

# notes

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## WHICH DEMOCRACY AFTER THE "ARAB SPRING"?

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Facing the failures, and the horrors, of non-democratic regimes, democrats tend to rest comfortably on the famous Churchillian dictum (democracy as "the worst political system, barring all the others"). Thus, they tend to be in denial of the more than evident problems and contradictions that deeply affect today's image – and substance – of democracy. The problem is not so much that of revising traditional political definitions, but rather of assessing in a critical way the premises – and the promises – of democracy in the light of contemporary societal challenges.

The major onslaughts on democracy that characterized the XX century, Soviet communism and Nazism, have been not only defeated, but relegated to that ashcan of history where they intended to consign democracy. Yet today, in a more subtle, more creeping fashion, democracy is being questioned and sometimes undermined, not so much explicitly, since the great majority of regimes and political parties and movements claim to be "democratic", but by an often glaring disconnect and contradiction between the claim and the practice.

At the beginning of 2011, the events of the so-called Arab Spring seemed on the contrary to vindicate the most sanguine believers in the inevitability of a worldwide triumph of democracy. Indeed the powerful mobilization of determined and courageous multitudes, leading to the downfall of entrenched regimes, could be seen, if not as a confirmation of the "end of history", at least as a confutation of the essentially racist view according to which democracy was the purview only of Western culture and traditions as well as of Western institutions. Democracy received a powerful boost from unexpected quarters: the Arab world.

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One and a half year later, the mood has dramatically shifted from elation to pessimism. In Egypt, once vote counting, and not the size of the crowds on Tahrir Square, has allowed us to assess the actual political orientations of the population, what has emerged is an ominous bipolar split between the military and the Islamists. In Libya the tyrant has been killed, but – in the absence both of state institutions and of a structured civil society – power is largely in the hands of armed and aggressive militias. In Tunisia, the most promising case (but also the

**The experience of the "Arab Spring", with its achievements and its failures, raises several fundamental questions on democracy that are valid beyond the region.**

**The weakness of secularism in the Muslim world is mainly due to the fact that it is perceived not as promoting the separation of religion and state, but as being hostile to religion, and opposed to the presence in the public sphere of religion, which it would like to see limited to the merely private domain.**

**Whereas in the West democracy has historically come only on the basis of a long process of construction of the rule of law, we seem now to expect that countries that have entered the XXI century without any real experience of the rule of law will move directly to democracy.**

**Liberals in the Middle East have a tendency to focus on political issues (human rights, individual freedom) and disregard social issues. Radical Islam is strong not because of the strength of religious fundamentalism, but rather thanks to its credible social activism (and reputation for not being corrupt).**

**Majority rule is not necessarily genuine democracy, but instead is fully compatible with "imitation democracy" – in which the appearance of the democratic process is preserved (elections) but its pluralist substance is denied by populist demagoguery and, when necessary, repression.**

“easiest”, given its size, cultural level and secular traditions) the jury is still out on the possibility to withstand, without infringing the rules of a still budding democracy, the onslaught of very radical and very intolerant Islamists. In Syria popular discontent toward the tyrannical Assad regime has turned into a bloody conflict, with a heavy human cost and unclear prospects for a democratic solution.

Of course, we could assess the situation with a realist approach, and talk about the inevitability of difficulties during “a time of transition”. But transition means that we know not only where we are coming from, but also where we are headed. Can we really say we know?

As someone has written: “February 11 [2011: Mubarak steps down] was the culmination of the Arab revolution. On February 12, the counterrevolution began”. (Hussein Agha and Robert Malley, “The Arab Counterrevolution”, *The New York Review of Books*, September 29, 2011). We may still be confident that a process has in any case been started, that perhaps we could still believe that, even if the “counterrevolution” will prevail in the short time, on a deeper level and on a longer time frame change

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will prove to be irreversible, as was the case for the 1848 revolutions, which were apparently defeated but which set in motion the eventual triumph of nationalism and of constitutional government throughout the European continent.

