

# **The Arab Spring, Islamic Identity and Democracy**

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## **Abstract**

Recent developments in “the Arab Spring” reflecting successive victories for “Islamists” in various elections has raised serious, though not new, questions about its nature and future: where is leading these movements with all their Islamic tendencies and trend? Which political order will come out of them? Departing from an approach to globalization and identity seeking trends involving contemporary globalization, this article is going to argue that, in spite of concerns about future of these movements, they are not to lead Arab people to some forms of old theocratic political systems, with a cleric on top of them, nor some new forms of autocratic regimes, but, instead will lead them to some forms of pluralistic democracy, a semi-secular political order, with moderate Islamist on top them.

**Keywords:** Globalization, Identity Seeking, Islamic Revivalism, Political Islam

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### **Introduction**

The Arab spring which in Iran officially referees to “Islamic awakening” evidently reveals Islamic features from various aspects. This fact raises questions about their potential trends and evokes various concerns about uprisings outcomes. Given predominant status what is named “The Political Islam” in these events some people suspect that some new forms of authoritarian regime might substitute the old ones, may be even an authoritarian regime with much less toleration than old ones. Dominant liberal outlook in the west equates the political Islam with “fundamentalism”, theocracy and even medievalism. Such understanding of “the political Islam” has a deep root in the west, surely not without certain grounds. Among these grounds, which some of them returns to historical misunderstanding between middle age Christian west and Islamic east, and some relates to modern colonial era, we are going to concentrate on the one which having to do with analytical-academic field. And it is the paradoxical relation between Islamism as an identity seeking political movement and democracy as a political order.

This so-called paradox returns, in a way, to a specific conception of modernization with a server culturalistic implication on part of mainstream though in the west. With this approach to modernization, in fact, the western way of democratization of the political structure and the political process is the sole way of democratic transformation. Such an outlook sees “the political Islam” only as “fundamentalism” (of course with negative connotation specific to this way of looking).

In what follows we will, first, argue against this conception of modernization, as well as this way of looking to the political Islam, and, then, while have a look to what is happening in “spring” making uprisings, try to inquire into potential course of events with regards to democratic transformation and political modernization in the new Middle East. In conceptual as well as theoretical stand point we draw on Roland Robertson (1991 a, 1991 b, 1992) Manuel Castells (1999) and Jurgen Habermas (1987) to asses modern developments such as globalization and its relation to identity seeking movements, fundamentalism and democratization in new global evolutions.

### **Modernity and Identity**

Soon after that “spring” movement in the Middle East and North Africa revealed its Islamic features and initial elections in Egypt and Tunisia registered successive winning for Islamic groups, once again arose the question as to why are Islamic ideas so appealing for uprising nations and in view of these developments what would be fate of the democratization requirements in the region. What wonders Western observers is the Islamic specification of the movement in an era that supposed to has laid religious appeals behind themselves. They labeled this development as fundamentalism.

While emergence of Islamic values as well as ideas as an ideological appeal supporting national liberation movement, in some countries, goes as back as late nineteen century, theorizing about “fundamentalism” is almost new. Nonetheless we are not in lack of theory and conceptual tools to explain and to understand these experiences. One approach to explain such seemingly astonishing manifestation for our era is, paradoxically, to relate term to globalization, the most modern proceeding of our era. There is, fortunately, some authoritative theoretical works connected with famous names in academic world. This approach tends to relate manifestations as Islamic revivalism, fundamentalism and nostalgic quest for identity to globalization process.

Much of concern about fate of the Arab spring, where concern to future of democratization in uprising nations, thus, returns to some specific understanding of present dynamism of historical and social developments, its driving forces and its direction. However, now many scholars take the globalization as a concept as well as a process with reference to which many major events of our time can be explained. The Islamic revivalism is typically one of these manifestations which some scholars has tried to explain it with reference to globalization as conceptual framework

Roland Robertson whom we referred to earlier is one of scholars who have adopted globalization as a referential for his social and civilizational theorizing. Globalization as a central concept in his theorizing, explains manifestations as, Islamic revivalism, fundamentalism and the like more thoroughly and in our view convincingly (Robertson, 1991 a).

To take the globalization as a conceptual reference to explain the major manifestations of our time, including Islamic revivalism, in the first place, we must ask how the Islamic revivalism and its new revelation

in the Arab spring relates to the globalization and some of its component parts such as modernization and democratization. Is Islamism in the Arab spring an opposing force contrary to globalization, or reversely a product of it and a local manifestation of its requirement? Reply to these questions reveals our specific understanding of both, the globalization, and various forms of what we call Islamic revivalism.

