The Call of Pluralism

Diversity, Not Merely Opposing Autocrats, Must be the Aim
of the Second Arab Awakening

By Marwan Muasher

How will history judge the uprisings that started in many parts of the Arab world in 2011? We now know that the label "Arab Spring" was too simplistic. Transformational processes defy black and white expectations. Do these movements resemble what happened in Europe in 1848, when several uprisings took place within a few weeks only to be followed by counterrevolutions and renewed authoritarian rule? Do they resemble the 1989 collapse of the Soviet Union, after which some countries swiftly democratized while others remained in the thrall of dictatorship? Whatever the case, it is clear that these processes will need decades to mature, and their success is by no means guaranteed.

The first Arab Awakening started in the late nineteenth century with an intellectual renaissance that eventually found its way into popular movements, though they failed to bring democracy to the Arab world. The second Arab Awakening now underway started with popular movements that have yet to find their way into intellectual frameworks. These movements are more unanimous about what they are against than about what they are for. But the debate to define this awakening has begun.

The principal fight in the Arab world is the battle for pluralism, not simply a fight against despotic rule. Decades ago, the region succeeded only in exchanging foreign despots for domestic ones. The second Arab Awakening must not emulate the first but go beyond it. It must anchor new policies with lasting respect for political, cultural, and religious pluralism, good governance, the rule of law, and inclusive economic growth. If any factor has contributed most to the years of stagnation in Arab society, it is the near-total absence of diversity and pluralism from political and cultural discourse. Truths are still regarded as absolute. A single person, party, or ideology is presented as the holder of all answers to all problems, while the public's role is largely to submit to those in power.

◁ Egyptian activist Ahmed Maher, Cairo, Nov. 30, 2013. *Salah Saied/Y7/ The Cairo Post*

But the answer to the question of whether this battle for pluralism is indeed being waged after the revolts is tentative at best. Many forces claim to be committed to pluralistic principles—regimes that have not yet been toppled, political Islamists recently come to power, or third forces trying to carve a place for themselves—but this commitment has often proven to be little more than lip service. So far, the developments of the past two years suggest that when in power, most forces place their own interests ahead of democracy and pluralism.

The commitment to pluralism is a prerequisite for a sustainable political and economic renewal of the Middle East, and it must be demanded of everyone, Islamists and secularists alike. Instead of fearing Islamist participation and trying to marginalize various political groups, all countries need to ensure that no group can monopolize truth, rule indefinitely, deny the rights of others, or impose its cultural or religious views.

If there is real hope that societies will begin to respect, indeed embrace, diversity in the Arab world, the fight for democracy needs two simultaneous guarantees: everyone's right to peaceful political participation, and no one's right to monopolize truth or power. There must be an ironclad commitment to resist the temptation to use violence to shape the political environment. This includes security forces under government control, allied but plausibly deniable thugs, and flirtations with "uncontrollable" extremists.

Not enough is being done. Both the Islamist and the secularist sides are crystallizing in an increasingly polarized environment. Both need to work harder to advance democracy and accountability, rather than employing exclusionist words and behaviors that prevent the healthy development of societies. Neither "reform from above" nor "reform from below" is likely to succeed if these principles are not firmly adopted. If the new Arab order still insists on a winner-take-all approach and zero-sum outcomes, and if the principle of peaceful alternation of power does not become firmly entrenched, the second Arab Awakening will be for naught.

The Battle is Not against Islamists
As Islamists develop their economic and political programs, all other players must do the same. They must stop wasting their energies seeking ways to prevent an Islamist rise based on irrational fears of theocracy. It will do no good to pretend that Islamist parties do not enjoy broad popular support. Political Islam will not go away if Arab governments and the West ignore it. Repressing it through force will backfire. In a burgeoning democracy, Islamists have a right to be part of the process, and in any case they cannot be stopped from entering the political realm. Authoritarian regimes tried to exclude Islamists in the past, but the Arab public is clearly ready to move beyond the old exclusionary tactics.

