Viewpoints
No. 24

As Islamists stumble in Egypt and Tunisia, the Arab Spring turns wintery

Adeed Dawisha,
Former Public Policy Scholar, Woodrow Wilson Center; University Distinguished Professor, Department of Political Science, Miami University, Ohio; and author of *The Second Arab Awakening: Revolution, Democracy, and the Islamist Challenge from Tunis to Damascus* (April 2013)

Of all the states that rose against tyranny, Egypt and Tunisia have traveled the furthest on the road to democratic transformation. However, concerns about the Islamists' fidelity to democracy continue to mount. This is particularly so in Egypt where the president seems susceptible to authoritarian proclivities and the Islamist elite show little inclination to compromise. In Tunisia, the prospects for democracy are relatively better as Ennahda, partners in the governing coalition, have little choice but to be flexible. It is rather ironic that democratic transformation is left in the hands of those professing fidelity to principles whose compatibility with democracy is contested.

March 2013

Middle East Program

Wilson Center

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Like most people in the United States, and indeed the world, I was mesmerized and enthralled by the extraordinary happenings in the Arab world in late 2010 and early 2011. However, my partiality for the young demonstrators who courageously took on the entrenched dictators was somewhat tinged with doubts and fears. In the back of my mind were the revolutions that swept the Arab world 50 to 60 years earlier. Similarly initiated by young and idealistic revolutionaries, and led by visionary leaders, these eruptions carried so much promise but ended up producing the batch of cruel and thoroughly ghastly dictators against whom the present protests were launched. So as I watched the daily clashes between unarmed protestors and regime forces on the television screens, I hoped desperately that this time around, this second Arab awakening would yield a more enlightened and democratic outcome.

Two years later, the exuberance and giddy expectations associated with those heady days we now commonly refer to as the "Arab Spring" have all but dissipated. To Arabs longing for democratic transformations, the Arab spring seems to be turning wintery of late.

In fact, the erosion had occurred gradually over time. It began in the small Gulf kingdom of Bahrain. There, the uprising by the Shiite majority against the politically dominant Sunni minority was quickly throttled by the Bahraini king with pivotal help from his neighbors, the Saudis, implacable guardians of the authoritarian vision. In Libya and Yemen, two dictators who had ruled their countries for a number of decades were successfully disposed of after considerable loss of life and many sacrifices, but the end result left much to be desired; tribal and regional loyalties have stymied political compromise, and, in both cases, emerging state institutions have not been able to exercise political control over armed and unruly groups. And in Syria, a murderous regime, allergic to any notion of civil human behavior, turned a peaceful uprising into a bloody civil war that has inflicted untold atrocities on countless men, women, and children.

In spite of all these cases of unfulfilled promise, the Arab spring could boast of the political achievements associated with the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia. In both cases, free and fair elections were held, parliaments were formed and tasked with writing new constitutions, and ensuing governments emerged from the will of the people. But the exhilaration felt by secularists and democrats in those early days was tempered by the extraordinary spectacle of Islamist parties sweeping the polls and assuming control of the ship of state. The concern was not only how effectively and competently would they rule the two countries and manage their economies, but, more poignantly, how accommodating would they be to others who did not necessarily adhere to their Islamist ideals and doctrinal dictates.

If at some point the outlook appeared encouraging, it took a turn for the worse over the last year or so, and lately it seems to be in free fall. Demonstrations by those opposing the new political orders in both Egypt and Tunisia have been large and widespread, and of late have turned ominously violent.

Economic anxieties have contributed to peoples' frustrations, as neither country can boast a leadership adept at economic management. In both countries, foreign exchange reserves are falling, and, despite constant governmental pleas, outsiders are not investing. In the two years since the revolutions erupted, the Egyptian pound lost 14 percent of its value, and a number of rating agencies cut Tunisia's sovereign credit rating to junk status. Unemployment, particularly among the young, is rampant, and inflation is rising. It is not uncommon to see demonstrators waving bread to signify the persistent wretchedness of their lives. More than a year after coming to power with promises to alleviate the economic woes of the people, all that the Islamists can show are economies that appear to be on the verge of a downward spiral.

