The Awakening of Muslim Democracy: Religion, Modernity, and the State

Jocelyn Cesari (senior fellow at Georgetown University's Berkly Center; director, Islam in World Politics program), teaches contemporary Islam at the Harvard Divinity School and directs its Gerogetown-based interfaculty "Islam in the West" program. On March 3 at the IIIT headquarters in Herndon, VA, she elaborated on the topics discussed in her latest book: *The Awakening of Muslim Democracy: Religion, Modernity, and the State* (Cambridge University Press: 2014). She explained that this book was based on three years of research on state-Islam relations in Egypt, Turkey, Iraq, Pakistan, and Tunisia.

She began her talk by saying that she was interested in "broadening out the concept of political Islam," which had existed before the now well-known movements and parties in the Muslim world. The key moment in this regard was the building of nation-states in Turkey, Egypt, Tunisia, Iraq (under Saddam Hussein), and Pakistan. She pointed out how the West was enthusiastic about Arab Spring, which brought both men and women into the streets without signs proclaiming "Islam" in a "bizarre" manner of protest.

She maintained that political Islam cannot be limited only to secularism and the state, for the former, especially in Europe, is supposed to engender the decline of religiosity, the movement of religion to the private sphere, and the separation of religion and state. But all of this is unique to the West because India, the oft-proclaimed world's "largest democracy," is officially secular despite its pervasive Hinduism. She wondered why the West cannot see Islam in the same way. And, moreover, why does the last century of the very western approaches of secularization and modernization have to determine what happens in the Muslim world?

Political Islam did not start with Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, but rather during the last period of the Ottoman Empire. Initially it was more a response than a reaction to the West, one characterized by pan-Islamism and pan-Arabism, the latter of which was based on common linguistic and cultural

bonds, as opposed to just Islam. Kemal Ataturk and Muhammad Ali Jinnah had no interest in making Islam the center of their new nation-states. The turning point came when Paris and London allied themselves with the indigenous political elites, who subsequently adopted the western view of the nation-state, one element of which was that religion was not considered a major link for cohesion.

Various grassroots and religious groups, especially in North Africa, resisted this idea on the grounds that colonialism threatened Muslim identity. For example, in 1870 Paris gave Algerian Jews full nationality and citizenship; however, Algerian Muslims could become citizens only by renouncing the Shari'ah. Paris, more than London, also tried to transform its subjects' identity.

The colonial rulers understood that they needed to mobilize Muslims in order to create a nation. She noted that America was an exception in this regard, for it was a state before it became a nation. Thus imperial Europe destroyed the independence of pre-modern Islamic thinking and tradition (e.g., multiple legal schools and pluralism), which had been characterized by financially independent religious scholars as well as education provided by the legal schools' universities, mosques, and waqfs, by transferring them to the government. This nationalization of Islam continued under the indigenous westernized elites who succeeded their colonial masters upon independence. Only Senegal and Indonesia did not follow this path.

In Turkey, Ataturk nationalized Islam by turning clerics into civil servants. Turkey and other Muslim-majority countries now link being "national" with being "Muslim." Saddam built his religious legitimacy on the Sunni minority, which made the country's ayatollas symbols of resistance. He created sectarianism, not Washington. Cesari then related that under Saddam, everything "started" with the nation-state, for the past had been "erased."

According to her, Islam does not need to be "reformed"; rather, it needs to return to what had always been: a force of truly independent thought. The modern state defines Islamic tradition and then sets about nationalizing and finally politicizing it. Within the context of globalization, this raises an important issue: "Where do you go when you want to learn of Islam?" Today, 80% of such people go to online Wahhabi sites; however, Wahhabism has removed the hadiths and tradition from their context because traditional Islam was "complex." Very interesting material is coming out of Iran, which drew the state and Shi'i hierarchy together. As a result, some Iranian intellectuals have begun calling for them to be disentangled so that Islam itself can be "saved."

She then questioned the applicability of the western, especially the American, paradigm to the Muslim world. For one thing, the United States separates the state and religion; but India, which has gained the distinction of being "the world's largest democracy," can somehow be both secular and religious. Senegal, a Muslim-majority country, is a democracy and its first president was Christian. In addition, America has built the "morality of its public space upon religious norms," whereas Europe built it public space "against religion." This is why American (and Muslim) leaders are held up as examples of morality, which is definitely not the case in Europe.

She mentioned that al-Azhar issued a "bill of rights" for women two years ago, a document that she distributes to her students to show that there is a non-Salafi viewpoint out there on women. In her words, women are limited in the public space not on the grounds of individual rights (e.g., citizenship, elections, employment) but of their person: their family role and the body. In a democracy inspired by religion, "you don't do anything that you want with your body." The issue of sexual emancipation is a major issue for young Muslims, according to those in the West whom she interviewed, as is how they see themselves.

Muslims and westerners have a different view of morality in the public space and how to deal with issues related to the "empowerment of the person" or "limiting the rights of the self." This is not a matter of being "illiberal," a term she tries to avoid because it "shuts off the whole agenda or repertoire of human rights," but rather "a new way of regulating relations in the public space." This can be seen in the abortion and contraception debates in the United States and Latin America. As all such elements are intertwined, political Islam is not automatically anti-democratic or intolerant on all levels. Nor does this mean that the Muslim world will follow the western secular paradigm. After all, things are in constant flux.

Cesari concluded her talk by stating that modern history has shown that modernization does not solve the problems. In fact, the Muslim world has already gone through this process, for building the nation-state is a modern project. But the outcome has been different than it was in the West. Thus Muslims should focus on creating independent ways of thinking about Islam and the common good, not only the state. This is a major challenge for them, and something that the West cannot "do" for them. That the current approach to Islam is largely a-historical, even among Muslims, is yet another serious problem.

The following points were made during the Q&A session:
• Democracy, secularism, and modernity go hand-in hand. The West's understanding of this project is wrong, for it was not the result of the people

(bottom up) as it was the result of authoritarian rulers (top down). Thus it was modernization without democratization No Muslim country, except Senegal and Indonesia, have ever attained secularism, which is defined as the "capacity for all religious groups to exist in some space" and to have their existence protected by law.

- The Muslim world's existing ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and other diversities are not reflected in the political landscape.
- Muslims, especially Muslim women, are grappling with the issue of "how we want to be seen without being seen as backward." Limiting religion to belief, which is also related to belonging and behavior, is a western Christian-specific development that cannot be exported. This reality is where the tensions are happening. The West has separated behavior from belief, whereas many Muslim mix belief, behavior, and belonging and cannot imagine separating them from each other. Particularly for young Muslims living in the West, behavior and belonging are major issues.

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