Moreover, pushing Islamists out of the political process has historically resulted in cycles of violence and retaliation—a process that ultimately radicalizes the Islamists.

The focus should instead be on bringing them in while cementing constitutional guarantees for pluralism and the right to organize that can be upheld at all times and for all people. The issue is not trusting Islamists' intentions but rather building a system that treats everyone the same and protects everyone's inviolable right to be included.

One should not fear Islamist parties in the Middle East simply because they are based in religion. Europe has many Christian Democratic parties that are socially conservative but advocate liberal social and economic policies—not much different from many Muslim Brotherhood parties. Currently, eighteen of the 120 Israeli Knesset members belong to religious parties that typically possess hardline views on the peace process—again not dissimilar from Islamist parties in the Arab world. In other words, it is not the presence of religious parties that matters but whether they are committed to democracy, the peaceful rotation of power, and the protection of individual rights.

This call for religious parties to be included is not an argument in support of their views. Selective democracy is no democracy at all. All political forces need to understand that if they accept the exclusion of others, they accept that they too may be excluded.

Third Forces
More than two years after the Arab uprisings, clear leaders of the battle for pluralism have yet to emerge. While secular forces claim to be the bearers of this torch, the continued hesitation by many of them to accept the participation of Islamists belies this commitment. All attempts to create a new Arab order—by old regimes trying to reinvent themselves, Islamist forces taking power after decades of semi-repression, or third forces still struggling to develop clear programs and organizational capabilities—have stopped short of a categorical, unqualified, and genuine commitment to individual and minority rights and a rejection of force.

Operating in a region that lacks well-developed democratic practices, all political groups are suddenly forced to learn how to build their own constituencies while understanding that they cannot deny that right to others. To assume they will do so intuitively or immediately is wishful thinking. It is interesting to watch all forces in the Arab world today accusing others of exclusionist practices while employing the same type of exclusionist discourse. This was apparent in Egypt, where many secular forces acquiesced to the military's undemocratic practices because it served their short-term interests against the Islamists.

The change will have to play itself out, until political forces either suppress their opponents by coercion—and therefore achieve little from the second Arab Awakening—or realize that their own right to operate must include the same right for others, thereby resulting in pluralistic and stable societies.

It would be wrong to assume that these forces will take familiar forms or follow a predefined path. Moreover, the resulting institutions should not necessarily be modeled

on Western structures and processes. While some universal values transcend culture, different regions in the world have been able to evolve into pluralistic societies without necessarily adopting all of the details of Western models. Democracy as developed in the Arab world must contain features that are unique to that region, or it is not likely to survive. Many formulas will be tried as Arab countries embark on their transitions. Western countries must not assume that Arab democracies will be identical to theirs, or that they must blossom instantly.

To have any hope of reshaping their societies—regardless of what unique details this ultimately includes—third forces in the Arab world must be founded on three basic values: pluralism, reliance on peaceful means only, and inclusion. These three values are embedded in the uprisings and can be found in the language of many of the protesters. Among the reasons cited for wanting to topple regimes was a desire for a functioning, honest government with limited powers that would grant every citizen the right to political participation. Many protesters chanted *silmiyyah* (Peaceful!) and carried flowers, sometimes in the face of deadly snipers, as in Syria for the first few months of the uprising. The movements that toppled the regimes were visibly inclusive, placing national identity above all other considerations (at least during the initial euphoria prior to bringing down the leader). These three values contributed significantly to the success of the uprisings.

Pluralism

Pluralism can best be defined as the fundamental commitment to political diversity at all times. It means that no party has a monopoly on the truth and no party can impose its views on the rest of society. Such a commitment must include developing a system of checks and balances that redistributes power away from the executive and toward the legislative and judicial branches of government. Across the Arab world, the executive branch is too dominant, often with unelected and unaccountable institutions beholden to it. The intelligence services, for example, typically play a role in domestic affairs that far exceeds their security mandate. Any reform that does not end in true power sharing among the three branches of government cannot be deemed serious or successful.

