

# POLITICAL ISLAM, DEMOCRACY AND ARAB SPRING

M. R. KHAN

The reasons as to why none of the 56 odd Muslim majority countries is a Western style, liberal pluralist democracy has been the subject of debate among the orientalist, social scientists and political analysts of all hues. Although opinions greatly vary, the general Western impression is that Islam in its purest form, in some manner, is inimical to democracy and development of civil society. The subject has generated great interest because a number of secessionist and radical movements the world over owe allegiance to political Islam and the central theme of all these movements is a call for Islamic governance based on the laws of the *Sharia*. This has also created an impression in unfamiliar quarters that there is some kind of a monolithic political structure recommended in Islamic texts, that, though antithetical to a liberal democracy, could, nevertheless, be applied to a modern state and, hence, may have global implications. The feeling, in the wake of so-called “Arab Spring” or Jasmine Revolution underway in a number of North African and West Asian states at the time of writing, which are basically mass movements aimed at overthrowing the long reigning tyrannical sultanistic regimes, has resulted in great anxiety in the international community regarding the future of these states.

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Commodore M. R. Khan is a Senior Fellow at the Centre for Air Power Studies, New Delhi.

The aim of this paper, therefore, is to explore various strands of thought in the historical and contemporary context on political structures compatible with the Islamic religion and culture, focus on Islamist notions of democracy, and attempt a prognosis. The subject is important because the signs of Islamic revival are evident in the personal and public life of virtually every Muslim country. A sizeable population of these countries seems convinced that political Islam is a viable alternative to Western origin systems like capitalism, socialism and secular nationalism, which have failed them. Political parties grounded in political Islam have a strong presence in these countries. The future political developments in some of these states in our neighbourhood/extended neighbourhood are also of vital interest to us as they are likely to have implications for our overall security.

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

Since the political structure of a presumed "Islamic State" accrues from the religion, let us briefly go over the origin of the religion and its fundamental principles. As is well known, Islam is a religion of Semitic origin and closely related to Judaism and Christianity. The Prophet of Islam did not claim to start a new religion at all. He was only the last Prophet in a chain of Prophets starting with Adam. His task was to restore the religion of God, which had become corrupted over the centuries, to its pristine purity. Its fundamental principles were belief in the one, all powerful, cosmic and transcendental God, the Prophethood of Mohammed and a very strong moral code, with great stress on the creation of a moralistic, egalitarian and just society bound together by a common faith.

Naturally, the religion's original appeal was enormous, particularly for the downtrodden of Arabia. Equally strong was opposition from the aristocracy and the privileged strata of society in Mecca, the place of the Prophet's birth. Since armed conflict was inevitable, great stress has been placed on the virtues of physical courage and valour, and martyrdom is considered the ultimate sacrifice in the path of virtue and to uphold the truth. It is not only to be welcomed in an armed conflict in the path of God but is to be actively sought and is glorified as the eternal life and path to

salvation in after life. Islam, like Christianity, is also an evangelical religion. The 'Message' has to be carried and missionary work to be given the highest priority. Virtuous and clean living is the best way to preach. The source of all religious and social mores is the book *al-Quran*, which is the word of God as revealed to the Prophet. What is specifically not provided in the *Quran* should be inferred from the *Sunnah* or the tradition of the Prophet.

The difficulty is that not much is mentioned in the *Quran* or the *Hadith* (sayings of the Prophet) about the political organisation or the system of government. The emphasis is on lifting the individual to a level of morality where the outcome can only be a just and tranquil society and acceptable political organisation. Implicit in principle is collective leadership of the pious and the wise. The supreme leader, who may be elected by the most pious and God fearing of the community, is to be implicitly obeyed, as long as he does not deviate from the path of virtue.

Hereditary kingship is scoffed at but not specifically forbidden. Economic principles are simple. Exploitation and profiteering are sinful. Interest is completely forbidden and one of the greatest sins, second only to apostasy and blasphemy. Honest earning is a must for salvation. A strong brotherhood, based on religion, is prescribed, irrespective of caste, creed, race and the colour of the skin. This has been emphasised time and again, including in the last sermon of the Prophet. The severest punishments are prescribed for social offences. There is emphasis on some rituals such as praying five times a day, fasting in the month of *Ramadan* and giving of alms. To sum up, the religion is simple, direct, and highly codified, with belief in monotheism, the Prophethood of Mohammed, with after life being its nucleus.

Muslims all over the world believe that a near utopian society, based on the aforementioned principles, existed when the Prophet himself reigned at Medina and during the period of the first four Caliphs who followed him. This period works out to roughly 40 years and is also popularly referred as the "Medina Model". The Prophet himself, as well as the first four Caliphs called *Rashidoun* or the rightly guided, ruled from the mosque and lived in the simplest possible manner, with no trappings of power whatsoever. In fact, the chronicles tell us that all of them drew such a small amount of

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allowance that their families had, sometimes, to do without adequate food and clothing, despite vast lands being conquered and enormous wealth pouring into Medina. Although the Islamic civilisation was the dominant civilisation for nearly 700 years, the utopian society lasted for just 40 years, and, some believe, for short periods thereafter in short epochs.