One reply to these questions could be that the Islamic revivalism is a kind diversion from globalization as a clash with it (clash of civilizations). And, aside from qualified replies, there is a quite contrary reply to those questions, which introduces the Islamic revivalism as one of particular manifestations of the globalization, a paradoxical response to a contradictory process. According to this understanding the relation between the two is simultaneously interaction and contradiction. Some claims hold true for other major manifestations as nationalism, ethnocentrism, and religious fundamentalism in our era. We are confront with politicization of culture generally and religion particularly. In fact, the quest for non mundane values has a demand to worldly power within itself. As Fukuyama says the idea claiming a right to identity and demands recognition is the prevailing idea at present time (Fukuyama, 1992). In addition, the politicization of “fundamental” values, as Robertson says, there are even signs of economization of the fundamental values (Robertson, 1992). In the same vein the protest against common social science and condemning it as western science grows more and more.

Looking to the Islamic revivalism not as a reaction intending to reject western modernism, but a movement that is attracting its mission unknowingly through a nativisation processes is not new. As early as 1990s some scholars asserted that the appeals in the new Islamic movements can not be evaluate at all by referring to traditional religious ideas in Islam.

While since anti-colonial movement of Muslim people, the political Islam grows to become an important political, social and cultural force (Amin Klan, 2009) Until 1990s the Islamic revivalism movement and Islamic fundamentalism assessed as some forms of extremism and religious radicals which shows itself in this or that part of Islamic world. It was in 1990s that there appeared new approaches to the movement which now has spread across the Islamic world all. Furthermore, the claim to identity and various forms of fundamentalism presented itself with much vigor across the world. However, these new evaluations yet

bound to be limited to a few line of thoughts. The old outlook remind dominant in academic researches, as well as, particularly, in mass media. So the role of Islamic ideas and emotions in political mobilization to gain natural independence and achieve social progress was nearly ignored and still commonly is ignored.

Equating the political Islam with extremism provides, in fact, the interests of world dominant powers. The interests of these powers initial an image of Islam and Islamic movements which permeates with violence. This image helps them to depict national demands and national resistance against imperial dominance as terrorism.

### **The ascent of Islamists in elections**

As the Economist writes, in mid revolutionary upheavals, and before the outcome of elections known, the revolutions swamping through the Middle East and North Africa seemed “very modern and secular”. What was happening in Egypt and Tunisia’s streets seemed to disapprove the dictators claimed that the only alternative to the violence of dictators is a theocracy with a clergy on top of it (the economists, 2012). Mubark and Bin Ali always claimed that if they yield the democratic way of running affairs the sole result will be reign of fundamentalism. What goes on today in the Arab world is ascendancy of political Islam. The most dramatic example of this is Egypt. Ikhavan al Muslemeen (Muslim Brotherhood) which bases its message on the Islamic ideas is winning the successive election of Egypt’s parliament and presidency. In Tunisia and Morocco, too, Islamists similar to Ikhvan al Muslemeen have won elections. In Libya something of this kind is happening. Political Islam now sways more than any time.

But what all of this means? Were these mentioned dictators right that the shadow of a theocracy hangs on revolutionary nations? Do all of these prove skeptics that claim that Arabs could not handle democracy? In what follows, we are going to argue against toppled the dictators claim and against skepticism about fate of democracy in Islamic nations.

### **The well-spring of the Arab spring**

Arab political system in the eve of recent upheavals was product of a number of domestic, regional and global arrangements and developments in post–world war international order. In the new world order which marked decline of European powers and rise of national

liberation movements many Arab states attained independence in 1950s and 1960s and after a period of instability the fabric of state system was more clearly defined in early 1970. The new Arab states, aside from different forms of government, invariably relied on a numbers of tools in their attempt to consolidate their grip on power. Unfortunately these tools themselves became characteristic of Arab state system. These characteristics emerged mainly in following manners:

First, autocratic rule combined with fraud and corruption. Generally forcing peoples to submission and acquiescence was main tools of new Arab states. This secured rulers with elections which typically produced 99% support for them.

Second, the one-party system became the operative ruling measure in the Arab states. Attempts to organize political parties other than the ruling party have been subjected to systematic destruction. Any form of opposition was considered to pose a threat to national security. The dominant form of Arab regimes indicated that there was not meaningful difference between monarchical and republican forms of governments, Mubarak, Bin Ali, and Saleh were such “monarchical republican” (Hisham Ahmed, 2012).

Third, nearly in all of new states, governments which were attained power at result of independent movement soon forget all peoples fight for their national pride and human dignity and began to violate human rights and suppress any opposition.