To achieve a political space in which all are free to participate and none can monopolize the debate, these countries need protective constitutional mechanisms. They need a multiparty system, with majority rule but also one that protects or guarantees minority and personal rights; an independent judiciary; freedom of expression and of the press; the complete application of the rule of law; equality before the law and equal protection under the law for all citizens, regardless of gender, religion, ethnicity, or position; and serious respect for human rights. The protection of personal rights—such as freedom of worship, freedom of choice of clothing, right to privacy—is key. It would greatly allay the fears of not only the various Christian and Muslim groups but also secular Muslims

who do not want their freedom of choice to be compromised by Islamist parties seeking to impose their religious views. But no matter which constitutional mechanisms a country adopts, they will not be respected unless there is also a balance among the political forces—for example, the ability of different political forces to coexist.

The third forces belonging to the old generation are not off to a good start. Many of them have favored their short-term interests over democracy, and many have shown themselves to be little different from the other dominant forces in Arab societies. That many are liberal will not be enough if they are not also democratic.

Thus the potential torchbearers of a pluralistic culture appear to be the new generation. This is the generation that started the uprisings, even if it has not yet shaped the course of the revolutions to address its needs and aspirations. When I met in June 2012 with Ziad Ali, cofounder of the grassroots organization Masrena (Our Egypt), he seemed aware of the challenges. "We have to go through the learning process. It is not fair to judge this process harshly or quickly." But he also understood the priorities. "Our challenge is to build institutions quickly. The young are different from the old forces. We are coordinating very well. I assure you a critical mass is being built that believes in a better life for Egyptians, even if it is not in their lifetime. There is a paradigm shift in Egyptian society."

Ahmed Maher, another youth activist and a cofounder of the April 6 movement, mobilized young Egyptians through new technologies and social networking sites such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. He too was clear on the path forward. "We need to build third parties," he told me. "We are seen so far as a spark, not an alternative. The youth and the liberals are weak, not organized, and fighting each other. Our main plan is to use the next five years organizing. We want to build a grassroots movement first, then a party."

Such talk seems to dominate the speech of the new generation, but it is hardly present among the older ones. The youth are likely to plant the seeds of pluralism. The Arab world will have to wait for decades, however, before the democratic experiment matures and societies enjoy a pluralistic culture with a manageable number of political parties.

Peaceful Means

Pluralism cannot survive unless all parties concede that only the state can carry arms, in line with the German philosopher Max Weber's "monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force" theory. Actors such as Hamas, Hezbollah, and the various armed groups in Iraq must be fully disarmed and integrated into the political process in their own countries. Residual militias in Libya, Yemen, and Syria, despite winning popular support for opposing autocrats, must also disarm.

In May 2008, after the government ordered the shutdown of its telecommunications network, Hezbollah occupied West Beirut and effectively turned its weapons against

the Lebanese people for several days. The Arab-brokered deal to end the fighting in Lebanon bolstered the group's political strength by granting Hezbollah veto power in the parliament. Nevertheless, the episode had negative consequences for the movement on the Lebanese street. Hezbollah lost some credibility in the eyes of the public and, by resorting to violence, set the democratic process back in Lebanon.

By the same token, governments must resist the temptation to use armed force to serve a partisan agenda. The police, intelligence services, and army must be inviolably neutral and must see their role as guaranteeing access for all to the political arena. Recourse to external proxies must be rigorously eschewed. When the governments of Libya and Syria used military power to suppress largely peaceful demonstrations, they forfeited their legitimacy as rulers and in effect authorized armed resistance. The new Libyan government, and any new Syrian one, will have a very hard time disarming the militias that have emerged as a result of their civil wars. The reconciliation process will also suffer.

Under a government committed to peaceful processes, no party can substitute guns for the ballot box or use force to repair an electoral defeat.

Inclusion

The Arab world is a mosaic of ethnic and religious communities. These include Sunnis, Shiites, and other Muslim sects; Christians of all denominations; Jews; and others. Ethnically, they include Amazigh (Berbers), Arabs, Armenians, Chechens, Circassians, Kurds, and many smaller groups. While the Arab world prides itself on its diversity, its politics and culture do not match the rhetoric.

