

Conference, Symposium, and Panel Reports

Islamic Political Thought after the Arab Spring

On December 7, 2012, Ermin Sinanovic (assistant professor, Department of Political Science, United States Naval Academy, Annapolis, MD) presented his “Islamic Political Thought after the Arab Spring,” at the headquarters of the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT; Herndon, VA). After opening with several questions – How have the events in the Middle East and Arab world influenced and continued to shape Islamic political thought? Why did the Arab Spring happen now? What were the contributing factors? How is Islamic political thought being reshaped by these events? – he began to make his case that the underlying political theory of the Arab Spring represents something new in Islamic political thought.

One of his contentions is that traditional Islamic political thought is now seen as out of date, as caught up in the past. This situation began to change first among the Shi‘ah and was instrumental in Iran’s revolution. The Arab Spring has accelerated this reawakening among the Sunnis, which began in the 1970s, thereby showing that Islamic political thought was no longer static. But because this uprising is still so recent and ongoing, scholars are still trying to make sense of it and thus all conclusions up to this point remain tentative.

In historical terms, Islamic and other forms of political thought developed through abstract theorizing and ideal archetypes, as well as through actual practice (viz., trial and error). The aftermath of the Arab Spring will produce new insights and developments, for such things are a normal part of implementing a given theory. What adjustments need to be made will become clearer over time, as was the case with democracy in the United States.

As this region-wide rebellion against what had been the status quo is not happening in a vacuum and remains ongoing, there is a great deal of second guessing. Thus the “law of unintended consequences” is also in play. For example, the parties involved are making normative commitments. Whether they are serious or not is an entirely different matter, but their true attitudes will be-

come clear in the future. What is important today is that they are establishing a paper trail and record to which their adherents will hold them. Thus even if they are not sincere today, they may be forced to keep their promises because the negative consequences of not doing so would be considerable. And, quite naturally, none of them wants to become irrelevant.

Sinanovic then focused on classical Sunni political thought that, grounded in the memory of the political chaos of the first two centuries, demanded that all subjects render complete obedience and loyalty to the ruler and allowed rebellion only in very rare circumstances. This view was also based on hadiths asserting that the people should tolerate their rulers' excesses because such things are part and parcel of political reality. What matters are order and stability, for they allow the society to function smoothly. Other Sunni trends emphasized justice and virtue, which led to a certain tension between justice and piety/religious identity (cited by Ibn Taymiyya). In essence, justice was held to be more important than belief because justice affects everybody, while Islam is just a personal belief.

Such hadiths are reappearing today, among them the historically largely ignored "The best form of jihad is to speak truth to an unjust ruler." Hamza is being cited as a person who spoke truth to power. Moreover, the idea of what constitutes an "acceptable" status quo has changed. Now, the *fitnah* caused by dictators is considered greater than the *fitnah* caused by rebellion. Now that the right to dissent has entered the lexicon of Sunni political thought, the classical understanding has been eclipsed. Even al-Azhar has approved of demonstrations as well as free and direct voting (which represents the Islamic idea of *shūrā*), approved of a constitution and the separation of powers, the ruler being bound by a constitutional framework, and other contemporary western political practices.

Many Salafis have abandoned their traditional opposition to western-style democracy after many years of asserting that it is nothing short of *shirk* and *kufr*. Those who had supported Mubarak, as did al-Azhar, began to change their minds as the revolution unfolded. This represents a fundamental shift for them. The Muslim Brotherhood even went so far as to form a political party: the Freedom and Justice Party. It remains unclear if this organization really accepts electoral democracy for the long haul, but its leaders have made statements that they cannot retract. Despite the different definitions of democracy that exist, all participants in the electoral process have accepted the basics and cannot go back. Clearly the ongoing discourse of basic rights and freedoms, the people's right to elect/choose their leaders, and establishing democracy within the framework of the Shari'ah is something totally new for them.

Another departure from classical Sunni political theory is who will have the final say. Traditionally this belonged to the *khalīfah* (president). But now Parliament is becoming far more important because it can limit the president's power. And then there is the emergence of the *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*. This is not a new approach, for it was practiced even in the days of Muhammad, but its principles were only really systematized by al-Shatibi (d. 1388), who remained largely unknown until his works began to be published during the 1880s. It reappeared in the 1920 with the Tunisian scholar Ibn 'Ashur (1879-1973) and more recently with IIIT, which has done a great deal to bring it into the political discourse. Traditionally the *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* were geared toward achieving five objectives, each of which has three levels. For example, the Shari'ah does not ban alcohol for no reason; rather, it aims to protect a person's dignity and mind or to avoid/resolve the social problems associated with intoxication. Ibn 'Ashur added a sixth element: freedom. The fact that the *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* has transcended the legal/jurisprudential sphere and has entered the political discourse is also something new.

Sinanovic maintains that these new developments are addressing the traditional blind spots in Sunni political theory. They are not expounding the classical tradition, but are challenging it. He sees hope for a Sunni/Shi'ah reconciliation and believes that Sunni thought and Shi'ah revolutionary thinking are moving closer in some aspects. Could we be, he wondered at the end of his presentation, seeing the beginning of post-Sunni Islam?

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