Fourth, many Arab rulers while had apparently a commitment to Palestine cause, in fact had betrayed Palestinian peoples.

Fifth, corruption of every kind prevailed every where and rulers family were themselves embodiment of corruption.

These are the immediate agents of uprisings. Now the question is what will bring about revolutions in countries where changes are underway. People in the street have made clear that they want real changes and have been determined to do away with old systems with their entirety. But now that elections produces an meaningful reception of and voting to Islamic groups what changes be expected to come about from all of these.

### **Political Islam and Pan-Islamism**

A number of perspectives differentiate Islamic groups from each other. From one perspective, we can draw a line between radicals and moderates. While both radicals and moderates appeals to Islam as the source of their ideas and ideals, their attitude to required changes to reconstruct the community and the way to achieve them differs considerably. The radical Islamist groups such as Al-Qaida want to make a community based on canonical law (Shariah). But moderate Islamist groups as Ikhvan-al Muslemeen has reconciled with many modern democratic values and institutions such as nation state, citizenship and liberty. In other word, their demands accommodate modern state.

In the Arab world, identity was traditionally, largely if not exclusively, defined in religious, communal terms (Umma). Al-Tahtawi was an early example of the Egyptian cleric who introduced modern nations such as homeland (watanie) and rights of people, freedom and social equality to the Arab world. He was also an early example of Muslim cleric and intellectual who began to accommodate modern ideas and institutions in Egypt. He produced evidences from Koran (the Book) and prophetic traditions (Hadith) for all of these. This approach characterizes Muslim thought and writing about modernity and democracy until now (al Rahim, 2011).

Over the much of second half of the twentieth centuries pan-Arabism and pan Islamism dominated on political discourse of the Arab countries, however in recent uprisings the political discourse and political grievances has markedly shifted to a national (namely Egyptian, Tunisian, etc) based agenda with clearly defined and, in their eyes, achievable goals. This will push aside al Qaida's utopian pan-Islamic goals, including establishing an imagined unified caliphate stretching from Spain to Indonesia. Ikhvan al Muslemeen and similar organizations throughout the Muslim world, while in ideas seeks Muslim Polity (Umma) in practice has operated as national Islamist movements.

### **Which model of political Islam?**

All signs indicate that moderate Islamist as Ikhvan al Muslemeen of Egypt and Alnahda of Tunisia and similar organizations will ascent to power in new Arab states. On February 27, 2011, Ikhvan al Muslemeen announced that has formed Freedom and Justice Party. So Ikhvan which up to now operated rather as a movement – a Jma'a – officially established a political party with a specific national platform. This party

is currently the best organized party in Egypt. Soon after this development political analysts began to argue that moderate political Islam in new Arab states will assume Turkish Islamists model. But we are going to argue against this assessment, below, though Ikhvan explicitly asserted that will follow AKP.

Despite some similarity between Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) and AKP a deep root difference separates them from each other. Turkish ideological pillars turns back to the Young Turk movement which had adopted a vulgar version of materialism which upheld the role of modern science and modern political institution: as a panacea for all the cultural, economic and political ills associated with the Ottoman Pan-Islamism. Modern science and nationalism counted as a key for Turkey to catch up with the more advanced west. This through-going form of secularism is, at least constitutionally, foundation of the Turkish national republic. This situation has led to a political environment where have been emerged political Islamists without “Islam”, religious parties that not explicitly campaigning in the name of religion. Kemalist secularism and nationalism which has been the center of politics in Turkey, since its founding in 1923, is making the political Islamist experience there politically unique (al Rahim, 2011).

It is not so easy for Ikhvan and similar parties to follow Turkish Islamists. Kemalist secularism and nationalism, with its origin in a distinct philosophy of nineteenth century German, has deep roots in Turkish institutions and politics, while Ikhvan and Al Nahda belong to different circumstances. Ikhvan has been founded by Hasan al Bana in 1928 as a radical Islamist movement. Its objective has been to infuse the Qu’ran and Sunnah as the sole reference points for ordering the life of the Muslim individual, community and state and delivery of Shariah (Kerckhove, 2012, I). Egyptian secular military leadership in Gamal Abd al, Naser time outlawed Ikhavan in 1954. In 1980s, it officially renounced the use of violence and began to channel more of its resources towards political involvement.

