biggest failures to solve day-to-day human problems. It's worth noting that, with divorce banned in the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria—which is by far the largest of the Coptic Churches—people who are unhappy in their marriages may convert to another faith in order to dissolve those marriages. These problems, combined with the weakened political state of Egypt, have allowed the Islamists (mainly Salafis) to rise up and perpetuate violence in an atmosphere that does not prosecute those who commit these crimes. Salafis have used these 'new converts' to commit violence against the Copts.

This adds to the frustration that can partly explain the frequent violence against them. Many prominent Copts rightly claim that they suffer from unequal legislation that makes it harder for them to build places of worship; they cannot occupy high-ranking posts in all state bodies, and were marginalized in candidate lists for the ruling party in the last election. The Copts are growing more and more angry, and that is why they are more vocal after the revolution.

The Coptic Pope might feel that there is a change of course in relation to the ruling Military Council. The Pope has been dealing with Mubarak for more than 30 years. Mubarak had a kind of practical, pragmatic and in many ways damaging partnership with the Coptic Pope. The Pope would endorse Mubarak and on many occasions expressed support for his son Gamal to take over after him. Shenouda also asked all the Copts to do likewise. It helped to have his endorsement and his patronage. The Pope would remind his people that Mubarak and his son Gamal were looking out for them. In exchange Mubarak would do the Pope a favour. This relationship angered Muslims as well as Copts, and created strife within the Church that the Pope always prevailed, thanks to the support of Mubarak.

The Pope has always intervened to keep laws that he liked, often conservative and reactionary, because they enforced certain Coptic moral codes just on the Coptic population and not on the Muslims, in addition to other quirks of the Egyptian legal system. One of the most peculiar episodes is when the Coptic Church and Pope Shenouda reacted on September 2010 to a decision taken by the Egyptian High Administrative Court to legalize the divorce of some hundreds of Christian Copts. He stated on live television that 'this Court's decision is the word of man but we have the word of God, and the word of God will prevail!'[18] This means that he denied about 300.000 people the right to divorce. It was also reported that he had a guarantee from Mubarak personally that the court's decision would never be enforced.[19]

17 The Copts of Egypt are a Christian minority with a unique cultural heritage that may be traced directly to the Pharaonic period in Egyptian history. St. Mark the Evangelist (the author of an appropriately named gospel) allegedly founded the Church of Alexandria in 42 A.D., thus creating one of the five original Christian sees. Since the 1970s, Egypt has seen a rise in Islamism. Egyptian Christians—who make up 10 per cent of the population—often complain of being second-class citizens.

IV

During the coming months, the relative weight of these players should become clearer, but as this happens conflict could increase in the fragile political and social landscape of Egypt. The elections will of course provide the first indication of the support enjoyed by the various parties and put an end to the speculation, but if Islamists should get a high percentage of the vote, election results could also create a deep division in the country. In such a scenario we can envision the possibility that the military will continue exercising power overtly.

The Youth of Tahrir Square have come to the conclusion that they will make a difference as a street force to dictate political change, as they have been the since the ousting of Mubarak. The 6th of April Movements and their counterparts reasoned that it is impossible to hastily establish political parties to compete in the election. It is too short a time in a country that has a weak civil society and with no culture of political affiliation.

As I see it, even though the political scene has become chaotic, Egypt still has the new and revitalized political force of the Youth of Tahrir Square. As Egypt moves toward elections, the youth organizations and—more broadly—the people are willing to go out and demonstrate in the streets; this remains an important feature of the political scene in Egypt. This development seems to be the only hope for viable political change. These youth protests act as the conscience of the revolution, challenging the decisions of the Military Council and occasionally the willingness of political parties to go along with them. Some critics portray these protesters as a dangerous force, seeking to press the government into hasty decisions that may harm the transition. What is certain is that the protesters remain an established part of the political process in today's Egypt.

The election results could lead protest movements to fade away, at least temporarily, or to become mobilized again if they deem that the elections reconfirmed the power of the old regime. At this point, it is clear who the participants in Egypt's political game are. It will be several more months before we understand their relative strength, and considerably longer before we know whether the emerging balance of power will allow a democratic transformation.

18 See al-Masry al-Youm, 14 September 2010.

19 See Mohamed Zaian in his recently published book, *Masloboon 'ala abowab al-Kannaes* (Crossed on the Gates of the Church) discuss the problem of the victims of those who have been denied a second marriage. He illustrates with many examples of people who suffered due to the Church refusal to accept their request for divorce.

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