Egypt and the Challenges of Democracy

Tariq Ramadan, HH Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al-Thani Professor of Contemporary Islamic Studies, Oriental Institute, Oxford

INTRODUCTION

The 'Arab Spring' is often defined broadly as a series of revolutions taking place across North Africa and the Middle East. However, they are more accurately understood as a set of uprisings. This is not to diminish their importance as defining moments in the history of the region. Indeed, despite the setbacks experienced in recent months – especially in Syria – these uprisings have fostered a new mindset in the socio-political consciousness of the region. People are now aware that together they may challenge the status quo and shake the authority of dictators. No matter what unfolds in the coming years, this is an achievement.

PEOPLE POWER

When we speak of the uprisings, we need not refer to Islam or to Christianity. The movement was not an Islamist uprising, but an uprising of citizens calling for 1) respect for their dignity, 2) freedom and justice, and 3) the removal of dictatorships and corruption.

Islamists did not start the uprisings, but over time they have organised themselves into the main opposition to dictatorship, basing their legitimacy (in contrast to secularist opposition) on their grassroots structure and historical precedence. Egypt's problem is that it is much easier to achieve unity in protest against a common dictatorial enemy than it is to rebuild a country around common principles. What then are the prospects for democracy in Egypt?

DEBATING DEMOCRACY: THE CHALLENGES AHEAD

The future of Egypt as a country and the prospects for democracy are crystallised in the debate about the nature of the state. This is not, however, a political debate only. Segregating political discussions about the nature of the State from questions of social justice and economic stability is wrong. There will be no democracy in the Middle East if there is no economic stability. Economic failure fragments society, which in turn leads to sectarian divisions and power struggles from within.

It is also important to understand the history of these debates. The principles of democracy have existed in the region for a long time, but it was only in the 1980s that specific use of the word was made (by the Islamist groups). For decades prior, the Muslim Brotherhood understood democracy to be an imported colonial ideology. As a result, they avoided using democratic language, even if they accepted the principles. Though the Muslim Brotherhood held that Islamic *shūrā* and democracy represented two different concepts, they acknowledged that in principle the two agreed. These democratic principles are 1) the rule of law, 2) equal rights, 3) accountability, 4) universal suffrage, 5) the separation of powers (executive, judiciary and legislative), and 6) the separation of authority (religious authority and mandated government authority).

This begs an important question: are these principles rooted in common human rationality or are they from God? Secularists strongly disputed any possible agreement between Islam and democratic principles. Does *sharī'a* not mean that unless you are Muslim you are a second-class citizen? If so, is *sharī'a* really then in agreement with democratic principles? The popular Islamist slogan *Islām dīn wa dawla* (Islam is religion and state) captures the heart of the discussion: if this slogan is true, what does it mean for equal rights and citizenship in an Islamic state?

In answering this question, it is helpful to distinguish between models and principles. Models do not come from principles, but from culture and history, and we have as many models of democracy as we have democratic countries. Models of democracy should not trump principles, but their development must be in harmony with the historical and cultural narratives of the specific country.

Six months after the January 2011 uprising, the Turkish prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, visited Egypt. He encouraged Egyptians not to fear the secular model, and argued that it was possible to shift from an Islamic State, where *sharī'a* is the *exclusive* reference, to a civic state with *sharī'a* as *a* reference. It was, in essence, a choice to pursue either an Iranian model or a Turkish one. Egyptians must work out a model of democracy that does not undermine the values of their religious faith; society cannot ask people to respect and live by principles that they believe are fundamentally against their religious affiliations. However, the model cannot violate democratic principles in the name of culture or religion. The discussion must continue until the people, models, and principles can be reconciled with the nation's history and culture.

There are three important further challenges that must be faced if Egypt is to embrace democracy.

(1) *Corruption*: No democracy can exist with corruption, where people are using power and authority to undermine the very essence of what democracy represents. This is prevalent in the Middle East and must be discussed.

(2) *Education*: There will be no democracy in the Middle East if there is no reform in the educational system. Education is central to the democratic process because democracy requires the country to have thinking, autonomous citizens. Educational reform must empower women, giving them access to the job market. We may talk about a democratic state, but such talk is meaningless unless education is seen as a matter of social justice.

(3) *Pluralism:* For Muslim, Coptic, and secularist Egyptians to see each other as *equal citizens of one nation*, there must a compelling common narrative, formed not through principles and rights, but through arts and culture. What is missing today in the Arab world is a celebration of the imagination, of arts, of literature, and of creativity. Those who would champion democracy must prioritise the arts and imagination because democracy has to do with feelings and with loyalties. One feels like a true citizen when people share a loyalty to the common narrative.

I hope that Egyptians at every level will confront these challenges and begin to find common solutions as they seek to establish a true democracy in their nation.