

Emerging Middle Eastern Leadership – the Dilemma

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The tragic suicide of a Tunisian graduate in January 2011 ignited the proverbial tinderbox of suppression and oppression in the Muslim world. Having rapidly consumed the Tunisian and Egypt governments, its flames have now engulfed Algeria, Yemen, Jordan, Libya and Bahrain; several other countries in the region have been put on notice that the long overdue economic and social reforms cannot be withheld any longer. The reactions of the frustrated and desperate population will not allow the maintenance of status quo.

While these popular uprising have resulted in widespread demands for democracy in the region, the transition to democracy will be a long and turbulent journey because the infrastructure for democracy's success is non-existent in the Arab world. Individual responsibility, accountability and the establishment of strong state institutions are critical for the success of democracy. And individual responsibility does not mean casting the vote; it means casting votes on issues after understanding the dynamics in their historical and political contexts. In most Muslim countries where elections are held, corruption is rife and votes are cast on personal and familial considerations. Many Muslims form their worldview from Islamist-dominated madrassas and mosque sermons and believe the conspiracy theories fed through the pulpit. With this attitude, democracy simply becomes governance by the dominant gang. Iraq is a case in point where in spite of the best efforts by Western powers, democracy has been elusive; the situation of ordinary citizens has not improved.

The unfolding events in the Middle East and Africa have given birth to the question about the future form of governments in countries that have deposed the dictatorial governments. The role of Muslim Brotherhood¹ and other Islamist parties is being prominently discussed in this context. Several commentators view Muslim Brotherhood as a transformed and non-violent organization that shunned violence in the 70s. And some cite Malaysia as an example of successful democracy in the Muslim world. These are wrong questions and ignore the fundamental cause of violence and undemocratic behavior in Muslim countries where re-engineered doctrines of Islamic State, jihad, blasphemy, apostasy, sharia, etc., are gaining widespread acceptance; these contrived doctrines have been adopted by terrorist and radical organizations around the world.

Brotherhood's ideologue Syed Qut'b and Jama'at-i-Islami's founder Maulana Maududi contemporarily authored political Islam's ideology in the 1940s. The central tenant of these flawed doctrines is the reestablishment of an Islamic State (along the lines of the former Ottoman Empire). This mythical State will be governed by the caliph under sharia, will wage jihad its non-Muslim neighbors with whom the Muslim state will perpetually be at war; peace can only be established after the non-Muslim neighbors have been defeated, or by treaty whereby the neighbor accepts the Muslim State's hegemony. Minorities will have diminished rights compared to Muslims and will not be allowed to hold important positions in the government. Thus the Muslim state will not trust non-Muslims and, as quid pro quo,

¹ Formed in 1928, after the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and the termination of the Caliphate, with the aim of re-establishing the Muslim State.

this twisted ideology demands that Muslims cannot be loyal citizens of non-Muslim governments! And apostates have to be killed. While appearing comical in today's connected world, these doctrines were unanimously confirmed by Muslim scholars' before a high powered investigative commission in Pakistan in 1954 who expertly extracted details through written testimony and cross examination.² The Commission debated these flawed dogmas at length and the Islamic political parties shamelessly ceded that parts of the Qur'an, that negate their views, have been abrogated – a position that contradicts an important fundamental pillar of the Islamic faith!

Clearly, these indefensible positions were developed as reactionary policies under a defeatist mindset when new nation states were being formed in the Middle East from what previously constituted the Ottoman Empire and considered the Muslim State. Rather than looking forward and accepting the changed situation, the Muslim clergy forced people to regress into history, adopt past practices with the hope of being successful, if not in this world, then surely in the hereafter! The clergy's desire to monopolize Islam and control its discourse was obvious; they wanted to usurp the right to define a Muslim. In the ultimate power grab, virtually every Muslim sect has declared others as non-Muslims, and liable to be killed for apostasy. The flawed and misrepresented concepts of sharia, jihad, blasphemy, apostasy, etc., are thus critical for controlling the Muslim discourse.

This ideology has been embraced by all Islamic political parties, some of which later morphed into groups like al-Qaida, Taliban, etc. Ironically, proponents of this ideology fail to realize that the Muslims' failure to transition from the agrarian-based to the industrial-based economy wrought on by the Industrial Revolution in the eighteenth century caused their downfall. To move forward, Muslims must accept the change that includes adopting secular education and challenging the Islamist propaganda.

The increasing religiosity, rising persecution of non-Muslim minorities in Muslim countries, demands for sharia implementation, institution of laws against blasphemy and apostasy, etc., have all culminated in the 57-nation Organization of Islamic Conference's (OIC) rejection of the Universal Human Rights declaration adopted by the UN in 1948 as un-Islamic! Instead, they have adopted an Islamic version developed around their warped interpretations of blasphemy, apostasy and sharia in 2008. This rejection of the 1948 UN Declaration of Human Rights and the adoption of an Islamic version highlights the growing influence of Islamists in the mainstream Muslim discourse. This and similar events happening in the Muslim world must serve as leading indicators of negative changes to come if the Islamist doctrines are not exposed.

Although this popular uprising in the Middle East started as a grass roots rebellion against high unemployment and suppression by dictatorial regimes, radicals are claiming responsibility for this revolution. Citing The Tsunami of Change – an article in the al-Qaida's English-language magazine "Inspire" – NY Times reported Anwar al-Awlaki's³ claims that the radicals were somehow behind the Middle Eastern uprising and they had gleefully watched the success of protest movements against governments they had long despised. Stating the mujahedeen's elation at their success, he mockingly

² Report of the Court of Inquiry Constituted Under Punjab Act II of 1954 to Enquire into the Punjab disturbances of 1953, commonly referred to as the Munir Commission Report

³ American-born radical cleric representing Al-Qaida of the Arabian Peninsula

questions “whether the West is aware of the upsurge of mujahedeen activity in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Yemen, Arabia, Algeria and Morocco?” Similarly, the al-Qaida leader Ayman al-Zawahri, claimed indirect credit for Al Qaeda for inspiring the Middle Eastern uprisings and urged the Egyptians to shun the United States, reject democracy and embrace Islam as the answer to their problems.⁴

Islamist groups prosper and gain acceptance in their communities through political activism and charity work. Even though Muslim Brotherhood (Egypt) and similar groups in other Muslim countries are banned, they have hundreds and thousands of passionately committed members from the society’s middle class. These educated young people include professionals (lawyers, doctors, scientists, businesspeople, etc.) and opinion formers (editors, talk show hosts, etc.) who propagate their message using slogans as “Islam is the solution” and “jihad is our way”. Unfortunately, some Muslim governments use Islamists to perpetuate their hold on power (Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, etc.) and as quid pro quo, deny the right to free speech to groups that oppose Islamist propaganda; several countries penalize free speech equating the condemnation of Islamist doctrines as anti-Islamic.

Thus the Islamists are already claiming credit for the popular uprisings in the Middle East and Africa and have cast their eyes on implementing their twisted concepts of Islamic State in the Middle East. To defeat them, the world must ask them to explain those incendiary concepts and Muslims around the world, particularly those living in non-Muslim majority countries, must either own or disown the Islamist version of Islam. These groups must be challenged because their political objectives remain unchanged.

Al Qaeda’s statements counter the common Western view that the Islamist networks are irrelevant at this time of unprecedented change in the Middle East where secular-leaning demonstrators have called for democracy and generally avoided violence. That may be about to end and the Islamist dominance in the region where dictatorial regimes kept them out, may be beginning.

⁴ <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/31/world/middleeast/31inspire.html?partner=rss&emc=rss>