This consolatory, hopeful, optimistic approach, however, seems to be neither well-grounded in reality nor useful from a theoretical point of view. One could instead suggest a different exercise, and try to analyze the events characterizing the “Arab Spring” as an important test allowing us to raise some questions on democracy in general – questions that, in spite of the deep differences between the West and the Arab world, the developed and the developing, are also relevant in the framework of an attempt to identify, and hopefully address, the problems that democracy – triumphant only in theory, if not in mere rhetoric - is encountering also in our part of the world.

### **Looking for the citizen.**

The crisis of the citizen as the necessary actor within a democratic system cannot be ignored. The citizen today is caught in a deadly vise between two alternative and largely incompatible figures: the consumer on one hand and the believer on the other.

In the more developed societies the historical defeat of the political and ideological Other, the communist alternative, has not only fatally weakened the answers that Communism gave to the essential questions of life within a society, but has in practice disqualified even the questions themselves: about the nature of the political system, about equality and inequality, about social class, about the public dimension of the economy, about welfare. The individual has become more and more fixated on consumption as a value, as a measure of individual success and worth, as a marker of identity, even as a way of spending one’s leisure. The consumer, on the other hand, has no time for engagement within society, for participation, for cultural self-improvement, for questioning the functioning of society. The consumer is not interested in politics as such, but only insofar as politics can “deliver the goods” in the most literal sense. Participation, the necessary lifeblood of democracy, tends to be dwindling, and any appeal to the common good falls on deaf, selfish ears.

On the opposite pole of the geo-political and socio-economic divide that characterizes the contemporary world, the citizen is a rare figure. While its

emergence has been historically prevented or stunted by both traditional and modern dictators, now the plight of individuals and groups deprived of rights and submerged in a disenfranchised world of arbitrary power and corrupt government tends to be addressed by the radical proponents of politicized religious faith. This is especially true in the Muslim world, where Islamist movements

tend to fuse the category of the citizen with that of the believer. Prompted by the revulsion and rebellion against non-democratic power and rulers (often secular, from Saddam to Mubarak, from Ben Ali to Assad) this new form of politicization is also inherently anti-democratic, insofar as it rejects both procedural and substantial rights to those who do not share the same religious faith. Instead of a *demos*, what is being advocated is an *ethnos*, a category which is not necessarily racial, but can also be religious.

The vast and unexpected popular uprisings that characterized the Arab Spring were not prompted by religious issues, nor were they headed, especially in the beginning, by Islamist movements and activists. Yet, the “religious question” has become one of the main elements which will determine the political future of the countries of the region.

It has to be said here that we are not witnessing, throughout the region, a revival of religious faith as such, but rather the powerful growth of religion as the foundation of social cohesion and political activity. In other words, what we are seeing is belonging more than believing, in the sense that religion has always been there as tradition, as individual and collective identity, but is now being converted into political ideology.

It is important to understand why throughout the Muslim world secularism, which in the West has characterized political modernization and the growth of democratic citizenship, is so weak, if not totally absent. Some will say that Islam is inherently *integrative*, i.e. that it does not recognize separate spheres of human reality and sees religion as all-encompassing and inspiring, without any degree of autonomy for each single dimension, from ethics to politics, from dietary prescriptions to the economy. This “essentialist” interpretation of Islam does not survive a comparative historical analysis. The *integrative* interpretation of religion, in fact, is definitely not unknown in Christianity, and was predominant until the Protestant reformation and the consolidation of strong nation-states.

The problem with a secular approach to religion in the Muslim world has many different facets. In the first place, secularism has been identified with something “foreign”, harking back to the major trauma of the arrival in Egypt – perceived as a humiliation - of Napoleon and republican (and *laïque*) France.

