

UWTSD

Muslim Politics (HPRS7017)

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5. The impact of 'Arab Spring' and its relationship with Islam and Muslim Identities.

Introduction

The 'Arab Spring' which began with a series of protests in Tunisia in December 2010 sparked off a domino effect on several other Arab countries (Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Syria and Bahrain) in early 2011 and led to various successful popular uprisings against the then ruling powers in these countries.¹ As Hudson puts it, "Nobody expected that the self-immolation of a street vendor in Tunisia would seemingly precipitate a wave of protest that has shaken the whole Arab world..."² Yet, this very act of self-immolation sparked off a series of mass protests that overthrew longstanding governments in several countries such as Tunisia and Egypt. While the 'Arab Spring' took place in a Muslim majority region, the protests were not about a push for an Islamic state to be established in each of the six countries neither were the protests initiated by the Islamist political parties. The 'Arab Spring' did not center on Islam nor on issues of Muslim identities. Hudson opined, "the crowds who shook regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain and Syria were not demanding the imposition of Islamic rule; they were objecting to the arbitrary, incompetent, corrupt and often cruel behaviour of rulers."³ The 'Arab Spring' arose primarily as a reaction to an accumulation of injustice, corruption, inequality, and poverty faced by the people under decades of authoritarian rule and dictatorship. The 'Arab Spring' was thus a people's revolution regardless of religion; it was never about Islam.

However, the 'Arab Spring' paved the way for a democratic transition of power and interestingly led to the choice of Islamist parties being elected to power in the various

¹ Mustapha Kamel Al-Sayyid, 'The Arab Spring: Why In Some Arab Countries And Not In Others?', in *Routledge Handbook Of The Arab Spring: Rethinking Democratization*, ed. by Larbi Sadiki (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), pp. 51-62 (p. 51).

² Michael C. Hudson, 'Arab Politics After The Uprisings: Still Searching For Legitimacy', in *Routledge Handbook Of The Arab Spring: Rethinking Democratization*, ed. by Larbi Sadiki (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), pp. 28-38 (p. 31).

³ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

Arab countries involved in the 'Arab Spring.'⁴ Although the Islamists initially gained the upper hand politically during this period of political transition in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria, the 'Arab Spring' can be seen as a double-edged sword for Islam and Muslim identities. On the one hand, Islam and Muslim identities were strengthened through the rise of Islamist parties in power and profusion in the use of new media during the 'Arab Spring.' On the other hand, Islam and Muslim identities were also threatened when the Islamist parties failed to deliver what they had promised to their electorates post 'Arab Spring.' Further political chaos and crisis ensued in the Arab region with a military coup in Egypt in 2013 and the rise of militant ISIS (Islamic State). The onslaught and easy access to social media also led to the radicalization of Muslims through the ISIS especially after the failure of the 'Arab Spring' to facilitate a transition to Islamic rule in each of the countries involved.

The Rise and Struggle of the Islamists in Politics

The 'Arab Spring' saw the close collaboration between Islamists and secular political parties working together for the common good of overthrowing corrupt governments in their midst, restoring power to the people and having some resemblance of democracy. A sense of euphoria and optimism of political change was in the air as protestors saw the successful ouster of authoritarian regimes and dictatorships. In the aftermath of the downfall of the authoritarian regimes in the 'Arab Spring' period, there was a power vacuum. The people who led the revolution were youths, women, professionals and unemployed who lacked political experience or leadership to form a new government in their countries.⁵ Therein lies the opportunity for the Islamists with their huge social grassroots base and organizational prowess to put their theory of Islam being the solution (to the country's socio-economic and political woes) into action.

The Islamists were seen to be the biggest winners in the 'Arab Spring' as they were sworn into power through new elections held in various Arab countries such as Tunisia and Egypt. An example would be the Harakat Ennahdha Islamist Party (Renaissance

⁴ Al-Sayyid, pp. 59-60.

⁵ Hudson, p. 33.

Movement) in Tunisia.⁶ Another unexpected example would be the surprising rise of the Muslim Brotherhood with their Freedom and Justice Party forming the new government and the installation of Brotherhood's Muhammad Morsi as the new President in Egypt in the Post Mubarak's era in 2012.⁷ Unfortunately, the Morsi government only lasted a year and was overthrown in a military coup in 2013.⁸ Egypt was a case of a failed experiment of an Islamist party in power. Not only was the Muslim Brotherhood severely repressed and thrown out of power by the military, but it was also relegated to being a terrorist organization in Egypt one year after being in power. Elsewhere in the other Arab states involved in the 'Arab Spring,' Al-Sayyid opined that the transitional governments failed to offer "security, stability, economic growth or social justice to their citizens, and the continued bloody conflict in Syria with its heavy human cost probably helped to contain the contagious effect of the so-called 'Arab Spring' to these six countries."⁹

It is interesting to note that while the Muslim Brotherhood and Harakat Ennahdha advocated for the Islamization of society since their inception in their respective countries, they had to back down on their Islamization agenda when they were in power. They had to be careful not to antagonise other secular political parties, the military and the West and become politically alienated and jeopardize their position.¹⁰ Post 'Arab Spring,' the fault line between the conservative leadership within the mainstream Islamists such as the Muslim Brotherhood and the young Muslim activists who were more revolutionary in nature became more glaring.¹¹ Mainstream Islamists also have to contend with the pervasive presence of ISIS and its violent and

⁶ Noha Mellor, 'Introduction', In *Political Islam And Global Media: The Boundaries Of Religious Identity*, ed. by Noha Mellor and Khalil Rinnawi (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), pp. 1-13 (p. 7).

