Viewpoints
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The Resistible Rise of Islamist Parties

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Some call it the Islamist winter while others talk of revolution betrayed. Neither claim portrays accurately what is happening in Arab countries in the throes of popular uprisings and rapid political change. The rise of Islamist parties in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings took most by surprise, including in some cases the Islamist parties themselves, which were more successful than they dared to hope. Coupled with the disarray of the secular opposition, the success of Islamist parties augurs poorly for democracy, because a strong, competitive opposition is the only guarantee against the emergence of a new authoritarianism.

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Some call it the Islamist winter. Others talk of revolution betrayed. Neither claim portrays accurately what is happening in Arab countries in the throes of popular uprisings and rapid political change. The situation is still far too fluid to reach sweeping conclusions, and the revolution supposedly betrayed was, at best, the hope of some participants in the uprising, rather than a clear project for a new society and polity supported by most. On the other hand, it is a fact that Islamists parties are winning elections, while secular parties are struggling to compete, or even to maintain their relevance. Meanwhile, the youth groups that spearheaded the change have failed to transform the momentum they gained in the streets into a movement for transformation. Yet, it is not inevitable that Islamists will come to dominate all countries undergoing transitions. Their victories are due, to no small extent, to the weaknesses of the secular opposition, which has been unable to develop a clear message, build viable political parties, or overcome its fragmentation. These problems are not insurmountable, but so far the secular opposition parties have failed to address them forcefully and systematically. The outcome of the uprising depends to a large extent on whether they do.

The electoral victories of Islamist parties vary in size from country to country. Egypt presents the most extreme situation. The 2011-12 parliamentary elections saw the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) win 37.5 percent of the vote and the Salafi Al-Nour Party 27.8 percent, with the rest divided among 15 parties or blocs. And contrary to a widespread tendency by analysts to confuse secularism with liberalism, liberals are few in the ranks of the opposition. Amr Hamzawy, a prominent liberal intellectual elected to parliament as an independent, put the strength of the liberal bloc among members of parliament (MPs) at a measly 18 members. The fact that the Egyptian Supreme Constitutional Court has since dissolved the parliament in a highly political decision does not annul the imbalance the elections revealed.

The situation is not as dire in Tunisia, where Ennahda, also a Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated party, won 37 percent of the vote in the constituent assembly elections of October 2011—no Salafi party participated in those elections, although one or more probably will next time. But in Tunisia, too, secular parties are fragmented, divided by ideology and the egos of their leaders, giving the more cohesive Ennahda a clear advantage. Morocco presents a somewhat different picture. The Party for Justice and Development (PJD), also rooted in the Muslim Brotherhood, received 22 percent of the vote in the November 2011 elections, twice as much as the second highest vote winner, and thus named the prime minister in keeping with the rules of the new constitution. But the plurality was not large and, in any case, the prime minister and cabinet share power with the king by the provisions of the constitution as well as by political reality. Furthermore, secular parties in Morocco are not flimsy new creations; many have long histories, in some cases going back to the struggle against the French protectorate, and have legitimacy and staying power even if their fortunes wax and wane.

The transitions that started with the 2011 uprisings will not lead to a democratic outcome unless a better balance is established between Islamist and secular forces. Islamists are not necessarily more authoritarian than secularists—the regimes of Gamal Abdel Nasser and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt were secular, as were those of Habib Bourguiba and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia.

But Islamists are not necessarily more democratic, either, as President Mohammed Morsi and the FJP have clearly shown in Egypt. The real issue is that democracy does not depend on the behavior of one party or faction, but on a pluralistic and balanced political spectrum. And that balance must be established in the electoral arena. The current attempt by Egyptian secular parties to write off election results as irrelevant by turning to the courts and the streets is as great a threat to a democratic future as the Islamist domination those actions purportedly seek to avoid.

Lest We Forget the Lessons of History

In Egypt, which has the most unbalanced political spectrum among the countries discussed here, the secular opposition's antidote to the threat of Islamist domination could become as dangerous as the poison it purportedly seeks to neutralize. Secular parties, mistrusting their ability to compete with Islamists in the elections expected for April, are seeking to prevent those elections from taking place. The National Salvation Front, a somewhat shaky coalition of secular opposition leaders, has been trying to stop the election clock by challenging the legitimacy of the constitution, of the constituent assembly that wrote the draft, and of the referendum that approved it. It has challenged the legitimacy of President Morsi, who won an election many secular leaders considered sufficiently legitimate to participate in. Some secular leaders even declared he should resign. They have asked for the dissolution of the cabinet and the formation of a government of national unity on the basis of unspecified criteria. And they have called for protests in the streets to support their demands.