Rights of minorities—and often majorities—have been systematically subordinated to the power of the ruling elites. How else can one explain the repression of the Kurds in Iraq and Syria, or the Amazigh in North Africa? How can one justify the treatment of Shiites as second-class citizens, often accused of serving as Iranian agents, in Saudi Arabia or Bahrain, or the Copts under successive Egyptian regimes? How can one explain the legal discrimination against women? Such official discrimination makes its sufferers feel they are less than citizens and prompts them to seek outside protection.

Societies prosper only when their members recognize that not everyone thinks or behaves similarly—nor should they be expected to. Diversity of views and perspectives is a prerequisite to problem solving, scientific and economic innovation, and artistic creativity. An appreciation of different views is also an important factor in the development of domestic peace. Respect for diversity should be not only enshrined in Arab constitutions but codified in law and taught in educational institutions so that legal and cultural norms can harness the full potential of the different constituencies that form any Arab state.

The Arab uprisings demand that all regimes reconsider their policies toward the ethnic and religious constituencies that make up the Arab world. Inclusion is therefore a

core component not only of political pluralism but also of social, geographic, and political cohesion in the region. Arab governments cannot hope to build prosperous societies unless they treat the entire population as citizens, irrespective of their ethnic, religious, or gender differences. The discourse of the emerging third forces must advocate a society that regards diversity as a positive force. It should also include an unwavering position that women are full participants in society, with equal political and legal rights.

Even after they take these three values to heart, the emerging third forces will still face fundamental challenges as they navigate a transitional period that will last years, if not decades. Standing in the way of the hope for a successful second Arab Awakening are the two dominant forces—existing governments or elites, and Islamists. Despite their shared history of not embracing pluralism, these two forces will also need to fight for real change and diversity.

Inclusive Reform

In the past, reform in the Arab world was mostly nominal, imposed by the regime (often without consultation) and then hailed as a program that the bureaucracy could implement without question. More often than not, these regime-led reforms were insufficient, ad hoc, poorly communicated, and disingenuous. Without public participation, even the best intentions did not translate into effective programs.

These top-down reform projects have come in various guises. Some aimed at economic liberalization but were misleadingly called democratization efforts. They sometimes brought in dramatic economic changes and impressive growth, as happened in Tunisia and Egypt. But they did not alter the regimes' authoritarian character. They also lacked clear strategies for making growth more inclusive, so the economic benefits went largely to the business elite.

Other projects responded to social unrest and encompassed limited political reforms. For example, the National Action Charter of Bahrain, developed in 2001 in response to public demands for change, was written and implemented as a royal initiative without consultation with diverse social and political actors. Among the reforms were the creation of two parliamentary houses (one appointed and one elected) and the transformation of the country into a hereditary constitutional monarchy. In spite of their lofty stated goals, these programs delivered less-than-pluralizing reforms—the elected parliamentary house exercises no true legislative power, and the kingdom is not a real constitutional monarchy. The Bahraini public remains disillusioned and continues to demand change.

If reform projects concocted by the very leadership that needs reforming are to be seen as substantive and credible, they must adequately represent and empower all the major forces in society. When the military leaders in Egypt attempted to dictate the rules of the political game after Mubarak's fall, the rules were immediately rejected by the public.

Holistic Reform

Arab leaders have long argued that economic reform must precede political reform—so-called bread before freedom. Yet even when conducted in good faith, that strategy has failed to achieve either political or economic reform. Since necessary economic measures were carried out without the concomitant development of political oversight, abuses by economic actors went unchecked and unpunished. As a result, many economic reform programs benefited only a small elite. Even the potential economic impact of the reforms was hamstrung. It is difficult to encourage foreign investment if there is no independent press, parliament, or judicial system to address grievances and curtail corruption.

This means that a serious reform process must include political, economic, and cultural elements. It needs to be based on an understanding of how all aspects are linked so as to address these issues simultaneously.