Beyond economic concerns, what fueled the protests in Egypt and Tunisia were mounting fears that the Islamists' fidelity to democratic principles is paper thin. Yet a closer look suggests some palpable variations in the performance of the ruling Islamists in the two countries so far. On a number of fronts, Tunisia's Islamist party, Ennahda, seemed to be the more flexible and more willing to compromise. On the other hand, Egypt's victorious Islamists, be they members of the mainstream Muslim Brotherhood or the puritanical Salafist creed, have proved to be less open to the proposition that politics is the art of compromise.

Civil society leaders in Egypt have every reason to fear the direction that President Muhammad Morsi and his Islamists have taken Egypt over the last 12 months or so. Morsi himself seems susceptible to authoritarian proclivities. Last November, he stunned Egyptians by unilaterally decreeing new powers for himself, and, a month later, he put a new and contentious constitution to a snap referendum, leaving no time for public debate.

Indeed, the whole episode of the writing of this constitution and its provisions revealed the absolute determination of Egypt's Islamists to include in the conversation only those who shared their vision. Almost all non-Islamist members left the committee that was entrusted with writing the constitution, complaining that their opinions and objections were constantly and dependably dismissed. That left the constitution in the hands of the Islamists who ended up producing a document that many human rights groups described as flawed. It, for example, gives Al-Azhar, Egypt's center of Islamic learning, the right to intrude in the law-making process, and it excludes religions not belonging to the Abrahamic tradition from practicing their faith. Certain provisions could easily be used by Islamists to restrict the rights of women, and others would limit freedom of expression. There was no mistaking the heavy hand of Egypt's Islamists.

Tunisia's case, however, is rather different. To begin with, the current president is not an Islamist, but a member of one of the two secular parties that entered into a governing coalition with Ennahda. As for writing a new constitution, the process could not be any more different than that of Egypt. An elected Constituent Assembly produced a constitutional document in August 2012, but, rather than ramming it through with a quick vote, they presented it as a first draft and opened it to public debate, accepting comments not only from domestic, but also international organizations. This led to a revised second draft, submitted in November 2012, which is still in the public domain. The final draft, to be completed by April 27, will undoubtedly be a better document than that of Egypt in matters of freedom of expression, freedom of thought and belief, and women's rights.

So far, Tunisia's Islamists have exemplified a somewhat different model of political behavior than that practiced by their ideational cohorts in Egypt. And this is not just of late. From the early days of the revolution, Tunisia's Ennahda advocated a more enlightened form of political Islam that would allow it to coexist with secular dictums. The party's leader, Rachid Ghannouchi, consistently proclaimed his disdain for rigid applications of Islam that are oblivious of modernity.

Ghannouchi is an admirer of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey's Islamist prime minister, who on a visit to Tunisia was heartily applauded as he reminded his Islamist audience that while he was the leader of an Islamic party, he was also the prime minister of a secular country. On that same trip, Erdoğan was received much more coolly by the Egyptian Islamists who told him that the Turkish experience could not be transferred to Egypt, and one leader of Egypt's ruling party attacked Erdoğan for refusing to criminalize adultery in Turkey.

There is perhaps no better barometer of the democratic orientations of political groups than their attitudes and policies toward women. In Tunisia, Ennahda reiterated many times their commitment to safeguarding the country's personal status law, which is the most liberal in the Arab world. There were concerns by women and civil society groups that women's liberties and their status in society might be at risk in the new Islamist–dominated political order. But the current draft constitution should alleviate much of these concerns.

In Egypt, on the other hand, the Islamists have hinted time and again that they would reopen debate on existing laws that had made female genital mutilation illegal, that had given women the right to divorce and to keep custody of their children beyond the ages of seven for boys and nine for girls, that had allowed them to travel without the permission of their husbands, and that had given them legal powers to contest discrimination through the office of an ombudsman. The Islamists justified their hostility to these laws by arguing that these regulations undermined the sanctity of the family.