The traditional position of the Ikhvan towards Mubarak regime was always been one of no direct confrontation. Mubarak didn’t want repress Ikhavan al Muslemeen altogether while tried keep it under some control. So allowed Ikhvan to flourish, and Ikhvan consolidated itself in civil society. Ikhvan according its initial principle did not try to achieve political power, and centered its activity in the civil society. Mubarak



capitalized on the Muslim Brotherhood willingness to compromise and its conservative social program. This in a way helped to marginalize secular opposition. In 1981-1990, Ikhvan took the lead in social organizations such as student organizations, professional syndicates (doctors, engineers, lawyers). Democratic reform movement in 2004 and 2005 provided new situation for Brotherhood to emerge as an organization with mass support (Pioppi, 2011). In 2005 parliamentary election, Muslim Brotherhood obtained 88 seats (20% seats). This was beyond all spectators. This victory brought another repression for it. In 2007 Muslim Brotherhood decided to form a full-fledged party. Given its mass social influence, Muslim Brotherhood received good support.

Successive electoral victories of Muslim Brotherhood, along what has been said regarding the identity seeking feature of Islamic movement, and as another support for our idea, relates to its social base. Many assume that there is one specification which differentiates Ikhvan from other opposition forces: it has an important social component and a social base. Political control and occasional repression focused its attention to proselytism (da'wa) and social work. Muslim Brotherhood has efficient network of charities providing popular services in health and education. Persistent neoliberal policies in Mubarak time destructed social protection and Muslim Brotherhood development its charity activity to answer some of poorest needs (Pioppi, 2011).

All evidences indicate that ongoing political process in Egypt will make Ikhvan as the main political force. Political Islam does reflect a fair majority of public opinion in Egypt. A 2005 survey revealed that in Egypt, 87% said that religion was the most important aspect of their identity, more than anywhere else in the world. A Gallup Poll Conducted in June 2008 revealed the 68% of Egyptian believe that shariah Law should be the only source of legislation (Kerckove, 2012).

However, Political Life in Egypt is too diverse to allow one single Political growing or party to dominate the entire system. This is true even about Ikhvan as the best organized political organization in Egypt. This mean in Egypt, with its Parliamentary system, alliances will have to be built not only between competing Islamist Parties, but also across the Secular and religious divides in Egyptian Society. All evidences indicate that it would not be any way to close again political system in post – Arab spring world.

More probably there will be politics in the Arab world that not necessarily of the Islamists versus secularist. What appears significant about this moment in the history of the Middle East and North Africa is the post-colonial nature of the protest to dismantle decades at autocratic rule. The dominant discourse in recent years has shifted from Pan-Arabism and Pan-Islamism to nationalist one and is far from claiming an imagined unified caliphate.

### **Islamism and Political Islam in Tunisia**

In Tunisia as in Egypt while a mixture of various forces, without a distinct role of Islamist engaged in protests that made Zine al Abidine Ben Ali Fled the country on January 14, 2011. When national elections were held in October 23, Islamists won the election. Harakat al Nahda, a moderate Islamist Party won 41% of the seats, and has formed a governing coalition with two centers – left secular Parties: the Congress Party for Republic (CPR) and Democratic Forum of Labor and Liberties (FDTL). With the election of the Constituent Assembly, government activities have turned to defining the key issues inherent in drafting a new constitution and the processes through which they will be addressed. The National constituent Assembly charged with drafting new constitution. The main Islamist Party, al Nahda, controls 89 of 217 Seats (41%) by far the largest block in the assembly, but not enough to rule without a coalition. The new electoral law Promulgated in may 2011 set out a one – round voting system based on proportional representation that was designed to make it difficult for any party to gain an absolute majority.

Al Nadha is followed by Congress Party for Republic (CPR), With 29 Seats; Al Aridha al Chaabia (Popular Petition), With 26 Seats; Democratic Forum of Labor and Liberties (FDTL), With 20 Seats; and Progressive Democratic Party, With 16 Seats. Congress for Republic is a center – left, secular party, al Aridha al Chaabia (popular petition) is a populist conservative and Fractious independent coalition party, the Democratic Forum of Labor is center-left, secular party, and progressive Democratic Party is leftist and stringently secularist. So Islamists though with popular Support need a coalition to rule.

Following the elections Al Nadha formed a governing Coalition with the congress party for Republic and Democratic Forum of Labor and Liberties. The agreement paved the way for assembly to elect Democratic Forum Labor and Liberties as President of The assembly on November

22, and congress for Liberties as President on December 12. Al Nahds Secretary – general become Prime minister who makes the head of government and most powerful of the three roles. The main political Parties have agreed not to significantly alter Article I of Tunisian former constitution proclaiming Tunisia as a free, independent and sovereign state, and Islam as its religion (987. Tunisians are Sunni Muslims).

