

When Western PC meets Arab democracy

The complications that accompany secular democracy in Middle East nations presents Western spectators with a difficult moral dilemma.

By Shlomo Avineri | Sep. 20, 2013 | 2:00 AM | 2

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One reason the West is having difficulty understanding what's happening now in the Arab world is its Eurocentric approach and its efforts to evaluate events using concepts and occurrences that characterized European historical development. When events in the Middle East refuse to fit into this Procrustean bed, the West is often left helpless in its cluelessness.

This lack of understanding is particularly evident with regard to the concept of secularism, which is of major importance given the rise of Islamist elements following the downfall of tyrannical regimes – as happened in Tunisia and Egypt – and given the complex struggle in Syria.

Throughout Western history, the processes of secularization were linked to the legacy of the Enlightenment heritage and went hand in hand with liberalization and democratization. In the Arab and Muslim worlds, however, the picture is completely different. There, secularization in the Middle East stemmed from the efforts of authoritarian rulers to copy Western models of secularism and impose them by force on traditional Muslim societies. Mustafa Kemal Ataturk in Turkey and the Shah in Iran saw the forcing of secularism onto traditional Muslim society as an integral part of their projects to modernize their nations.

Despite the differences between the two, both Ataturk and the Shah tried to forcibly uproot religious customs and institutions. For example, men were forbidden to wear turbans and women to wear veils. European styles of dress were imposed, and the educational system – a powerful tool in the modernization process – was characterized by secular content and didn't allow Islam any foothold in the state schools. In Turkey's case, replacing Arabic script with Latin script was aimed at cutting off the Turks not just from their Ottoman history but also from their link to Muslim holy writings.

But as demonstrated by the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the rise of Recep Tayyip Erdogan's party to power in Turkey, over time this forced secularization generated very broad popular opposition and brought to power, with popular support, Islamist elements that opposed secular coercion.

In the Arab world secularization was also an integral part of the modernization processes under military dictatorships. Former Egyptian presidents Gamal Abdel Nasser and Hosni Mubarak oppressed the Muslim Brotherhood, each in his own way, and saw a republican government backed by the military as the best guarantee for maintaining the secular nature of the regime and the public square. Saddam Hussein in Iraq and the Assads in Syria, who placed secularization at the center of the Ba'ath ideology that characterized their regimes, imposed secularism more brutally.

Of course it is no coincidence that Saddam represented the Sunni minority in Iraq, which has a Shiite majority, while the Assad family relies on the Alawite minority in Syria, which has a Sunni majority. "Secularism" was a convenient ideological cover for maintaining regimes that in both countries represented a religious minority. But one cannot ignore the content these regimes poured into their rule beyond this veil. It turns out that tyranny and secularism can coexist.

As a result, what preserved the status of Iraq's Christians was actually Saddam's tyrannical regime, while in Syria, President Bashar Assad argues - quite rightly - that his regime was what protected the Christians, and to some extent the Druze, from oppression by the Sunni majority. It is also no coincidence that Saddam's foreign minister, Tariq Aziz, was a Christian, as is Walid Muallem, the foreign minister of the Assad regime; these were not merely token appointments, but reflect a much deeper reality. It has also emerged in recent weeks that the large Coptic Christian minority in Egypt sees the military regime that ousted elected President Mohamed Morsi as the only barrier against the Muslim Brotherhood's fundamentalist rule.

In other words, contrary to what happened in the West, in the Middle East secularism is associated with oppressive tyranny, and democratic processes - as in Turkey or Egypt - or partially democratic ones, as in Iran, bring religious extremists to power.

This complex situation presents Western political correctness with a moral dilemma. Western political narrative usually refers to political struggles in binary terms, as a struggle between tyranny and democracy, between secularism and benighted religion, between the forces of light and darkness. Obviously, even in the West the reality is more complicated, but there is no doubt that for historical reasons, in the Arab world the struggle is not between good and evil, because the forces of darkness are on both sides, as Moshe Arens, with whom I generally disagree, wrote recently in this newspaper ("Stay out of Syria," September 3).

That's why it's so hard for the West to deal with what's going on in Egypt. After all, it's clear that the military staged a coup against the elected president; the point is that the democratically elected president represented an antidemocratic and fundamentalist worldview, which is why much of Egypt's secular liberal elite, as well as its Coptic minority, found itself supporting the generals.

In Syria the situation is even more complicated: A substantial proportion of the refugees who have fled Syria are Christians, just as Iraq lost almost half of its Christian population after the fall of Saddam. It's not easy for Christians in Syria to support the horrific Assad regime, but for them the alternative is undoubtedly worse. This, by the way, is also one of the reasons the Russians are supporting Assad. At issue for Moscow are not just strategic and geopolitical considerations, but also the fear of the possible consequences of a radical Islamist victory in Syria for the domestic reality in Russia, where close to 20 percent of the population is Muslim (mostly Sunnis).

This complexity of tyrannical secular regimes alongside Islamic fundamentalism also explains why it is so hard to hope that the current upheavals will lead to democratization and the formation of a liberal democratic regime in any Arab country. The mistake being made by commentators, thinkers and Western statesmen who want to see the Arab world as a mirror of political developments in Europe is indicative of a provincial, Eurocentric bigotry that seeks to shape the world in Europe's image. It turns out that the notion of the "white man's burden" has a liberal version, a less-than-legitimate heir of traditional European imperialism.