Ideational leadership has of course played an important part, and the Islamist leaders of Tunisia have consistently exhibited a more flexible approach to doctrinal interpretation than Egypt's Brotherhood and the Salafists. But perhaps a more robust explanation has to do with democratic institutions themselves, which are supposed to impose a logic of governance that encourages compromise and pragmatism. And herein lies the fundamental difference between the Egyptian and Tunisian cases.

With their overwhelming electoral victory, garnering 66 percent of the national vote, Egypt's Islamists had little to no incentive to compromise. And when the massive vote netted them more than 70 percent of the National Assembly's seats, they knew they could push any legislation through without the need to find allies. On the other hand, while Ennahda did score a handsome win in the Tunisian elections, it fell short of an outright majority, receiving 37 percent of the national vote and 41 percent of the Constituent Assembly seats. In order to govern, Ennahda had to enter into a coalition with non-Islamist parties, and consequently had little alternative but to follow a moderate version of Islamic politics.

After the early exuberance that accompanied the "Arab Spring," it is now patently clear that getting rid of tyrants is but the first fledgling step toward a democratic future. Of all the Arab states that experienced the second Arab awakening, the best chances for an eventual transformation to democracy lie with the Islamists in Tunisia and Egypt. But for this outcome to be realized, those Islamists need to work within the democratic rules of the game, and these rules are not confined solely to winning free and fair elections. Democracy demands a liberal disposition; a tolerance for minority rights and views; and a willingness to negotiate, compromise, and when necessary make concessions for the political process to proceed. In Egypt's case, the odds against this happening are pretty long. In Tunisia, the odds are better, but to a large extent that is because Ennahda had to enter a post-election coalition partnership with secular parties. For the sake of democracy, one very much hopes that the same institutional arrangements would accrue in the wake of the coming parliamentary election later this year.

Still, it is rather ironic that post-revolution democratic transformation is now left not in the hands of liberals and secularists, but in the custody of those professing fidelity to principles whose compatibility with democracy is contested.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not reflect those of the Wilson Center.

Viewpoints Series

Tunisia's Islamists Struggle to Rule
Viewpoints No. 1 (April 2012) by David Ottaway

Fostering the Next Generation
Viewpoints No. 2 (April 2012) by Moushira Khattab

Algeria's Islamists Crushed in First Arab Spring Elections
Viewpoints No. 3 (May 2012) by David Ottaway

Syrian Refugees: Lessons from Other Conflicts and Possible Policies
Viewpoints No. 4 (updated August 2012) by Rochelle A. Davis

Morocco's Islamists: In Power Without Power
Viewpoints No. 5 (August 2012) by David Ottaway

The Arab Awakening: Is Democracy a Mirage?
Viewpoints No. 6 (August 2012) by Roberto Toscano, Moushira Khattab, Fatima Sbaity Kassem, and Daniel Brumberg

Iran is Reversing its Population Policy
Viewpoints No. 7 (August 2012) by Farzaneh Roudi

Voting as a Powerful Tool for Women
Viewpoints No. 8 (October 2012) by Hanin Ghaddar

The Uncertain Fate of U.S.-Egyptian Relations
Viewpoints No. 9 (November 2012) by David Ottaway

The Demon's Besieging Lebanon: Iran's Tighter Grip
Viewpoints No. 10 (November 2012) by Hanin Ghaddar

Iran's Nuclear Program: A Change in the Winds?
Viewpoints No. 11 (November 2012) by Shaul Bakhash

Has the Arab Spring Lived Up to Expectations?
Viewpoints No. 12 (December 2012) by Various Authors

Reflections on the Adoption of UNGA Resolution Banning Female Genital Mutilation
Viewpoints No. 13 (January 2013) by Moushira Khattab

In 2013, Rise of the Right and in Elections Across the Mideast
Viewpoints No. 14 (January 2013) by Robin Wright

Edited by Kendra Heideman and Mona Youssef
Designed by Kendra Heideman

Middle East Program
Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars