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PERSPECTIVE

Is Turkey the Next Arab Spring?

By Dr Emmanuel Navon

The Arab Spring may not have arrived in Turkey just yet, but recent protests and demonstrations clearly indicate that Erdoğan's government must rethink its autocratic ways

This question is a double oxymoron because there never was an 'Arab Spring' and because Turkey is not an Arab country. The expression 'Arab Spring' was coined after the 'Spring of Nations,' a revolt against European monarchs that spread throughout Europe in 1848. I haven't been able to track down the journalist who came up with the expression 'Arab Spring', but he or she is either very ignorant or very knowledgeable about European history. Why? Because the European 'Spring of Nations' collapsed within a year, and did not bring freedom to Europe. Karl Marx believed that 1848 was the first wave of a proletarian revolution; in fact, it was followed by decades of flourishing capitalism. So either the author of the 'Arab Spring' expression mistakenly thought that the 'Spring of Nations' replaced tyrants by democracies, or he already knew two years ago that the revolts in the Arab world were not going to bring freedom and democracy to North Africa and the Middle-East.

Arab World after the Spring

What does the Arab world look like after the so-called 'Arab Spring'? In Syria, the civil war has caused about 100,000 deaths and millions of refugees. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists won a majority in Parliament. The elected President, Mohamed Morsi, is a Muslim Brother (as those lines are being written, Morsi's rule is being challenged by mass demonstrations and the Egyptian army). Islamists also won a majority in elections held in Tunisia and Morocco. So saying that the Arab world is not embracing democracy and liberalism is an understatement. From Morocco to Iraq, people who have been given an opportunity to elect their leaders have consistently and overwhelmingly chosen Islamic parties.

In the Middle East, political Islam has been chosen by non-Arabs as well. The Iranians brought down their pro-Western monarchy for an Islamic regime in 1979. And in Turkey, the Islamic Justice and Development Party won the 2002 elections. It has been in power ever since.

Understanding Two Diverse Value Systems

The same way that the 'Arab Spring' is a European expression, today's Middle-East is basically a European creation. Before World War I, the Middle-East was dominated by the Ottoman Empire. The Empire was multinational and multilingual, but Islam was a common denominator in terms of allegiance and identity. The Arabic word 'Ummah' means altogether 'community' and 'nation', but it is commonly used to designate Islam as a nation and not only as a religion. Under the Ottoman Empire, Middle-Easterners considered themselves part of the 'Ummah'. In their mind, there was no difference between nation and religion, but there was also no difference between politics and religion.

In Christianity, there is a distinction between the divine and the political authority ("Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's" says the Book of Matthew). In Western democracies, political authority belongs to the state alone – as German sociologist Max Weber put it, the state has a monopoly over legitimate violence. Religious authority only applies to individuals, who can either accept it or reject it. No such distinction exists in Islam.

Until the First World War, those two different value systems lived separately and were rarely at peace with each other. There were many wars between the Ottoman Empire and the European powers, and whoever won imposed his values and his political system. There were wars here and there, but World War I dealt a final blow to the Ottoman Empire. Britain and France broke the Ottoman Empire apart and then shared the dowry. They created and imposed new and artificial national entities such as Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine – entities that did not exist under Ottoman rule. Libya was invented by the Italian Ministry of Colonial Affairs in December 1932. Historically, Cyrenaica in the east was part of Egypt, while Tripolitania in the west was part of Tunisia.

Birth of New Nations

The Islamic 'Ummah' was replaced by the European nation-state model. Except that in this new Middle-East, these were nation-states without nations. Or, to be precise, there was an Arab nation divided between artificial states or mandates. Other Middle Eastern nations were vying for their own and separate nation-states: the Persians, the Turks, and the Jews.

Turkey, so to speak, became more catholic than the pope. It's first post-World War I leader, Ataturk, remodelled his country as a European nation state. Most significantly, Ataturk adopted the Western model of separation between state and religion. The Soviet threat justified Ataturk's alliance with the United States and Turkey's membership in NATO.

Post-Cold War Scenario

In 1979, the Iranian revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan had the effect of uniting more and more Muslims against the United States and Soviet Union. So when the Cold War ended ten years later, pro-American Muslim leaders had to explain an alliance that was no longer justified by the Soviet threat. Why side with America now that the Soviets were defeated?

The Islamists had an answer to that question: there was no reason. With the end of the Cold War, Islamists claimed that America was supporting corrupt dictators to subjugate the once glorious 'Ummah' to US interests. No wonder Islamists have systematically won all elections held in countries formerly ruled by Western-backed leaders.

Turkey's Transformation and Turmoil

This is also true of Turkey. During the Cold War, it was a strong US ally. In 2002, Islamists came to power for the first time. The new Islamic Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan made a point of rejecting America's request to invade Iraq from the North via Turkey. He became a hero overnight in the Muslim world. Once a pro-Western secular republic, Erdoğan's Turkey now symbolised Islamic pride and nostalgia for the Ottoman Empire.

Except that Erdoğan's conservative, if not reactionary, social agenda is now being challenged by Turkey's liberals and secularists who feel that their freedom is being threatened. They have good reasons to be concerned. During his first term, Erdoğan tried to criminalise adultery. More recently, he imposed restrictions on the sale of alcohol, and introduced mandatory Koran classes in primary schools. There are more jailed journalists in Turkey than in any other country. The fact that Erdoğan has called the social media (especially Tweeter) "the greatest scourge to befall society", and has claimed that anyone who drinks alcohol is an alcoholic, is an indication of the wide gap between his Islamic conservatism and Turkey's younger generation.

In addition, Erdoğan has staffed the army, judiciary, and media with people faithful to his Islamic Party – thus neutralising counter-powers and intimidating those challenging his rule. When protests erupted, Erdoğan brushed them off by saying he has won three elections. This statement goes to show that Erdoğan does not seem to understand that democracy is not only about the rule of the majority. It is also about citizens' basic rights, about independent courts to enforce them, and about free media to monitor them. Turks are protesting because they feel that Erdoğan's autocratic and dismissive of his critics. By calling protestors terrorists and foreign agents, and by silencing them with tear gas and water cannons, Erdoğan has proved his point. By contrast, Brazil's President Dilma Rousseff has insisted that demonstrators have a right to protest and has paid attention to their grievances.

For Turkey to become a true democracy, it will have to undo Erdoğan's assault on civil rights, judiciary's independence and freedom of press. Otherwise, Erdoğan will embolden those who claim that the very idea of 'Muslim democracy' is an oxymoron.

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