Despite substantial historical evidence, some find it difficult to believe that such a near utopian model existed, for however short a period it might have been. A perennial nostalgia for the “Medina Model” is at the core of all the Islamist movements as far as the quest for a just and clean political system is concerned. To them, any other regime, irrespective of the political system, appears illegitimate in comparison. On the other hand, rationalists and liberals among Muslims contend that considering the complexity of the modern state and the world order, the Medina Model, which applied to a much smaller and incomparably facile state, cannot be realised in the modern times, though nobody refutes that it was based on sound moral principles. They also point out that while the system could be construed as liberal for its period (1,400 years ago), the world has moved on a lot in terms of minority and human rights and gender equality, etc., therefore the traditional Islamic political system, without incorporating some of the structural changes based on modern principles, is not workable. Nevertheless, the emotional appeal of the Medina Model and its hold on the Muslim psyche is so durable that those outside the faith find it difficult to comprehend. In the current state of Muslim nations, most of which are riddled with authoritarianism, corruption, nepotism, backwardness, injustice, repression and incompetence, this appeal becomes overwhelming. The appeal of political Islam lies in convincing the *ummah* that the only way to come out of this morass of immorality and repression is to return to the faith and the high principles associated with it and the Medina Model of governance. The advocates of political Islam also emphasise that

the materialistic and decadent West cannot advance a political structure compatible with the religious cultural and social values of Islam.

### MODERN POLITICAL THOUGHTS IN ISLAM

The conventional genealogy of modern Islamic thought started with Sayyid Jamaluddin Afghani (1839-97). He was born in Asadabad in Iran and adopted the eponym al-Afghani. His basic call was for the Muslims of the world to unite to confront the European, specially the British imperialism, which he considered to be the greatest threat to Islam.<sup>1</sup> His political career included activity in India, Egypt, Iran and the Ottoman capital of Istanbul. His movement came to be known as the Pan Islamic movement. In Egypt, he had a young associate, Mohammed Abdouh(1849-1905). Together, they spoke out against the foreign political and economic domination of Egypt which culminated in the British invasion and occupation in 1882. Exiled in Paris for their views, they published a Pan Islamic journal *Al-Urwa al Wuthqa* (The Firmest Link). When Abdouh returned to Egypt, he partially made up with the British and with the approval of the British Consul-General, Lord Cromer, eventually became the chief Mufti of Egypt. He occupied himself with reforming the teaching of Arabic and the understanding of Islam. He argued that a proper understanding and implementation of the moral and ethical principles of Islam was compatible with the adoption of modern science and technology. He noted that Muslims were the first to inherit and develop Greek philosophy and science before passing them to the Western Europeans. Abdouh also argued that the early Muslims or the *Salaf*, practised a more pure and correct form of Islam, unsullied by the medieval accretions and superstitions perpetuated by ignorance and unconsidered imitations.

Rashid Reda(1865-1935) who came to Egypt from Tripoli, Lebanon, was Mohammed Abdouh's most influential student. He wrote a biography of his teacher, compiled his writings and publicised a conservative interpretation of Abdouh's doctrine. Using the magazine *Al-Manar* (The Lighthouse) as his mouthpiece, Rida promoted the *Salafia* movement, a neo-traditionalist

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1. Reza Aslan, *No God but God* (New York: Random House Trade Paperback Edition),p.230.

orientation that restricted what was to be regarded as correct in Islam to the *Quran*, the *Sunnah* (traditions and practices of the Prophet), and the reports of the reign of the first four Caliphs in the Sunni tradition: Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman and Ali . This by no means was a new movement. The return to pure, unsullied, free of innovations and accretions, simple Islam of the Prophet's time, is a recurring theme in the history of Islamic theology. The first such movement was pioneered by Imam Ahmed bin Hannibal about 150 years after the death of the Prophet. In modern times, a clarion call to return to original Islam is attributed to Mohammed bin Abdul Wahab of Najd in Saudi Arabia, and Shah Waliullah Dehlvi of India in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Mohammed bin Abdul Wahab was closely associated with the Al Saud family, rulers of the province of Najd who later became rulers of the entire Arabia, including the Hejaz region where the holy cities of Mecca and Medina are located, and named the country after their family.

The *Salafia* movement influenced many *ulema*(Muslim scholars) all over the Sunni Muslim world. The Aligarh education movement of Sir Sayyed Ahmed Khan was partly inspired by it<sup>2</sup>. It was a factor in the formation of the Association of Algerian Ulema in 1931, an Islamist current that was largely absorbed into the National Liberation Front (FLN) and later became a source of inspiration for the Islamist opposition to the Algerian regime in the 1980s. Salafist ideas also influenced the thinking of Izz ad-Din al Qassam, a Muslim cleric in Haifa who organised a shortlived Palestinian guerrilla movement against the Zionists and the British in 1955. The military units of Hamas, the Izz ad Din brigades, are named after him.