Street protest has become a constant feature of the political process in Egypt. It is by no means completely orchestrated and controlled by the National Salvation Front or any of the big-name secular leaders who advocate it. Street protest is driven in part by the same idealistic youth groups who took to the streets in January 2011 calling for a more just and equitable system and who are now seeking to re-launch the revolution they believe was betrayed. In part, it has become a tool used by the secular organizations in the National Salvation Front to erode the control by the Islamists and avoid having to confront them in new elections that risk showing their own continuing disorganization and weakness. In part, it has unfortunately degenerated into thuggery and intimidation, leading to ugly incidents including the burning of Muslim Brotherhood offices and police stations, the equally ugly use by the security forces of Mubarak-era crowd control methods, and the re-imposition of the state of emergency in some governorates by President Morsi.

While historical analogies should not be pushed too far, there are some disquieting parallels between some trends emerging in Egypt and those that emerged in European countries in the 1920s and 1930s, a period during which the existing political and social order in Europe was being challenged by the rise of socialist parties as it is challenged at present in Arab countries by the rise of the Islamists.

In Italy, elections in 1919 resulted in the Socialist Party winning the plurality of the vote, with fragmented liberal parties in a non-competitive position; in Germany, the Social Democratic

Party had also steadily gained support through most of the 1920s. The opposition feared a revolution by elections, having little hope of outcompeting the socialist parties at the polls. The most effective resistance to the threat of socialism was mounted in both countries by parties that did not limit themselves to the electoral arena. In Italy, the Fascist Party came to power not through an election, but through the March on Rome of October 1922, when Benito Mussolini's supporters, including the Black Shirts, converged on Rome, intimidating the king into making him prime minister. Violence and intimidation by the Brown Shirts similarly played a central role in the success of the Nazi party and the rise of Adolf Hitler in Germany. In other words, both parties fought against the electoral advantage enjoyed by socialists at that time by turning to the streets. The rest is history.

The secular opposition parties of Egypt and Tunisia are not fascist or Nazi organizations of course—and those of Morocco have shown no inclination to resist the Islamists' ascendancy by taking to the streets. But it is worth considering the experience of countries where the fight by extra-parliamentary means against one form of authoritarianism led to other forms of authoritarianism. Indeed, some of the dangers of combating Islamist parties in the streets rather than at the polls are beginning to be evident in Egypt: the appearance of black-clad and masked members of the Black Bloc at some of the demonstrations, which is too suggestive of the rise of armed squads for comfort; the burning of FJP offices or police stations; the confusion between political demonstrations and the violence of "ultra" soccer fans; and the constant demand that an elected president simply steps aside and cedes power to a non-elected national unity government. None of this augurs well for democracy, and least of all the unwillingness by opposition leaders to draw a firm line between legitimate peaceful demonstrations and unacceptable thuggery.

The opposition in Egypt and to a lesser extent Tunisia has developed a tendency to glorify all direct action in the streets as a way of achieving the goals of the 2011 "democratic revolution" betrayed by Islamist parties. Such glorification of direct action raises a considerable number of extremely difficult questions. Many can only be answered politically—is the authoritarianism of Islamist parties more dangerous than that of secular parties? Others are moral and philosophical—when is direct street action justifiable and when is it not? Is there a difference between the demonstrations that brought down the Mubarak and Ben Ali regimes and the ones that are seeking to bring down President Morsi? Ultimately, when does the end justify the means? At the very least, the questions suggest the need to say "not so fast" to those who glorify direct action as the road to democracy. The warning of Hannah Arendt and William Kornhauser in the aftermath of World War II about the dangers of mass action not mediated by institutions is worth revisiting by the scholarly-inclined.[i] The danger of the rejection of political due process in the name of revolutionary legitimacy does not require elaboration.

Is There a Democratic Alternative?

Secular parties could do a lot to stop the rise of Islamist parties through democratic means. True, Islamists have shown they are better organized and more adept at developing a message that appeals to voters. But the strength of Islamist parties is not immutable, as the PJD in Morocco learned the hard way. After a strong showing in 2002, when it went from 9 to 42 seats in the parliament, it only gained a few extra seats in 2007; but most importantly it lost about one

million votes—voter turnout was dismal in general, and the PJD was as affected as all other parties. The PJD made a comeback in 2011, but the lesson is clear: supporters of Islamist parties are like all other voters, expecting the party they support to deliver and turning elsewhere if disappointed. Both Tunisia and Egypt have scheduled elections in the next few months, and in both countries voters have good reasons to be disappointed. Economic problems are enormous and cannot be corrected quickly. The uprisings have raised the expectations of the population, as shown by continuing labor unrest. And many voters who supported Islamists in the last elections are troubled by some of their policies and the handling of the protests.

Disenchantment provides ample opportunities for the opposition, but only if it manages to tackle its three major weaknesses: absence of a clear message, organizational weakness, and divided leadership.