Congressional election confirmed the political rise of Tunisia's main Islamist party, Al Nahda. Al Nahda Leaders have Portrayed themselves as moderates who seek to participate in a democratic system, support the separation of religion from state and as was the case in former regime would protect women Freedom (in Tunisia women enjoy a dignified status). Al Nahda spokesman told a Journalist in April that there is no developed country that does not has women's rights, these things go together (Lomond, 2011).

Ghannouchi, the Leader of Al Nahda compared it whit Turkish ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). Al Nahda expressed support for preserving Tunisia's personal status code, which is a key focus of concern among secularists. The movement opponent, However, accuse al Nahda of fraudulency: presenting a moderate face in order to enter government and gradually introduce more conservative, restrictive laws and institutions (Arieff, 2011, 7) But as we have argued the presence of multiple forces in Tunisia, as well as Egypt, defies any grouping domination on the political processes.

Al Nahda did not play a significant role in Tunisians revolution. But two decades of confinement to exile and underground activities, in addition to repression meted out to its activists under Ben Ali appears to have endeared the movement to many Tunisians and exchanged its popular legitimacy. Moreover the party raised its profile in 2011 through a series of politically skilful choices. For example, in early 2011, it joined the committee to defend revolution, a loose coalition of political party activists, unionists, and leftist groups that successfully called for the interim government to broaden consultation on political reform and dismiss senior officials from the former regime. Al Nahda also is widely reported to have engaged in superior grassroots mobilization during the electoral campaign.

In October election organizations that based their strategy on Arab nationalist and full-blown Secularism did not gained voters support. Voters appeared to reward secularist Parties that signaled a willingness to

work with Al Nahda, such as Congress for Republic and Democratic Forum of Labor. This again confirms our idea that quest for identity, which in Arab countries has its most prominent manifestation in Islam, is the most significant feature of Arab Spring movements. Indeed, a significant percentage of Tunisians, who may or may not have voted for Al Nahda, broadly desired Islam to play a more prominent role in public life.

With Tunisia's considerable secular traditions, a stable educated middle class and a good tradition of promoting women's socioeconomic equalities (Alexis, 2011, 8) this again reveals the highly popular regard for identity.

### **Isolation of radical Islamists**

Victorious march of moderate Islamists as Ikhwan al Muslemeen in Egypt and Al Nahda in Tunisia will isolate radical Islamists as Al Qaeda and many more radical Salafists. No doubt the successful march of moderate Islam will teach Al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations that mass protests is more efficient than terrorist action which they embarked on in their campaign against pro-western dictators. Al Qaeda will learn that groups of violent entities are no longer agents of change. The sweeping changes are taking away many Al Qaeda supporters and their potential support base. While Al Qaeda has not distanced itself from the project of establishing Islamic law (Gunaratna, 2011, 2) parties like Freedom and Justice in Egypt and Al Nahda in Tunisia demand modern democratic values with a mainly nationalistic trend. Aimen al Zawahiri in his statements relating to protests calling his followers to support protest movements with their best efforts.

Al Zawahiri in his statements for his followers restrains from violent rhetoric which usually abounds in Al Qaeda statements. In Libya the Libyan Islamist Fighter Group (LIFG), a group associated with Al Qaeda and Zawahiri follows a strategy that seeks to infiltrate the reform movements. It appears that Al Qaeda tries to exploit the power of the movement to overthrow secular regimes and then advances its own objectives to install Islamic state and Islamic Law (Gunaratna, 2011, 5).

If moderate Islamists succeed in building political and societal institutions which are not only truly inclusive but also economically beneficial to a broad swath of people surely will bring about stable societies. If presenting nascent civil societies of the Middle East succeed, they will demonstrate that multi-religious, multiethnic, representational

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governance can develop in the region. Surely will Arabs become immunized to Islamic extremism (Chomsky, 2011).

### **Sum up**

Political Islam is undergoing significant changes in the Arab spring movement. Originating from inherent dynamism of contemporary globalization the movement simultaneously reflects a quest both for identity and democracy. As in Arab countries the identity seeking presents itself in Islam, the dominant thinking in west assume a contradiction between these two- Islam and democracy, We have argued against this assumption and have raised this idea that, in spite of some inconformity between some liberal values and Islamic ideas, now many Muslim movements in Islamic countries are busy, at least pragmatically, to reconcile their demands with democratic role. As has been indicated, moderate political Islam has adapted many requirements of a democratic rule such as basic liberties, representative government, women rights and status. The new parties, such as Freedom and Justice that has been constituted in Egypt and Tunisia by old movements as Muslim Brotherhood and Al Nahda chose to accept many democratic institutions. This trend goes to dominate political processes of new Middle East and will isolate Islamic extremism and radical terrorist groups. Thus Islamic identity and democracy, both as product of globalization tend to reconcile politically.

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