Hasan al-Banna(1906-49), an Egyptian school teacher working in Ismailiya, the headquarters of the Suez Canal Company, and a highly Europeanised town, was one of those influenced by Rashid Reda and *Al-Manar*. In 1928, he established the Society of Muslim Brothers (*Jamiyat al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin*), which was to become the largest and most influential Islamic organisation in the Sunni Muslim world, espousing the cause of political Islam. After emerging as an important factor in the Egyptian politics in the 1930s, the Muslim Brothers established branches in North Africa,

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2. Asghar Ali Engineer, *Islam and Revolution* (New Delhi: Ajanta Publication, 1998), p.109.

Syria, Palestine, Jordan, and Sudan. The Islamic Tendency Movement was also inspired by the Muslim Brothers. The Muslim Brothers were banned in 1948, as a consequence of the assassination of the Egyptian Prime Minister by a member of the Brothers, despite a forceful condemnation of the act by al-Banna. Al-Banna was himself assassinated in February 1949 by a suspected agent of the King's secret police.

Many of the Islamic movements of the 1970s and 1980s are inspired by the thinking of Sayyid Qutb, a Muslim Brothers leader executed for allegedly planning to overthrow the Egyptian government in 1966. Qutb had argued that the regime of Gamal Abd al-Nasser, since it had tortured and imprisoned pious Muslims and was refusing to implement the *Sharia*, was not an Islamic one at all but a regime akin to pre-Islamic ignorance (*jahiliya*). Hence, it was legitimate to launch a *jihad* against such a regime. Maulana Abul Ala Maududi, the founder of the Jamaat-e-Islami of India, who later migrated to Pakistan in 1948, was also influenced by the extensive writings of Sayyid Qutb on the structure of an Islamic state, a subject close to his own heart.

The Shia tradition, a minority orientation in Islam which regards the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, Ali, as the first legitimate Caliph and believes that the succession to the leadership of the Muslim community should have devolved and been confined to the Prophet's family, has an entirely different genealogy. It is geographically centred in Iran and southern Iraq where the Shias form the large majority of Muslims. An important political focus of much of Shia thought is the struggle of the *ulema* (*mullah* in Persian) to assert the primacy of their authority against the Qajar and the Pahalavi monarchies of Iran. It is significant to note that the Shia orientation has a well defined clerical hierarchic order whereas the Sunni faith has virtually no officially recognised ecclesiastical dispensation. In the modern period, the most prominent exponent of the Shia tradition of political Islam was the late Grand Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the Iranian revolution of 1979. He propounded the idea of *Vilayat-e Faqih*, meaning that an Islamic jurist alone is fit to rule an Islamic state. The political structures and the Constitution of post revolution Iran have been shaped by his ideas of a functioning Islamic state.



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## **ISLAMIST VIEWS ON DEMOCRACY AND THE STATE**

A number of authors belonging to the Sunni mainstream Islamist movements have written on the subject. These include the already mentioned Syed Qutb and Abul Ala Maududi, members of the Jordanian and Egyptian Brothers, Rashid al Ghanoushi of the Tunisian Islamist Movement, and the authors committed to the Islamic awakening movement like Muhammed Imara, Muhammed Salim al Awwa, Fahim Huwaydi and others. There

is general agreement among these authors that Islam is comprehensive or as a commonly used modern formula has it, that it is a religion...a state (*al-Islam din wa dawla*)<sup>3</sup>. The formulation not only rejects Western notions of secularism but also the version advocated by the Egyptian author Ali Abd Raziq in his book *Islam and the Roots of Government*, published in 1925, shortly after the abolition of the Caliphate in Turkey. His claims that Muhammad was a Prophet and not a statesman, that Islam is a religion and not a state and that the Caliphate from the beginning was based on coercive force, still provoke outrage.

The consensus view of the Islamist authors in the forefront of political Islam is that Islam comprises faith, ethics and law as set forth in the *Quran*, exemplified by the life of Prophet Muhammad and his companions and later developed by the Muslim theologians and jurists (*ulema and fuqaha*) into the *Sharia*. The hallmark of the truly Islamic system (*al-nizam al Islami*) is the application of *Sharia* and not a particular political order—the historical Caliphate included. What matters is the purpose of the state and the principles on which it rests. The principles are to be found in the *Quran* and the *Sunnah*, and they include, most notably, justice (*adl*), mutual consultation (*shura*), equality, freedom and struggle in the path of God (*jihad*). The militants go even further, declaring that any Muslim who does not apply and follow the divine

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3. Joel Beinin and Joe Stork, ed., *Political Islam: Essays from Middle East Report* (1996), p.68.



law is to be considered, and fought, as a sinner, a tyrant and an infidel (concept of *tekfir*)<sup>4</sup>.