Measurable Reform

Reform processes have often been long on promises and short on implementation. Clear performance indicators are necessary so that governments cannot get away with perfecting reform rhetoric without undertaking any reform.

At the Tunis Arab Summit in 2004, Arab leaders agreed on a reform document that reiterated their commitment, among other things, to "upholding justice and equality among all citizens; respecting human rights and the freedom of expression; ensuring the independence of the judiciary; pursuing the advancement of women in Arab society; acknowledging the role of civil society; and modernizing the education system." But they did not specify any performance indicators or evaluation mechanism to monitor progress. It is not surprising that these promises went largely unfulfilled.

None of the countries attempting a gradual reform process appear fully wedded to these principles. Reform from above in the Arab world is still moving too slowly—if at all—to keep up with the demands of a restless street. These regimes' commitment to pluralism has been largely rhetorical. They have not shied away from preaching inclusion to the Islamists while exercising exclusion. If these Arab regimes continue to ignore the urgent need for change, the street will catch up with them and they will have squandered the opportunity to lead their countries to stability and democracy.

Third forces have a critical role to play in helping their respective country's legitimate but increasingly contested rulers understand the urgency of engaging in this process. Regimes will have to abandon their sole dependency on their traditional constituencies, which are interested only in prolonging their own privileges, and shift alliances toward third forces as they become stronger and develop constituencies of their own. That requires the kind of farsightedness and calculated risk taking that Arab leaders so far have not shown.

Will Islamists Embrace Pluralism?

We can assume that, like all political forces, Islamists want to succeed. Whoever governs Arab countries will need to tackle tremendous political and economic problems. Islamists don't want to be blamed any more than other politicians for the mess. They know that they alone do not have economic answers and that jobs will not be created simply by repeating "Islam is the solution." Economic problem solving will come from detailed policies that encourage investment, attract tourism, create jobs, and reduce the public deficit.

Islamist parties need to offer such detailed proposals now. They have only recently turned their attention to these issues, so they will need to close the knowledge gap fast once they are partners—or leaders—in governments. They need to prove they can tackle such challenges effectively or they face being voted out. What they have offered so far are general platitudes that fall short of answering the huge problems facing their countries, all of which have been compounded by the loss of tourism, investment, and economic activity following the uprisings. Signs are also emerging that they may be making up for a lack of governing or economic experience by absorbing wholesale some of the bureaucratic and business elites from the old regimes, together with their practices.

If they want to be successful over the long term, the Islamists must practice what they preach. The emerging political systems in the Arab world must make it categorically clear that "no compulsion in religion" is not only a theological principle but also a political one. And whereas Islamic scholars may differ over whether this principle applies both ways in religion—meaning both to accepting Islam and to leaving it—there can be no such dispute in politics and governance. Arab societies cannot hope for constant renewal without a solid commitment to the peaceful rotation of power and the acceptance of the people's free will at all times.

Are Islamists embracing pluralism? While the positions of different Islamist parties in power today have evolved toward moderation, their commitment to pluralism is still less than categorical. Further, the rise of the Salafis, though they are still a minority in these countries, is alarming. Their commitment to political pluralism is clearly absent, and on the street they regularly employ violence. It remains to be seen whether the peaceful majority of political Islamist forces will confront these groups, appease them, or even seek to use them in the competition for votes. This is a moment of truth for Islamist parties migrating toward pluralism. If there is a fight over who speaks for Islam, it must be led by Islamists who stand against those who insist on monopolizing the truth.

The inclusion of Islamists in the political systems does not absolve them from their obligations. Religious forces have to reconcile their ideologies with the fact that they are now political parties. When the two conflict, say, on women's rights, will they treat women as equal citizens or let their interpretation of religion dictate inferior

treatment? They have not made this clear. The Muslim Brotherhood and at times even the Salafis have indicated their commitment to a civil state, but often with qualifications and without going into detail, leaving the impression that the promise is incomplete. Islamist forces want to win the public relations campaign to paint themselves as more pluralist than others, but their actions are not always convincing. Third forces in countries where Islamist parties have emerged can help by making it clear that they are for legitimate pluralism across the board and are not merely using popular terminology to exclude Islamists from the political arena.