Besides, secularism in the Middle East has never been of the pluralist, tolerant, religious-compatible and even religious-friendly Anglo-Saxon brand – but has rather been presented, and seen, as an anti-religious, atheistic ideology. In the early XX century the ideologist of Turkism, Ziya Gokalp, when translating the French term *laïque*, used the word *la-dini*, which means “non-religious”, thereby making it sure that believers would consider secularism unacceptable. More important, Atatürk – and later Reza Shah in Iran - applied in practice this identification of secularism and systematic anti-religious modernization. Even today we can be sure that this is exactly the way the concept is perceived by Muslims, except perhaps those belonging to educated and often Westernized elites, aware of the fact that a constitutionally secular country (the case of the United States is the most significant) can be at the same time a highly religious country.

Having said this, it remains to be seen how, in the Muslim world, religion and democracy can coexist. “Coexist”, in the sense that they cannot coincide, since – as shown by the Iranian case – the fusion of politics and religion makes for bad religion and worse politics. But neither can they be totally separate, as would be the case if we were to conceive (French-style or Atatürk-style) religion as being relegated to a purely individual, private sphere. Democracy will have a chance in the Muslim world only if secularism will be conceived as separation between religion and the state, but not as an impossible, and for most Muslims unacceptable, banning of religion from the public sphere.

The widespread interest for the present Turkish model in the countries where the events of 2011 have subverted the previous authoritarian regimes means exactly this. Turkey is today seen and appreciated as characterized by the recognition of a strong religious identity, the role of a political party explicitly inspired by Islam, and yet a pluralistic, democratic system based on the Turkish *demos* (and a strong nationalist tradition) rather than an Islamic *ethnos*.

We would be overly optimistic, however, if we were to overlook the problematic nature of this “model”, both in its present Turkish version and in its possible reproductions in other Muslim countries. As we are seeing today both in Egypt and in Tunisia, the Muslim Brotherhood and Ennadhwa (the more moderate, more democracy-compatible Islamist movements) are being challenged by militant radical Salafists, while in Turkey Erdogan and AKP seem tempted by an authoritarian drift which is not mainly focused on religion, but which includes the reference to a conservative interpretation of Islam on issues from abortion to alcohol and, what is still more problematic, a campaign to promote religiously inspired education.

## Democracy and the rule of law

The events of 2011 in the Arab world were very significant insofar as they dramatically disproved the racist, rather than merely relativist, approach according to which democracy is allegedly by and for “the West”, while for the poor, ignorant and backward masses of “the rest” some form of dictatorship is normal and inevitable.

**Power in the West has also been violent, but has gradually replaced – in the interest of its own stability-arbitrariness and the recurrent use of violence with the rule of law - and this much before the emergence of any institutions that could be defined as “democratic”.**

The Arab Spring confirmed, instead, that democracy, while not being a universal reality, turns out to be a universal aspiration and demand.

It has to be said, on the other hand, that the West has been guilty of a major, and disastrous, fallacy, consisting in reversing the historical and logical sequence between rule of law and democracy. The idea that holding an election in a lawless society is the right path to democracy is being tragically disproved. The countries of the democratic, developed West, would be well advised to go back to reading their own political history. They would “discover” that democracy has been the late fruit of a long and difficult process of rule-setting and limitation of the power of rulers. The famous “Magna Charta” of 1215 was definitely not a democratic document, but a pact between a Sovereign and a group of what today we would call warlords aimed at reducing conflict by the common acceptance of rules and limitations. It opened indeed the way for democracy, but it was not democracy. And who would maintain that XIX century Britain, with its limited property-based electorate, was a democracy?

Democracy comes after the law, not vice versa. Let us take the “ground zero” of contemporary Somalia, a non-state rather than a failed state. Who can believe that the holding of a democratic election, even in case it were technically feasible, would create a democracy in Somalia? Don’t we see that we should first have the equivalent of a “Magna Charta” between the Somali clans, with the recognition of some basic

common rules? For the same reason, in Afghanistan a “Loya Jirga” might be more substantially significant than elections conducted in a climate of violence and corruption.

The rule of law before democracy opens the way to democracy. Democracy before the rule of law is a fraud.

