

The Role of Religion in Democratic Transition: Egypt

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Introduction

- 1) Egypt is in Transition. With the fall of Hosni Mubarak in 2010, and the subsequent elections and transfer of power, Egypt is clearly going through a transition of sorts
 - a. Where this transition leads – and whether this will create a constitutional democracy – remains to be seen.
- 2) Although this process as commonly referred to as a “Democratic Transition,” there are actually multiple transitions unfolding – Pol, Econ, Culture...
 - a. I will be focusing my remarks on the role of religion in these transitions, particularly as it relates to the political and cultural realms
 - b. To this end, I will give particular attention to the current debates over proper role of Islam in Egyptian public life.
 - i. Although the protests during the Arab Spring were consciously devoid of any calls for an Islamic state,
 - ii. This question of religion and government – and freedom of conscience - has become a central feature of the post-Arab Spring politics
 - iii. particularly in the Constituent Assembly which is currently drafting the country’s new constitution.
- 3) It is in the context of this debate that many in Egypt (and elsewhere) see religion as a threat to the democratic ideals of the revolution.
 - a. I, however, would like to take a more nuanced view
 - b. Religion – and Islam in particular – is not an obstacle to democracy – and democratic consolidation per se,;
 - i. Rather, the obstacle is exclusive (and authoritarian) tendencies of various political actors, notably the more extreme *salafist* parties, but also the military
 - ii. And it is these exclusive tendencies that threaten to replicate the dysfunctions of the previous order, and perpetuate Mubarakism under a new guise.

Democratic Transitions: Theory and Practice

- 1) As I alluded to a minute ago, there are three transitions which are unfolding in Egypt today. Political, Economic and Cultural.
 - a. Generally speaking, what I mean by a Political transition
 - i. a transition from an authoritarian form of government – one

- dominated by the military, secret police and a small ruling elite –
- ii. to a form of government defined by a greater accountability, rule of law and a respect for civil liberties
 - 1. free and fair elections are a *necessary* part of such a transition,
 - 2. but in and of themselves do not make for democracy.
 - iii. What is also needed are new forms of governance, with a high degree of pol transparency, restraint on the arbitrary exercise of power and tolerance for diverse political views.
 - iv. At least this is what is required to consider the political transition a success – constitutional governance.
- b. There is also an economic transition currently underway, the goal of which to address the economic dysfunction which is associated with authoritarian rule.
- i. This is arguably the most important because it was economic discontent that which gave rise to the protests.
 - ii. It is also perhaps the most difficult – because it is not clear what the answer to Egypt’s economic ills are
 - iii. and it is also a topic I will also say the least about...
- c. Cultural transition – It is the third issue that I want to focus on in this talk:
- i. Democracy is more than just a new set of political structures with parties and elections, et. al.
 - ii. it is also a culture, or an “ethos” if you will,
 - 1. Defined first and foremost by a culture of tolerance and acceptance of competing political view points
 - 2. It is also defined by an inclusivity of all members of the national community
 - iii. A consolidated democracy, then, would entail a transition from a closed political culture which demonizes dissent and equates difference with heresy, to a more open, inclusive political culture, where diverse viewpoints are tolerated if not always respected.
 - 1. Or to use Prof. Ferrari’s framework, would be supportive of both freedom and equality, particularly as it relates to religion and belief.
 - iv. Numerous obstacles to this in Egypt -
 - 1. 60 years of Authoritarian rule
 - 2. the sectarianism that has emerged the last 30 or 40 years
 - 3. And the prevalence of political ideologies – particularly among the *salafist* groups - that seeks to impose an exclusive vision of social life upon the broader community

- v. Lest we become too pessimistic, there are reasons for optimism: the non-ideological nature of the protest movements – and the historical legacy of religious tolerance in the country – and the pragmatic requirements of governing a diverse society.
- d. The point is that it is the tension between these two visions of post-revolution Egypt – open/inclusive as opposed to closed culture – one that seeks national unity through religious uniformity - provides an insight into the ideological debates that inform contemporary Egypt...

Civil vs. Islamist State

- 1) At the heart of the ideological debate is a question over whether or Egypt ought to have a religious or civil state
 - a. This is not a new question.
 - i. It was prevalent 1920's and 30's,
 - ii. Similarly, in the early Nasser period
 - iii. And again in the 1990's
- 2) At one level, the debate is over the proper role of religion in public life, and whether or not the religious beliefs of the dominant community ought to be given preference within the institutions of nation and state.
 - a. Or, the state should be neutral in regard to matters of religion and belief.
 - b. i.e. Should we have a "religious" state or a "secular" state
- 3) At another level, the debate is over the issue of identity – who is an Egyptian? Does need to be a practicing Muslim to be fully Egyptian? Is civil status going to be tied to religious identity?
- 4) Perhaps most problematic is the question as to whether the state ought to enforce religious orthodoxy? i.e. is it the proper role of the state to promote a particular vision of religion in society, and use the coercive apparatus of the state to punish heresy and regulate belief?

