



WINNERS AND LOSERS IN THE ARAB AWAKENING

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On January 25, 2012, one year has passed since the protests began on Cairo's Tahrir Square. Events in the Middle East and North Africa over the past year have altered many previously held beliefs about the political dynamics of the region, and it is still difficult to assess the full meaning of the Arab awakening. But as the dust begins to settle, it is possible to perceive the direction in which these post-revolutionary states are headed. While in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt, dictators have been deposed and in two of these states elections have been held, there is little progress toward true democracy. Indeed, it is becoming increasingly clear that the Arab awakening has created winners and losers. Paradoxically, the losers include both the liberal forces who spearheaded the revolutions, and the deposed dictators; the winners are the Islamist forces, who contributed little to the overthrow of the old regimes but certainly are reaping the benefits of their demise.

Many have expressed great optimism about the future of Tunisia, the birthplace of the “Arab Spring.” In the year after the ousting of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, elections have been held in the North African country and new governing institutions are beginning to form. So far so good, but under the surface of these structures are strong tensions between the country’s Islamist and more secular forces, and there are indications that the former will prevail over the latter. The winner of the Tunisian elections turned out to be Islamist Ennahda Party, seizing 37 percent of the votes. While Ennahda has been praised for joining a coalition with two of the more liberal parties, CPR (9 percent) and Ettakatol (7 percent), the balance of power is overwhelmingly in favor of the Islamists, which have appointed its leader, Hamadi Jebali, to the powerful post of prime minister.

In recent months, Tunisia has had indications of the sort of clashes the country will have to face in the aftermath of the Jasmine Revolution. In December 2011, thousands of Islamist and secular protesters gathered in Tunis in a dispute over the role of Islam in society. While Islamists demanded segregation of the sexes at universities and the right for women to wear a full-face veil in class, seculars claimed their rivals were attempting to impose Islamic rule in what used to be considered one of the most liberal Arab states, particularly

in terms of women’s rights. While Ennahda is generally viewed as relatively moderate Islamic movement, Jebali’s statement announcing the arrival of the “sixth caliphate” provides a frightening preview into the future of Tunisian politics, unless the liberal forces show more unity and determination, and succeed in mobilizing a societal counter-force to the Islamists.

Libya experienced a far more violent and dramatic revolution than neighboring Tunisia, prompting external military intervention. However, the interest of the international community has faded since the death of former leader Muammar Qaddafi, even though the country has recently seen incessant violent clashes between the militias which fought to depose the dictator. At the same time, statements by National Transition Council (NTC) chairman Mustafa Abdul Jalil are indicative of intentions to steer the country towards strict Islamic rule. Only days after Qaddafi’s killing, Jalil announced the adoption of Islamic Sharia as the main source of law. Libyan marriage laws, for instance, will be revised to permit the previously banned institution of polygamy. Women are not the only group to be disadvantaged by the new rule, however. Libya’s Berber minority, making up 10 percent of the population, recently took to the streets in protest of the lack of representation of the group in the transitional parliament, despite the claim by NTC that the body “repre-



sents the entire Libyan population.”

Of all the countries experiencing regime change this year, Egypt is attracting most of the world’s attention. The largest Arab country by population, and traditionally the leader of the Arab world, the political development in Egypt is of great importance for the rest of the Middle East and for the West. In the parliamentary elections, the Muslim Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), gained 47 percent of the seats in parliament; the second largest force is the Salafist Al-Nour Party, with 25 percent. By contrast, the liberal Egyptian bloc and Wafd parties only received nine percent each. Thus, over 70 percent of the seats in Egypt’s parliament went to Islamist forces – none of which are moderate. Indeed, the fact that a quarter of the parliament is composed of ultra-Orthodox Salafis sent shockwaves across the region.

These results will have great implications for Egyptian domestic and foreign policy. Most directly, they benefit the Muslim Brotherhood’s image. Many analysts have indeed drawn the conclusion that the FJP are moderate next to the Salafists, yet this is nothing but an illusion. The Brotherhood’s political wing has announced that they are now officially allied with the Palestinian terror group Hamas – long known as the Palestinian wing of the Brotherhood – and furthermore, that they will “under no circumstances” recognize Israel as the state is considered “an occupying criminal enemy.” At a recent Brotherhood rally in Cairo, representatives of the organization announced that “one day we will kill all the Jews” and “Tel Aviv, judgment day has come.” A parliament led by the FJP is therefore likely to take a hostile stance towards Israel, something that is certain to be detrimental to regional security.

The country’s women and minorities also have cause for concern in the new Egypt. In December the Al-Nour Party announced that a Christian candidate for the presidency would be unacceptable, as “Egyp-

tian society is not fit to accept a Coptic president.” The Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights has also reported that both FJP and Al-Nour have coerced women at polling stations into voting for their parties. Moreover, the women’s rights group A Safe World for Women has claimed that “the swing towards Islamism in the Arab Spring is deeply disturbing for liberal Egyptian women who see the country’s election captured by religious parties that could strangle women’s rights.” No women were invited to join a committee preparing amendments to the constitution.

It is also important to take into account the interests and intentions of the different political actors. The future of Egyptian politics depends not only on how the FJP will relate to the Al-Nour Party, but also on its relations with the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), which still holds executive control over the country. If the FJP manages to successfully balance between the more radical Al-Nour and the pragmatic SCAF by making concessions to the Salafists while proving to the SCAF that they are separate from these, the Brotherhood’s party will be able to remain the central force in the forming of the new government and constitution.

The situation in other Arab states is none the more uplifting. In Yemen, militants with connections to al-Qaeda are taking advantage of the unrest by attempting to establish an Islamic state in the south of the country. The group has already taken over most of the Abyan province, and recently seized the town of Radda, 105 miles south of capital Sana’a. Syrian Islamists are likely to use the current uprising in their country for similar purposes. In Algeria, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) has expressed its hopes for the Arab awakening to reach their country as well, in an aspiration to bring about the sort of Islamic revival their neighbors have seen over the past year.

The autocratic despots of the old Tunisian, Libyan and Egyptian regimes are gone – exiled, dead or im-



prisoned. In this sense, the Arab awakening has been successful, and can truly be referred to as a watershed event. But while a strong message has been sent to dictators around the world, and preconditions for democracy may have been created, the holding of elections should not be confused with the emergence of liberal or constitutional democracy. Indeed, true democratization requires the developments of institutions of checks and balances limiting the power of the government, as well as rule of law, the protection of minorities and of the equality of citizens irrespective of gender, ethnicity or religion.

Such institutions are far from being established in any of the post-revolutionary states, and the past year has hardly seen progress on this front. Instead, it is increasingly evident that political Islam has hijacked the Arab awakening at the expense of the liberal forces that initiated the protests. It is possible that the West overrated the democratic forces that fought to liberate Arab

countries from the autocratic and corrupt regimes, and underestimate to what degree the Islamist forces are the most well-organized and deep-rooted in these societies. Indeed, wherever given the opportunity, pluralities or majorities chose to cast their vote in favor of Islamist parties whose ideals are anything but democratic. Unfortunately, the ones who will suffer the most from this development are women as well as minorities who today stand without protection from the state.

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