

COMMENTARY

No. 43

Friday, 4 May 2012

Response to the Rise of Islamists: Fear Mongering is Counterproductive

Hussein Solomon

University of the Free State, South Africa

Following the Arab Spring which has so convulsed the Middle East, Islamists have emerged on top in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. Understandably, there are fears in the West as to the rise of “the bearded ones.” There is good reason to fear. In Egypt, for instance, there has been a rise in attacks on Coptic Christians and the supply of gas to Israel has stopped. Islamists in Tunisia have called for the death of the owner of an independent television channel, which broadcast a film that they did not like. Tunisian President Moncef Marzouki rightly declared these Salafists as a “threat to democracy.” The calls for Sharia law by Islamists also reinforce Western fears of the establishment of hard-line Islamist regimes across the Middle East.

However, the situation is far more nuanced than we may believe. In the first instance, as Graham Fuller has abundantly made clear – the Islamists themselves are deeply divided – between ultra-conservative Salafis, more moderate Muslim Brothers, a smaller segment of liberal Islamists – all in competition. Even this breakdown is problematic given the inter-generational conflicts amongst Islamists in the various countries.

Second, Islamists have rapidly come to understand the political game. In Egypt, for instance, ultra-conservative Salafis who vilify secularism have reached a political compromise with liberal parties to form a minority coalition against fellow Islamists in the Muslim Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice Party in an effort to prevent them from having a near monopoly on power. In Tunisia, similar calculations are at play. Rachid Ghannouchi, the leader of the Islamist

Ennahda party recently stated, *“When you want people to come together, you have to be in the centre.”* Should the West not assist in a policy of critical engagement with the Ghannouchi’s to find the centre between liberalism and Islamism as opposed to a dead-end policy of fear mongering?

Increasingly, the Ennahda leader is displaying statesmanship of the highest degree. Following a call by an Islamist cleric for the murder of Tunisian Jews, Ghannouchi immediately distanced his organization from the call and made a public show of meeting with Jewish leaders. Another example of Ghannouchi’s statesmanship was where he supported excluding Islamic law from Tunisia’s constitution. I believe this also to be an Islamic position, especially when one considers the Quranic verse 2:98 which states that there can be no coercion in religious affairs. After all, if one uses coercion to get people into mosque or compel citizens to fast during the holy month of Ramadan one is undermining faith. Faith arises from a willing submission to the will of the Almighty.

Third, whilst there have been fears of what constitutes Sharia law, Ziya Meral cogently argues, *“... that there is no inherent reason to think that the principles of Sharia set out in the Quran and the life of the prophet contradict today’s legal and political ideals. The dynamic evolution of laws and regulations across Muslim-majority countries over the last 30 years attest that Sharia is highly adaptable and capable of meeting modern legal, social and economic needs. New interpretations and applications of Sharia are enabling Muslims to live freely according to their consciences within the realities of this century.”* What is problematic is not Sharia itself but its interpretation by leaders to achieve power with claims of being Islam’s sole standard-bearers. Again, a strategy of engagement as opposed to disengagement is needed – an engagement which would strengthen more inclusive conceptions of Sharia which would be compatible with liberal democracy.

Fourth, there is the politics of delivery. Islamists have been lucky to have a good reputation of criticizing the totalitarian despots in power whilst engaging in socio-economic activities to alleviate the lot of the ordinary citizens through their welfare programmes. They did not have to shoulder the burden of office. This has now changed. Having been voted into office, Islamists are compelled to deal with daunting policy problems to fix their neglected societies. Anti-US or anti-Israeli rhetoric cannot replace policies and resources to fix problems of unemployment amongst the youth or the crumbling health services in their respective countries. Whilst Tunisia’s Salafists might well bemoan the scantily clad tourists visiting their beaches, they do need those tourists’ dollars. In other words, the Islamists would have to compromise and moderate their positions if they want to maintain popular support. In Egypt, too, signs of moderation are evident. Whilst the Muslim Brotherhood has vowed never to recognize Israel, its deputy chairman asserted: *“We have announced clearly that we as Egyptians will abide by the commitments made by the*

Egyptian government ... They are all linked to institutions and not individuals.” Presumably, this also includes the 1978 Camp David Accords between Egypt and Israel.

Whilst there are certain dangers associated with critically engaging with these Islamist movements, the alternative is far more dangerous. Michael Hirsh forcefully makes this point when he noted that “... *the United States will either have to deal constructively with organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood, or it will find itself increasingly marginalized and irrelevant in the region.*”

The author is Senior Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of the Free State, South Africa. Email: hussein.solomon@gmail.com

As part of its editorial policy, the MEI@ND standardizes spelling and date formats to make the text uniformly accessible and stylistically consistent. The views expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views/positions of the MEI@ND. Editor, MEI@ND: P R Kumaraswamy