Arab Spring and its aftermath

- 1) Interestingly, these debates were entirely absent from the 2011 uprising.
 - a. Rather, what defined the protests was a high degree of unity despite diversity –
 - i. Copts, Muslims, Men, Women, young, old...
 - ii. All uniting around very simple message: Mubarak must go...
 - b. Unity ultimately breaks down – Not surprising... Przeworski – *Dem and The Market* – two stages to democratization process
 - i. Extraction from authoritarian regime
 - ii. Institution of a new democratic order

- iii. While various members of civil society are united in stage 1 – and need to be – in stage two they are pit against one another as they struggle reshape the new order
 - 1. Interests and ideology (visions of society);
 - c. 2011-2012 Elections – Even in the Dec/Jan Parliamentary and Presidential last June
 - i. I would argue that these ideological debates were not the driving force, particularly in the Parliamentary elections...
 - ii. The Islamist forces did exceedingly well,
 - 1. Parliamentary elections, MBhood wins 47 percent of the seats, the Salafists win 23 percent...
 - 2. Presidential Election –
 - 3. Many supported the Islamists for non ideological reasons -
 - iii. Many supported the Islamists because they weren't the other guy – the old regime –
 - iv. but we can also explain the success of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafi parties was due to
 - 1. Extensive grassroots Organization
 - 2. Money – huge influx from the Gulf...
 - 3. Legitimacy
 - a. History of standing against the regime
 - b. Islam... Vernacular/Activate Identity...
 - v. It was also due to the weakness of the Secular parties
 - 1. Lack of organization – most of the secular parties created in the past year
 - a. Little grass roots organization
 - b. Little money
 - 2. Still suffering from years of Mubarak repression
- 2) Constitution – where the ideological debates really come to the fore is in the Constituent Assembly that is drafting the constitution.
- a. Because the Islamist forces did so well in the Parliamentary campaigns, they have a majority in the Constituent Assembly
 - i. And have used this as an opportunity to promote vision of religion and society
 - ii. And it is this that gives concern to the liberal and secular forces that the democratic ideals of the rev are being betrayed.
 - b. From the Salafist view, however, this is not at all the case. They are simply trying to affirm the religious identify of the majority community – and build a society consistent with their understanding of their faith tradition.

- i. From this view, democracy is about the will of the majority; not a concern with minority rights.
- ii. On certain issue, the Salafis are finding support among members of Egypt's legal community who long argued that national unity requires a high degree of religious uniformity.

Some of the key Points of Contention include

- c. Article 2 of Constitution which identifies Islam as the official religion
 - i. And the principles of Islamic law – or sharia – as the primary source of all legislation
 - d. A proposed constitutional provision to criminalize Blasphemy (There are laws against blasphemy...)
 - i. Which raises numerous concerns about freedom of conscience
 - ii. And how such a law would be applied...
 - e. Hisba – whether or not individual citizens can initiate cases regarding blasphemy, apostasy or heresy.
 - f. Press Freedom
 - g. Independence of the Judiciary
 - h. The question of Women's rights
 - i. Independence of Al-Azhar – and whether Al-Azhar ought to be the primary institution for interpreting Islam for Egyptian society.
 - j. Institution to collect Zakat – alms –
- 3) POINT: all of these issues come back to the question of whether the state should be promoting a particular religion in the public sphere – and enforcing religious orthodoxy – or whether the state should be neutral in regard to matters of religion, and respect the legitimacy of conscience, minority rights and dissent?

Conclusion:

- 1) Recognizing that I am skipping over a great deal here... What can be generalized from this case, particularly in regard to the role of religion in democratic transitions?
 - a. The short answer is that it depends upon which interpretation of religion that one is speaking of
 - b. While the tendency is to view these ideological debates as “secular” vs. “religious,” I would argue that they really reflect an internal debate within Islamic circles over how to interpret their tradition for a contemporary era.
- 2) Some of the most interesting ideological debates are happening within the Islamist movement
 - a. Which includes a number of groups and individuals that have split with Muslim Brotherhood at one point or another, including the members of the Wasat Party – and Abdel Moneim abou al-Fotoh, who was a leading presidential candidate

- i. And who all have supported extending equal civil and political rights to all members of the community, and
 - 1. are very much in support of the democratic project as outlined above
- b. Similarly, one of the earliest statements of support for a “civil state” came from a series of meetings initiated by the Sheik al-Azhar, a leading cleric
 - i. who is rightly concerned about the influence of politics on religion, and hence wants some independence from political rulers.
 - 1. The document associated with these meetings released earlier in the year, argued for a democratic and constitutional state,
 - 2. Freedom of conscience
 - 3. Argues for a “civil” not a religious state.
- c. On the other hand, those interpretations of religion advocated by the *Salafist trend*, and which that exclusive visions of social life are going to be anti-thetical to the democratic ethos described above
 - i. And, hence, the danger that I alluded to earlier – the willingness of religious actors to embrace the authoritarian state structure in order to promote their particular vision of society
- d. The point, then, is that religion can play a positive, or negative, role, depending upon which interpretation we are talking about and what kind of vision it has for social life.
 - i. How this will play out in Egypt remains to be seen