This is indeed the problem in the Muslim world. What has historically characterized political power in the region has been a “patrimonial”, someone has said “extractive”, concept of rule. Democracy in the West was the slow, painful and contrasted product of an evolution of originally absolute monarchies based on the introduction of laws making the exercise of power more secure and allowing the rule-based functioning of modern and complex administrative and economic systems. Power in the West has also been violent, but has gradually replaced – in the interest of its own stability-arbitrariness and the recurrent use of violence with the rule of law - and this much before the emergence of any institutions that could be defined as “democratic”.

**Resentment toward elites is a very powerful force, and Islamists are extremely capable of appealing to it, especially in the conditions of inequality and deep economic hardship and social discontent that characterize Egypt as well as, in different degrees, the other Arab countries.**

As has been very convincingly analyzed, starting from 2002, by the yearly *Arab Human Development Reports* (UNDP), the relative economic backwardness of Arab countries in comparison with other, more dynamic, developing areas has political rather than economic reasons: arbitrary power, lack of accountability, lack of independence of the judiciary as well as the less-than-full inclusion of women in the social and economic sphere. On the specifically political level, this has taken shape as a novel political science item: that of the “hereditary republic”. It is very significant that this pretense to consider power as a family property transmitted from one generation to the other has most probably been one of the main reasons for the fact that popular discontent has turned into indignation and finally revolt.

### **Democracy and civil society**

Not only did the events of 2011 in Tunisia and Egypt give a boost to the hope that democracy would advance everywhere but they also strengthened the conviction that this could happen through processes that were internal, and not originated externally. Societies could become “open” without being “opened”: George W. Bush was wrong and Tahrir Square was right.

Since then Libya gave a very different signal, further strengthened by the situation in Syria: in the presence of regimes and leaders that are not willing to give up their power, but instead are able to apply extreme levels of violent repression, no amount of popular discontent and popular revolt can succeed. Libya was, indeed, “opened” – and in Syria the situation has evolved in the direction of a civil war prompting calls for external intervention aimed at putting an end to the slaughter by achieving regime change. We are very far from the basically non-violent demise of the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes.

But is it only a matter of repression, of military determination and capability on the part of dictators? Actually things are more complicated than that, and the case of Egypt proves it.

What we saw in Tahrir Square was a powerful surge of civil society protagonism – a surge that was saluted in the West not only in terms of solidarity, but also on the basis of an ideological preference.

In the post Cold War world the struggle for democracy has been often perceived as a contest between democratic civil society and a non-democratic state. Given skepticism on institutions (tainted, for some inevitably, either by authoritarianism or by demagoguery and corruption) the space for democracy has been identified outside the state, in the free and plural formation of associations, NGOs, movements. Such an

approach, while understandable and also promising in terms of active dissent against non-democracy, threatens to be politically sterile if it is not conceived as a necessary premise of, and not a substitute to, democratic action of a political kind aiming at new rules and new institutions within the state. Civil society dissidents are indispensable to challenge the authoritarian hold of non-democratic leaders and cliques, but democracy is about political participation.

The “surprise” for the results of elections in Egypt reveals this ideological bias. Public opinion in the West, encouraged by the media, were so elated at the sight of young people demanding democracy on Tahrir Square that they forgot looking at politics and asking a very basic question: who can muster the political organization that is indispensable to run in an election, and get votes? The answer was certainly not difficult, since it unquestionably pointed in the direction of the Muslim Brotherhood on one side and the military on the other. Commenting on the defeat of “Egypt’s incredibly brave Facebook generation rebels”, Thomas Friedman has written: “They could organize protests and demonstrations, and act with often reckless courage to challenge the old regime. But they could not go on to rally around a single candidate, and then engage in the slow, dull, grinding work of organizing a political party that could contest an election, district by district.” (Thomas L. Friedman, “Facebook meets reality”, *The International Herald Tribune*, June 11, 2011).

But it is not only a question of organization. Both the Muslim Brotherhood (and on a wider scale, all the different Islamist movements and currents) and the military, had a strong appeal based on powerful concrete needs, rather than ideology.