Developing a Message

The problem starts with identity: secular parties do not even know what to call themselves. They reject the word "secular" as implying lack of piety, even atheism. They like the term "liberal," but most of them do not uphold liberal values in practice. A term some favor, "civil," is both invidious, implicitly casting aspersion on Islamist parties for not being civil, and unhelpful, since mainstream Islamist parties also call themselves civil.

Developing a message that appeals not only to intellectuals and the well-offs but also to the mass of the population that hovers precariously just above the poverty line or struggles to survive below it is inherently difficult, but without such a message, secular parties will not be able to compete. In Egypt, 41 percent of the population lives below or close to the poverty line of $2 a day per person; the corresponding figure for Tunisia is 24.7 percent, with the greatest concentration of poverty in the interior region where the uprising started and tensions remain high. According to official statistics, only 8.1 percent of the Moroccan population lives on less than $2, with the figure increasing to 14.2 percent in rural areas, but the wretched slums that surround major cities and conditions in the villages call the official figures into question.[ii] The messages that have resonated historically with poor populations, in the Arab world and elsewhere, are nationalism and socialism. Nationalism played a major role in the formation of political parties and movements across the Middle East and North Africa when the region was under forms of colonial occupation, but it is not an idea with much pull today. And the key socialist demands, equity and social justice, are at the center of the Islamist message as well—couched in religious rather than Marxist terms, to be sure, but appropriating the left's traditional message of justice.

There is room for secular parties to regain ground here. The Islamist message is not well-articulated in socio-economic terms, and so far Islamist parties have failed to develop policies that provide convincing indications of what they intend to do to address concrete problems of work, housing, health, or education, let alone to defend human rights and in particular the rights of women. Secular parties, however, have also failed so far to suggest their own remedies in a way designed to gain broad support. The issue of women's rights is particularly revealing in this regard. While many women in Tunisia and Egypt are genuinely concerned that the already limited protection of their rights will be further eroded, secular parties have succeeded

in turning the issue into the cause of an educated, secular elite rather than a concern shared by all women. By not recognizing that Islamist women also have real concerns about their rights, secularists are missing an opportunity to reach across the line to women who voted for Islamist parties.

In Egypt, some secular parties or leaders are striving to develop a more convincing socio-economic message by presenting themselves as Gamal Abdel Nasser's heirs. Hamdeen Sabbahi, a presidential candidate who unexpectedly emerged from the pack of supposedly second-tier contenders to win third place, narrowly missing the run-off, explicitly casts himself in that light. More broadly, secular demonstrators often invoke Nasser's name. But the trend is still vague, and it is too early to know whether it will gain real traction.

Maghreb countries have a strong leftist tradition, but parties with communist roots did poorly in elections in both Tunisia and Morocco. The Communist Workers' Party of Tunisia, only gained three out of 217 seats in the constituent assembly elections of October 2011, and this led it to drop the word "communist" from its name in August 2012. In Morocco, the Union Socialiste des Forces Populaires (USFP), the historical major leftist party, lost votes in the 2011 elections although it had transformed itself into a centrist organization, while the more radical Party for Socialism and Progress (PSP) only managed to secure 18 seats. The traditional ideas of the left however are still present in the labor movement in both countries, particularly but not exclusively among the independent unions that are emerging. In Tunisia, even the dominant UGTT (Union Generale des Travailleurs Tunisiens), which was controlled by the government under both President Bourguiba and President Ben Ali, is seeking to recast itself in a more militant and independent mode and as a sworn enemy of Ennahda. The assassination in Tunis in February 2013 of Chokri Belaid, a well-known leader of the left, triggered large, angry demonstrations that suggest that the message of the left might yet emerge as a counterweight to the Islamist trend.

Developing an Organization

The weakness of party structures is another serious but surmountable failing of the secular opposition, whose leaders are more at home debating ideas than creating party machines. The spokesperson for Hamdeen Sabbahi's Popular Current even told this writer in a telephone conversation that the organization thinks of itself as a forum for discussion rather than as a traditional political party. Mohamed ElBaradei's Al-Dustour does not portray itself as a forum for discussion, but a visit to its largely empty Cairo headquarters in October made it clear that the organization was not seriously getting ready for parliamentary elections early in 2013. Tunisian opposition parties appear somewhat more active, but activity in their offices is nothing compared to that in the offices of Ennahda.

Distaste for the unglamorous task of organizing a party machine may be related to the social distance that separates the secular leadership from much of the population. The countries we are discussing are strongly stratified along class lines, and mobility is not particularly prized—there is more disdain about humble origins than admiration for the person lifting himself up by his own bootstraps. In Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco, secularists are quick to comment on the Islamists' lack of good breeding and education, and to sneer at their wives' lack of

sophistication and fashion sense. Secular leaders, furthermore, openly make contemptuous comments about the ignorance of the Egyptian populace—a self-defeating vote-getting technique.