These authors, while denouncing secularism as a creed alien to Islam, agree that a distinction exists between the eternal and the temporal. The distinction is reflected in modern Islamic legal theory which distinguishes between *ibadat*, involving a person's relations with his or her creator (essentially the five pillars of Islam) and *mu'amalat*, covering all other aspects of economic, political and family life. While *ibadat* is eternal and immutable, *mu'amalat* can be adapted to the changing requirements of time and locality, provided the results conform to the spirit of the *Sharia*. What they envisage, then, are the two differentiated spheres of human life and activity: one sphere revolving around the faith and worship, and the other around the worldly affairs, but both subject to the precepts of Islam.<sup>5</sup>

Having established the *Sharia* as the cornerstone of Islamic governance and the government as merely the executor of God's law, the debate shifts to defining the *Sharia*—whether it is a comprehensive set of norms and values regulating human life to the minute details, or a set of general rules of virtuous life and moral behaviour aiming at people's welfare on the earth and their salvation in the afterlife. There is a general consensus that the *Sharia* is comprehensive but, at the same time, flexible enough and, therefore, suited to all times and places. The crucial distinction is between an immutable core (*al- asl*) and the flexible elements (*al-fru*) derived by human reason from the core by following the rules of Islamic jurisprudence

The extent to which the *Sharia* can be modified from its classical interpretation is the main debate between the enlightened modernist reformers and the conservatives like Syed Qutb and Abul Ala Maududi. However, all agree that to apply the *Sharia* requires social organisation and a state. But God, in his wisdom, left the details of political organisation to the Muslim community (*ummah*) to decide according to its needs and aspirations. The government and politics are part of the *mu'amalat* that are to be regulated so as to realise the common good which, if properly

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4. Ibid., p. 69.

5. Ibid., p. 69.

understood, coincides with the purposes of the *Sharia*. Therefore, Muslims are not prohibited from adopting techniques and modes of organisation of non-Islamic origin provided they are in concurrence with the core values of Islam. Hence, the adoption of democracy or of certain democratic elements may be acceptable or even recommended, provided this does not lead to the neglect or violation of Islamic norms and values.

### SOVEREIGNTY AND AUTHORITY

The fundamental beliefs of Islamic polity are that all humanity is born equal, having been installed as God's viceregent on earth; the government exists to ensure an Islamic life and enforce Islamic law; sovereignty ultimately rests with God alone, who has made the law and defined good and evil, the licit and the illicit; the authority to apply God's law has been transferred to the community as a whole, which is, therefore, the source of all power; and the head of the community or the state, no matter whether he( and they specifically exclude women from that function) be called the Imam, Caliph or President, is the mere representative, agent or employee of the community that elects, supervises and, if necessary, deposes him, either directly or via its representatives<sup>6</sup>.

These modern positions with the centrality of the *Sharia* and the concept of authority resting with the *ummah* or the community mark a definite shift of emphasis away from the person of the ruler and the duty of obedience and acquiescence for the sake of peace and stability, even under unjust rule, as stressed in the medieval writings of Imam al-Ghazali(died1111) and Ibn Taimiya(died1328). This shift is perhaps the result of modern political ideas and general political awakening among the Muslim masses. It is also in consonance with the widespread resentment against arbitrary and peremptory personal rule and the desire to replace it with the rule of divine law. The argument in favour of God's sole sovereignty or *hakimiyya* is that humans with their limited intelligence and strong passions are incapable of framing just and egalitarian laws. Islamists contend that all people are created equal and, therefore, no one has the right to impose his or her often

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6. Asghar Ali Engineer, *The Islamic State* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1998), p. 86.

subjective will on others, and given that humans are too weak to control their passions and desires, a higher authority is needed to keep them in check. This higher authority could only be the divine law, binding on all, the high and low, rich and poor.<sup>7</sup>

The assertion of God's sovereignty can only be achieved through strict and exclusive application of the *Sharia* and that would not only signify genuine rule of law but would also liberate man from the servitude of man. Hence, Islamists insist that Islam is the only ideology of true liberation. And it is in this sense that the writings of Abu Ala Maududi, Syed Qutb, or Taqi al Din Nabhani have influenced a large section of Muslim masses in search of social and economic justice, and disillusioned with corrupt and despotic rulers. But for the critical observer, by contrast, the utopian character and, the very real, authoritarian streak of this line of reasoning, is all too obvious. Because in the ultimate reckoning, it would be only men and women ruled by their passions and subject to the limitations of their understanding, who would interpret and apply God's law.

The role and designation of the ruler in an Islamic state is, to some extent, a contested field among the Islamists. But the underlying concepts are similar. The ruler must be pious and of a high character. He could be directly or indirectly elected but he is only a representative of the people and his main task is to run the state in accordance with the divine law and with justice. He has no religious authority and must consult Islamic scholars in case of doubt about the interpretation of the *Sharia*. Thus, while the state rests on religious foundations, its leadership carries no religious sanction and is accountable to the people as well as God. Some modern Muslim authors have used the term theo-democracy.

## ISLAMIC STATE AND PLURALISM

The most difficult task the Islamists face is defining pluralism in the context of an Islamic state as there is little to draw upon in the classic texts. Some claim that the Medina Model had a fair amount of pluralism built in and cite the text of the Prophet's agreement with the Jews of Medina. But that alone

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7. Ibid., p. 87.

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cannot be the basis for structuring a complex modern pluralistic state. Therefore, they have to inevitably draw from the structures and institutions of a modern Western state. The need for the rules of business or a Constitution and continuous consultation as well as permanent control over the ruler and the government is acknowledged. Most authors also accept the need for the separation of powers in which the executive and the legislature effectively keep each other in check, though they maintain that in an Islamic context, legislation is confined to the implementation of the *Sharia* and its interpretation, if changed circumstances warrant it.<sup>8</sup>

Since the core value of an Islamic state is that the *Sharia* is immutable, except for minor interpretations, Islamists find it extremely difficult to envisage consultation and participation as a genuine political process involving interest representation, competition and contestation. Political parties with ideologies other than Islam are not to be permitted. There is great reluctance to allow for unrestricted freedom of speech and organisations with different opinions. Another controversial issue is of giving representation to non-Muslims. Some liberals among Islamists propose that non-Muslims could be part of the legislature and judiciary dealing with the affairs of non-believers who are to be left to practise their own religion and personal law. The representatives to the legislature are to be elected by a separate electorate consisting of non-Muslims only. Syed Qutb and Abu Ala Maududi allow them only to practise their religion and personal law but do not prescribe any representation. Human rights, as seen from the Islamic perspective, and their observance is a part of duties towards God and, therefore, obligatory. The protection of individual rights and civil liberties from government interference, as well as the elimination of repression and torture figure prominently on the Islamist agenda. But the mainstream attitude remains highly restrictive with regard to freedom of political, religious and artistic expression, if that involves the right to freely

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8. Ibid., p. 94.

express one's religious feelings and doubts. Change of religion by a Muslim is considered a grave offence and not permitted. Similarly, the attitude to gender issues is deeply conservative and based on the premise that God has prescribed different roles for the sexes and they are not interchangeable, though it is acknowledged that both are equally important for the Islamic society and equal in the eyes of God as humans. The bottom line is that pluralism, as known in the West, will be severely restricted in an Islamic state.<sup>9</sup>

### **CURRENT POLITICAL CONDITIONS IN MUSLIM STATES: AN OVERVIEW**

Having explored the various strands of thought on the structure of an Islamic state as put forward by its classical and contemporary exponents, let us take stock of the actual world of Islam and its recent political developments. The actual world of Islam is diverse and complex. There are 32 countries with Muslim populations of 86 percent and above, 9 are in the range of 66 to 85 percent Muslims and another 19 have Muslim populations close to 50 percent or a sizeable minority. Prior to the Arab Spring, most of these states, in the professed form, were democracies and monarchies, but in reality many of the so-called democracies were sultanistic dictatorships.<sup>10</sup> The term denotes governments where a national leader expands his power at the expense of formal institutions. He might maintain democratic props like Parliament, regular elections and political parties, but stands above them and rules by installing his compliant supporters in the key positions and with the support of the armed forces. These dictators as well as monarchs often sought international legitimacy as well as licence for political oppression, especially from the US and Western countries suffering from Islamophobia, on the pretext of keeping fundamentalist Islamic forces in check and were often propped up by generous financial aid from them. Iran under the Shah, Indonesia under Suharto, Iraq under Saddam , as well as Tunis, Egypt, and Yemen where the current Arab revolution (2011)

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9. Ibid., p. 106.

10. Jack A. Goldstone, "Understanding the Revolutions of 2011," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2011, p. 8.

has recently succeeded, were the regimes in this category. At the time of this writing, the outcome of similar regimes in Syria, Libya, and Sudan is still uncertain though major popular protests are going on. The ex-Soviet, Central Asian Republics also qualify as sultanistic dictatorships under their present political dispensation. Conditions in these countries, which include economic deprivation, rampant corruption, unemployment, ethnic and religious discrimination, and political oppression, are also ripe for popular revolt, which might come any time.

Monarchies such as Jordan, Morocco, and the Gulf Kingdoms have absolute monarchs in control who have considerable executive powers but have ceded some cosmetic legislative powers to either the nominated or elected representatives. Though not popular, these regimes have better chances of survival because of the flexible attitude of the rulers and in the case of the Gulf Kingdoms, their ability to bribe virtually every citizen, since these states have high oil incomes and small populations. The only major functioning democracies in the Muslim world are Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia Malaysia, Turkey and, to some extent, Iran. The Freedom House Organisation in its 2010 report rated only one Muslim country as genuinely free (Indonesia), a few are listed as partially free, and all others as not free. Seven of them find a place in a list of eleven most repressive regimes in the world.