The strength of Islamists does not derive mainly from religion nor from radical militancy, but rather from a focus on the social dimension that has been overlooked, as was obvious, by the previous regime – a regime of tyrants and crooks – but also by those liberals that we in the West thought had at least a claim to leadership after the demise of dictatorship. Islamists (the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Hamas in Palestine, Hezbollah in Lebanon etc.) are extremely active on social issues, and are perceived, for good reasons, as closer to the people, less corrupt, less elitist than the liberal democrats we in the West tend to focus upon and identify with.

Resentment toward elites is a very powerful force, and Islamists are extremely capable of appealing to it, especially in the conditions of inequality and deep economic hardship and social discontent that characterize Egypt as well as, in different degrees, the other Arab countries.

As for the military, their appeal is basically derived from their offer to deliver security at a time when people are afraid and disoriented in a situation of growing lawlessness and threatening chaos. If it is true that material, socio-economic conditions tend to trump the demand for individual freedom, it is often the case that even economic interest comes second after the very basic demand for security. Fear is more powerful than material interest. One is reminded of a public opinion poll held in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. The people were asked whether they preferred a Western-style democracy, Islamism or Communism: each of these alternatives received less than 10 per cent of preference, while over 50 per cent of the people answered “any system, as long as there is order”.

### Which democracy?

In a way it is true, in spite of all these problems, that there is no way back, that what happened in several Arab countries starting in 2011 is indeed irreversible and will eventually lead to democracy.

In a way, it has already led to democracy, in the sense of the reasonably free and fair elections that took place both in Tunisia and Egypt. Democracy has more and more become a sort of hegemonic “brand”, and we can expect that the tendency will continue spreading worldwide and specifically in the Arab and Muslim world.

We should be aware, however, of two ominous possibilities that, while preserving the outer trappings of democracy, tend to actually empty it of its real political substance. On one hand we see the spreading of “authoritarian democracy” (where the adjective tends to void the substantive). In Russia a sociologist,

when describing “Putinism”, has written about “imitation democracy”: the democratic process (elections, political parties) is preserved but power is substantially unchallenged and rests on a combination of populism and well-targeted repression (Interview to Dmitrii Furman, Polit.ru - <http://www.polit.ru/article/2004/12/26/furm>). What is happening in Turkey has much in common with this. Turkish secularist liberals have been warning against the danger that Turkey will go the way of Iran, with a non-democratic religious republic – but the real danger is that it will go the way of Russia. Democrats in the Middle East will have to be wary of the same possibility: the spread of “imitation democracies”. At the same time we must remind ourselves that democracy is not synonymous with majority rule. When we speak about democracy we imply constitutional democracy, the separation powers, pluralism, the respect for minorities. Liberal democracy, in other words.

Aristoteles identified “ochlocracy” i.e. mob rule, as the degenerate version of democracy (in parallel with the dyads monarchy/tyranny and aristocracy/oligarchy). Never has this been

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as relevant a warning as it is today in the Middle East, facing identity politics, sectarian strife, religious fundamentalism.

Having warned against “imitation democracy” and “mob-democracy” we should also warn against another deeply distorted approach to the question of democracy. A sort of one-size-fits all that unfortunately has been a fallacy that has frequently characterized Western ideological militancy in favor of democracy.

Democracy might triumph (when we feel more optimistic we say “will”) also in the Arab world, but it will take – as has been the case for the rest of the world, from Canada to Japan – different shapes and also be run according to different institutions.

Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* starts with the famous sentence: “All happy families are happy in the same way; all unhappy families are unhappy in their own peculiar way.” As far as politics is concerned, we should turn this around and say: “All democracies are democratic in their own way; all non-democracies tend to resemble each other” (in repression, use of political police, rhetoric and even esthetics).

The path will be long and difficult (after all, wasn’t it long and difficult for our countries, today proud, advanced but also historically forgetful democracies?) but Muslims in general, and Arabs in particular, have started moving toward democracy – in concrete terms, toward systems of legality and citizenship, of individual freedom and civil society pluralism, of social justice and social mobility, with respect for minorities, as well as characterized by religion with full recognition in the public space but no claim to political monopoly.