Will Third Forces Rise to the Challenge?

Are the Arab world's two dominant forces redeemable? I have argued that both the "deep state" (the governing apparatus that is still in control, even where leaders have been overthrown) and the Islamists share one trait: a lack of a solid commitment to pluralism. It is possible that both might agree to an internal transformation in which they would moderate their views sufficiently to endorse democratic principles—possible, but unlikely. This is particularly true where regimes are still heavily invested in unaccountable, nontransparent systems. That they would endorse democracy and voluntarily agree to the peaceful rotation of power seems like a long shot. In most cases, they have lost the trust of their publics and face an uphill battle to regain it.

Islamists, on the other hand, are stymied to some degree by their intellectual proclivity for absolute, God-given truths and strict codes of personal behavior. Both the ruling elites and the Islamists have structured their organizations as compartmentalized, disciplined movements that were socially and economically self-sufficient, with membership often equating to a kind of fealty.

Perhaps hope still lies in the third forces, which at least have no record of abuse of power. They will have to go through a long, hard, disciplined process before they are able to not only challenge but hopefully assume power and contribute to a pluralistic society. Arab publics regard democracy as the best form of government, and they understand what the concept means. Most people in the Arab world do not want theocratic states; their vote for Islamists has been based on performance rather than on ideology. It follows, then, that Arab publics want their societies to be pluralistic, but they have not been able to evolve the proper political structures to achieve these objectives. Third forces will have to do just that.

History is our guiding light on what is transpiring in today's Arab Awakenings. I write not out of a romantic connection to the region, but rather out of a firm conviction that the battle of ideas has finally started to unfold in the contemporary Arab world. It is a battle that will be won only by those who are ready to toil and sweat to get their point of view acknowledged. Some emerging political forces, frustrated by not being able to

build national organizations and political programs, may advocate undemocratic means, as they have already, to stem the tide of Islamists. They, too, will fade.

The Arab world will go through a period of turmoil in which exclusionist forces will attempt to dominate the landscape with absolute truths and new dictatorships. These forces will also fade, because in the end, exclusionist, authoritarian discourses cannot answer the people's need for a better quality of life—economically, politically, culturally, and otherwise. As history has demonstrated overwhelmingly, where there is respect for diversity, there is prosperity. Contrary to what Arab societies have been taught for decades by their governments to believe—that tolerance, acceptance of different points of view, and critical thinking are destructive to national unity and economic growth—experience proves that societies cannot keep renewing themselves and thereby thrive except through diversity. Neither the theological Iranian model of *velayat-y faqih* nor the secular, authoritarian model of the Hosni Mubarak regime in Egypt has succeeded in solving the region's economic, political, or cultural challenges.

But this realization will not come automatically, or quickly. The Arab world will witness many attempts by religious and secular forces to dominate the emerging landscapes in this region. Mistakes will be made, and there will be more struggles. The realization that salvation will come through diversity, coexistence, and a new mind-set that finally recognizes the beauty—and strength—of differences will not be automatic. It will require dedicated and sustained work on the ground for decades to come. It needs generations of believers to articulate such views, to build a sense of true citizenship, and to develop innovative and indigenous mechanisms for protecting that Arab citizenship, alongside programs that address people's needs, all the while embracing inclusive discourses and defending different outlooks.

This task is not for the fainthearted or those whom I consider to be the "true" romantics—individuals who are too quick to give up if democracy does not emerge overnight, or if their lifestyles are not guaranteed without them rolling up their sleeves. This job will require leadership, vision, and, most important, decades of hard work. There are no shortcuts to democracy or prosperity.

The second Arab Awakening has just begun, and the end may not be known in this generation's lifetime. But this is a battle worth waging and winning—the battle for pluralism across the Arab world.

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