### **THE ARAB SPRING**

In December of 2010, when the police forcibly removed the unauthorised vegetable stall of Bou Azize in the central town of Side Bouzid in Tunisia, it appeared a routine matter. But Bou Azize, an unemployed graduate resisted stubbornly and was reportedly slapped by a lady police officer. Bou Azize, unable to bear the insult, as well as the loss of livelihood, killed himself by self-immolating, and set in motion an Arab uprising the like of which has not been seen in the recent Arab history. The surprise is not that a minor incident like this set in motion a revolutionary movement of such dimensions, but that it was so long in coming.

Most of these countries have long been victims of political repression. Many of them are plagued by social stagnation, widespread corruption

at all levels, low economic growth, high levels of youth unemployment and unequal distribution of wealth. Decades of autocratic rule and lack of democratic norms in governance had created a volcano of popular dissent waiting to explode. Presidents, once elected, refuse to go, rig successive elections, and continue to rule for decades with the help of their armed forces, or specially created armed units and the secret police, collectively known as *Mokhberat*. The main US and Western interests in the region are access to oil, its availability at a price advantageous to the developed nations, and the security of their close ally, Israel. In recent years, two more have been added: non-proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs), and the war on terror. If a ruler supported these interests, he had the backing of the US and its North Atlantic Alliance. His repressive measures and kleptocratic conduct were condoned on the pretext of stability.

In the post 9/11 period, many of these rulers branded genuine political dissent as extremist Islamic movements supporting terrorism and had the tacit or overt support of a paranoid US in the large scale repression unleashed by them on opponents in order to remain in power. A media savvy, frustrated, large young population of educated unemployed, a product of the demographic explosion of the last few decades, was only waiting to explode. The trigger was provided by the incident in Tunisia. Egypt followed, and within days the unrest spread to Yemen, Bahrain, Libya, Jordan, and Syria. Even Saudi Arabia did not appear entirely safe, especially with rumblings in the oil rich, Shia dominated restive east. It was only with massive largesse and political concessions that King Abdullah could ward off the trouble for the time being.

## **TRENDS OUT OF ARAB SPRING**

While the leaders in Tunisia and Egypt have fallen, their regimes, dominated by the armed forces, are intact. In Libya, at the time of this writing, Gaddafi is gone but the situation is far from clear. Bashar al Assad's position in Syria is precarious but he is hanging on and the army is still loyal to him. In Yemen, though Abdullah Saleh has been absent for months, his relatives and cronies, with the help of the armed forces, are in partial control of



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the region around the capital. The opposition is divided and split along tribal lines. Jordan, Morocco, Oman, and Saudi Arabia have tried a combination of concessions, liberalisation, and repression to ward off the trouble for now. The Al Khalifas in Bahrain have managed to brutally suppress the Shia-led revolt with the help of Saudi forces but the outcome remains uncertain.

Another feature of the Arab Spring is that it has virtually spelt the end of Pan Arabism. States such as Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Libya, Algeria, and Tunis when they came into existence in their present *avatar*, in the 1960s, and 1970s,

were vibrant states, dominated by the ideology of Pan Arabism. The Pan Arab ideology was based on linguistic, regional and ethnic identity to the exclusion of religion, and, thus, mainly secular. The ideology has decayed over the years and now it has few takers in these countries.

Though demonstrations and unrest continue, the early political trends in Egypt and Tunisia post revolution are encouraging. These countries had comparatively well established secular political institutions which were subverted by the incumbent Presidents Zainel Abedin bin Ali and Hosseini Mobarek by rigging elections and the elimination of political dissent. These institutions can easily be revived by a well intentioned leadership. The military backed regimes in both countries have scheduled elections towards the end of the year (October-November 2011) and promised to support constitutional changes which elected legislative chambers may like to bring to prevent the subversion of democratic norms in the future. Elections in both the countries were postponed to allow the secular parties sufficient time to get organised against the well entrenched Islamist parties, Muslim Brothers in Egypt and Al Nahda in Tunis. There have been some apprehensions about the military's intentions in Egypt, especially when it refused to allow foreign observers in the forthcoming elections. It is feared

that if the Islamists are poised to win in either country, the military, a strong long time opponent of the Islamists, might intervene. However, Al Nahda is a well known liberal Islamist party and the leadership of Muslim Brothers in Egypt has repeatedly announced that if elected to power, they will refrain from blindly applying the *Sharia* and respect the secular institutions of the country.

The situation in Libya and Yemen is entirely different. The societies in these countries are highly fractured, where tribal loyalties run high and are permanent. National identities are not strong and secular political institutions are either weak or non-existent. The suspected Islamic extremist groups are also a part of the rebel movement. Therefore, the outcome is difficult to predict and balkanisation, instability and short periods of extremism are a distinct possibility. Syria has long been under the quasi fascist Baath Party. Bashar al Assad, and earlier his father Hafiz have ruled the country with an iron fist. The Baathist system of cell-based party structure, wide penetration of the society by the secret police, and the large privileged armed forces have so far ensured durability of the regime. But its time seems to be over. In Syria too, the Muslim Brotherhood has been in the forefront of the rebellion and is likely to play a prominent part in the political developments after Bashar is ousted.