⁷ Khalil Al-Anani, 'Upended Path: The Rise and Fall of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood,' *The Middle East Journal*, 69.4 (2015), 527-543 (p.527).

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 541-542.

⁹ Al-Sayyid, p. 60.

¹⁰ Ratiba Hadj-Moussa and Samar Ben Romdhane, 'Legitimate Singularities: Ennahdha In Search Of Plural Identities? In *Political Islam And Global Media: The Boundaries Of Religious Identity*, ed. by Noha Mellor and Khalil Rinnawi (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), pp. 17-32 (p. 20); Al-Anani, p. 532.

¹¹ Shadi Hamid, William McCants, and Rashid Dar, 'Islamism After The Arab Spring: Between The Islamic State And The Nation-State', (2017), The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World U.S.-Islamic World Forum Papers 2015. Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/islamism-after-the-arab-spring_english_web_final.pdf> [accessed 10 May 2022], pp. 5-6.

aggressive ways towards achieving an Islamic state.¹² Post 'Arab Spring,' the mainstream Islamists continue to struggle for political legitimacy and survival albeit in a harsher political environment, contending with both the revolutionary political aspirations of the young, the ISIS, the military and the ruling elites.

New Media As Vehicle for Both the Strengthening of the Global Ummah and Radicalization of Muslims

One of the contributory factors often discussed for the successful and widespread mobilization of the masses in the protests during the 'Arab Spring' was attributed to the new media such as the Internet. Jamali pointed out that the rapid pace of internet and social media penetration in the Arabic countries was the fastest between 2010-2013.¹³ Prior to that, the launch of Facebook in Arabic in 2009 already helped to amplify online activism in the Arab region.¹⁴ The role of social media especially Facebook and Twitter were seen as a vehicle for self-expression, freedom of speech, formation of a common collective identity and dissemination of real time information and visuals during the Arab uprisings.¹⁵ The internet now provided a virtual and safer space for Muslims especially the young ones to participate in politics via discussion and using it as a tool for activism and mobilization of masses against the government.

Furthermore, social media was seen as playing a critical role to sharing with the world about the Arab uprisings.¹⁶ The online media content such as the "We are all Khaled Said" Facebook page quickly helped to forge a collective identity among the Egyptians and precipitated political activism during the Arab uprisings.¹⁷ Noha opined that the internet is a new vehicle of "global dawah" (call to Islam).¹⁸ It is a new resource for Islam to gain global power as it is able to attract more followers and spread the ideals of Islam more widely and easily. During the 'Arab Spring,' the proliferation of

¹² *Ibid.*, pp.12-13

¹³ Reza Jamali. *Online Arab Spring: Social Media and Fundamental Change* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2014), p. 1.

¹⁴ Zeynep Tufekci and Christopher Wilson, 'Social Media and the Decision to Participate in Political Protest: Observations From Tahrir Square', *Journal of Communication*, 62.2 (2012), 363–379 (p. 364).

¹⁵ Merlyna Lim, 'Clicks, Cabs, and Coffee Houses: Social Media and Oppositional Movements in Egypt, 2004-2011', *Journal of Communication*, 62.2 (2012), 231-248 (pp. 231-234); Jamali, pp. 1-10; Tufekci and Wilson, pp. 363-364.

¹⁶ Mellor, p. 7.

¹⁷ Tufekci and Wilson, p. 364.

¹⁸ Mellor, p. 4.

information via the new media is a powerful uniting force to foster the Muslim's sense of identity especially being one with the global Ummah. Yet the 'Arab Spring' and the influx of new media can also be seen as a bane unto Islam. As discussed earlier, the 'Arab Spring' with the Islamist parties in power did not decisively bring an end to the old manner of politics in each of the countries that underwent the uprisings and establish an Islamic state. This led to the rise of ISIS to challenge the political status quo. The ISIS is known to be adept at using social media to propagate online radical Islamic thoughts and glorify acts of violence through videos and broadcast.¹⁹ Primarily, in the post 'Arab Spring' period, ISIS has primarily used social media to recruit new members across the globe by arguing that joining ISIS will help "establish and Islamic Caliphate, and is a path to martyrdom."²⁰ Thus, the new media is both a bane and a boon to Islam and Muslim identity.

Conclusion

The 'Arab Spring' can be seen as a double-edged sword for Islam and Muslim identity. The success and participation of the mainstream Islamist groups in the Arab uprisings were the best chance for them to display their political adeptness and convince the world that Islam and democracy can go hand in hand. It was also their chance to prove that Islam can be the solution to the socio-economic and political problems of a country. Unfortunately, moderate Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Harakat Ennahdha did not survive long in the political arena in their respective countries. The failure and demise of some of these moderate Islamist groups has certainly call into question if Islam can really be the solution. Their inability to establish an Islamic state based on Shari'a law is also in question. Lastly, the aftermath of the 'Arab Spring' and the failure of the mainstream Islamist groups have unleash a pervasive and difficult radical Islamic force – ISIS to be reckoned with for a long time to come.

(Word Count: 1568)

¹⁹ Mellor, p. 7.

²⁰ Dalia Yousef and Rasha Abdulla, 'Religious Minorities in Cyberspace: Identity and citizenship among European and British Muslims', In *Political Islam And Global Media: The Boundaries Of Religious Identity*, ed. by Noha Mellor and Khalil Rinnawi (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), pp. 138-157 (p. 152).

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