These problems should not prove impossible to surmount, if secular leaders decided to focus on them. It is true that the Muslim Brotherhood has an advantage over secular parties because it always took the task of organizing seriously, although it often had to so in secrecy. Secular parties today can operate openly, and expert advice is readily available. But they need to decide that the non-glamorous task of building machines is worth the effort and they do not appear to have done so thus far.

The Issue of Leadership

Rivalries among secularist leaders are another serious obstacle to the emergence of a viable opposition. Individuals who in theory share the same ideals of a democratic country that protects human rights and individual freedoms, respects diversity, and takes its place among modern nations are showing little inclination to work together for the common goal. Personal rivalries are nothing out of the ordinary in politics, of course, and Islamist parties have their own problems. But the personal rivalries among Islamists are tempered somewhat by two factors: a degree of dedication to a common ideal—without idealizing Islamists, this dedication has been evident in the way many have suffered imprisonment, exile, and more generally harassment without giving up; and the fact that they are now in positions of power, so that managing rivalries without splintering is a political necessity.

It is much more difficult for secular parties to overcome the splintering caused by personal ambitions. Ideologically, they believe in individualism. Culturally and professionally, many of their leaders are geared to highly individualistic activities such as writing, speaking in public, and debating each other on television. And they are so far from reaching positions of power that they have little incentive to come together and compromise with each other. By forming their own separate organizations, secular leaders can stay in the game even if they are not in power. If they subordinate their personal ambitions to the task of forming a strong secular opposition movement, they disappear from the limelight as individuals and only reap rewards if the party wins. There is a rational though perverse calculus to the splintering of the secular opposition, as explained to me by a Tunisian activist: after spending considerable time bemoaning the incapacity of secular parties to unite in a broad coalition to defeat Ennahda, he announced that he was forming a party, because in order to be at the table where negotiations for unity took place, he had to have his own organization. And that of course creates a vicious circle of splintering in the name of unity, and also prevents political parties and organizations from acquiring an identity separate from that of the founder. It is Beji Caid Essebsi's Nida Tounes, Hamdeen Sabbahi's The Egyptian Popular Current, and ElBaradei's Al-Dustour, and it is unlikely that any of these organizations could survive without the founder—in part because there is no real organization.

Party fragmentation is not always an obstacle to democracy. Countries that adopt a system of proportional representation always experience fragmentation, particularly if they do not require parties to receive a minimum percentage of the total vote before they can be allocated any seats.

There is no reason why in a pluralist system there should not be several parties with similar ideologies. The problem in Arab countries is the contrast between the fragmentation of secularists and the unity of Islamists. In Egypt, the Freedom and Justice Party and the Salafi Al-Nour Party in Egypt won 70 percent of the seats in the now dissolved Egyptian parliament, while the largest secular party, Al-Wafd, only received 7.5 percent. Even if Islamists lose some support next time and relations between the FJP and Al-Nour become more difficult, they will still be formidable opponents for the divided secular parties.

The Alternatives

The rise of Islamist parties in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings took most by surprise, including in some cases the Islamist parties themselves, which were more successful than they dared to hope. Coupled with the disarray of the secular opposition, the success of Islamist parties augurs poorly for democracy because a strong, competitive opposition is the only guarantee against the emergence of a new authoritarianism. Constitutional guarantees are no protection when there is no balance of power.

Secular parties are the key to redressing the balance of power necessary to give democracy a chance, not because they are in any way more responsible for the present worrisome trends than the Islamist parties, but because they are in a position to do more to resist it. In an ideal world, parties in power would behave democratically under all circumstances. In the political world, they need to be kept in check by the opposition.

Opposing the rise of Islamists by choosing street action and invoking revolutionary legitimacy should be a solution of last resort because it is fraught with dangers. Extra-parliamentary confrontation is bound to bring out extremism on both sides, possibly opening a vicious circle of violence and eventually triggering military intervention, especially in Egypt. Learning to outcompete Islamist parties in elections appears to be a promising approach at present. Opposition parties do not know yet their potential strength because they have done little so far to develop their message, build their organizations, and surmount fragmentation. They should not give up the democratic battle before really trying to fight it because their problems are serious but also surmountable.

With new elections scheduled in both Tunisia and Egypt, opposition parties have nothing to lose by preparing themselves better for the contest. They, the countries, and the cause of democracy have a lot to gain if they succeed. They should try.

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

[i] Hannah Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism (1951) and William Kornhauser, The Politics of Mass Society (1959)
[ii] http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.2DAY/countries/MA?display=graph and www.hcp.ma/file/111464/

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