Taking an overview of this Arab awakening, it is evident that while conditions are different in every country of the region, certain broad trends are discernable, and these are towards a democratic polity mixed with Islamism. This is making Islamophobics in the West and liberals in the Muslim world a little jittery because of the belief that once in power, Islamists might hijack the revolution, like it happened in Iran, and try to implement their repressive agenda. But these fears are exaggerated and were the cause of a bloody civil war in Algeria during the Nineties, after the Islamic Salvation Front's election victory was nullified by the army. The times have greatly changed since the Iranian revolution. Moreover, the structure and place of the clergy in Shia Islam is different. The classical Islamist views, as expressed in the early part of this paper are being debated within and outside the community and are being constantly

modified, and many modern Islamic writers like Tariq Ramadan and Amr Khaled, both of whom figure in *Time* Magazine's list of most influential people in the world, have extensively written about it. The young Arabs using Facebook, YouTube and Twitter are unwilling to surrender their freedom to religious bigots. Many Islamist parties which had their roots in the *Salafist* interpretation of Islam like Muslim Brothers in Egypt and Al Nahda in Tunis, correctly reading the mood of youth, have adopted moderate views on many issues such as wearing veils, banning alcohol, pluralism and women's rights.

The detractors in the Muslim world as well as in the West, feel that once in power, Islamists, like the Communists of yore, would never let go power, and if they lose elections, they would nullify them on some pretext or the other. However, the alternative, of preventing them from coming to power by undemocratic means has been tried out in Turkey, Algeria, Egypt and Tunis and has benefited neither the people of those countries nor the West. Banning Islamist parties is likely to push them underground and may even foment violence. Therefore, it is only wise that they be given a chance to prove their democratic credentials. These parties have moderated their views not because of any external pressure, but because their own young generation is no longer willing to adhere to orthodoxy. Therefore, even when in power, they would not be able to revert to orthodoxy.

## **THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME POST ARAB SPRING: A PROGNOSIS**

Opinion polls and other independent surveys have time and again shown that a majority of Muslims living in 56-odd Muslim countries, favour Islam as the main guiding principle of the state. They are completely disillusioned with the all pervading corruption, social injustice and despotism. While the nostalgia for the "Medina Model" is strong, they freely acknowledge that it cannot easily be applied to a modern complex state and even less to an international order based on modern secular values. But there is also a consensus that a Western style liberal democracy based on secularism cannot be a model for Islamic societies. The Islamic intellectuals point

to frequent failures where the model has been attempted in Islamic societies and its inevitable lapse into authoritarianism and oppression due to resistance from the masses. They believe that in Islamic societies, religion can never be entirely separated from the affairs of the state because it is so deeply entrenched in the life of an individual Muslim.

**There is also a consensus that a Western style liberal democracy based on secularism cannot be a model for Islamic societies.**

There are several functioning democracies in the Muslim world such as Turkey, Pakistan, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Bangladesh. But religion plays an important role in the affairs of the state in all of them. Turkey, for a long time, tried to model itself on the Western pattern as the legacy of Mustapha Kemal, but in the last decade or so, the Islamic parties or the closet Islamic parties have been an important part of its political landscape. Recently, Bangladesh has amended its Constitution to make it more secular, but it is still not clear that such changes can last.

The Islamists in the Arab world are increasingly looking at the Islamists of Turkey, who have been in power for nine years and won two elections, for inspiration and example. They have not enforced any radical Islamic measures, have improved Turkey's foreign relations, uplifted her economy, run a relatively clean government and tamed a coup prone army through constitutional measures. If the incoming post revolution Arab governments can emulate Turkey's achievements, not only would the pall of gloom lift from their people, but the world would also get convinced that it has nothing to fear from Islamists and that Islam and democracy can happily coexist.

The greatest challenge that Islamists would face, if they come to power, is to shape modern political institutions on credible Islamic foundations acceptable to their main constituency. The task is not as difficult as it appears. The classical Islamic law is endowed with stirring political ideals many of them modern in their connotation. It is easy to infer from the revealed text and the *Sunnah* a foundation for popular participation in government (*shura, nasiha*), the social contract and the consent of the governed (*bay'a*), the rule of law (the sovereignty of God and the *Sharia*), the right to petition for redress

of grievances (*nasiha, mazalim*), the sanctity of individual life, liberty and property and their protection from state interference, equality of all before the law, office as public trust (*amana*) prohibition of embezzlement (*ghulul*) and bribery (*rishwa*), and other political ideals.<sup>11</sup> A majority among the Muslims believes that these ideals were practised under the early Caliphs who ruled from Medina and can be revived to provide a solid foundation for a just and equitable modern state.

The need of the hour, therefore, is for Muslim scholars and the *ulema* to get together and evolve political institutions and structures which are based on sound Islamic principles but are flexible enough to be applied to a far more complex social, financial and political world order. A majority of the modern generation of educated youth in virtually every Muslim country is of the view that it is necessary to liberate Islam from the clutches of orthodoxy which has given it a medieval orientation, and interpret its teachings so as to conform to its fundamental values like equality and social justice. This hitherto silent majority which is becoming increasingly vocal in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, is bound to triumph over the minority still insisting on an obscurantist version of Islam. The youth also feels that Islam must be liberated from strict legalism as advocated by Islamists and often made use of by unscrupulous power seeking politicians in many Muslim countries whenever it suits them. The *Sharia*, with the exception of some fundamental points, is not rigid and is open to reinterpretation.

Three methods have been recommended by the Islamic scholars to do so. These are conscientious striving by the learned or *ijtihad* ; logical rationalisation through analogy or *qiyas* ; and consensus or *ijma*. These methods are to be used when no specific directions on an issue are available in the revealed text or can be inferred from the *Sunnah* or the practice of the Prophet. Hence, the *Sharia* was constantly evolving in the early part of Islamic history and was finalised in its present shape some 150 years after the death of the Prophet, through the four Sunni Imams and one Shia Imam who used the aforementioned methods. There

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11. Ibid., p. 116.

is no reason why these methods cannot be used again for resolving contemporary polemical issues facing the *ummah*. The opinion polls and the other media inputs indicate that a vast majority of people in the Muslim countries reject the Taliban or the Saudi version of the Islamic state and favour a mildly Islamic version. There is no denying that the debate on pluralism and gender rights among Islamic scholars is inchoate and inconclusive. A lot needs to be done on the status of non-Muslims, though recent debates on the subject emphasising the shared rights and duties of all inhabitants of the land, suggest that a concept of citizenship may be gradually evolving. The first agreement that the Prophet made with the non-Muslim pagans and the Jews of Medina is a remarkable document in the context and needs to be studied as a pointer because it talks of a state comprising a community practising different faiths yet bound together on the basis of mutual trust and common territory.

The international implications of strong Islamist representation in the post revolution governments in the Arab world are likely to be significant though not necessarily game changing. Many Islamist parties, during the upheaval and even earlier, have shown expediency and pragmatism in cooperating with the US and the West. The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood did not shy away from cooperating with the US in opposing the Iranian-Syrian-Hezbollah axis and the Lebanese Muslim Brotherhood, known as al-Gama'a al-Islamiya, made common cause with the US to oppose Syria's and Hezbollah's role in Lebanon. Similarly, Islamist elements among the Libyan rebels had no qualms in cooperating with the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in ousting Gaddafi. But, on the other hand, any popular government in the Arab world and more so an Islamist one, will come under pressure to take a strong anti-Israel and pro-Palestinian stand, and will have to do so by opposing blindly pro-Israel actions by the US due to its domestic politics. The popular governments are also likely to follow a more active and independent role on other sensitive foreign policy issues, especially those dealing with Muslim countries.

## INDIA AND THE ARAB SPRING

Despite her claims to multilateralism and resolve to play a more constructive role in world affairs, befitting her new found status of a trans-regional power, India's attitude to happenings in the Middle East has been extremely cautious. She was ambivalent for many days before backing the Egyptian revolution, and abstained on UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1973 authorising the use of force in Libya in March 2011 as well as on the UN Human Rights Council condemnation of the Syrian government's human rights violations in August 2011. These actions convey an impression that despite being the largest democracy in the world, New Delhi is reluctant to take up cudgels against autocratic and oppressive rulers and, on this issue, stands with the group represented by Russia and China, two major violators of human rights in their domestic policies.

While it is true that India lacks strategic resources and economic leverages to influence events in West Asia, her principled stand in defence of the democratic rights of the people of this vital region and against tyrannical rulers, rather than conventional and overcautious non-interference in the internal matters of another state, would have shown her as an effective member of the world community and served her long-term interests in the region better. India's abstention on the UN Human Rights Council Resolution condemning Syria is even more baffling because Indonesia, the largest Muslim country in the world, and Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Kuwait and Qatar, all voted in favour of the resolution. The abstention, perhaps, also reflects the scanty knowledge of the ground situation. Syria is in an untenable political situation, because a small Alavite minority has had a stranglehold on power for too long with the help of the creamy layer and the army. The Syrian Army also has an extremely lopsided structure with the minority Alavites forming the majority of the officer corps whereas the troops are mainly Sunni—this situation may no longer be tenable in the wake of the Arab awakening and the free elections which Syria might be forced to undertake under international pressure. Therefore, making any concessions to Bashar al Assad's regime is unlikely to pay any diplomatic dividend.



New Delhi should carefully study the situation emerging out of the turmoil in the Arab world and be prepared to boldly back the winners. It should also prepare itself to do business with the new ruling groups with an Islamic tinge. Most Islamists in the Arab world look at India favourably as a fellow developing country which has always followed an independent foreign policy favouring Arabs in their struggle against Western hegemony. India's fair treatment of her Muslim minority is also generally lauded. But on the flip side, it would need to manage the tricky Kashmir issue with diplomatic dexterity. It will be imprudent if we allow our fears on the 'K' question to cloud our vision in deliberately backing the wrong horses in a region wherein we have multiple interests