

Conference, Symposium, and Panel Reports

Religious Dimensions of Democratization Processes in Muslim-Majority Nations

The 41st AMSS annual conference, held on 29 September 2012 at Yale Divinity School, brought together scholars and activists to address “Religious Dimensions of Democratization Processes in Muslim-Majority Nations.” The event, consisting of four panels and Juan R. I. Cole’s (University of Michigan) very anticipated keynote luncheon address, was co-sponsored by the Yale Divinity School and the Council on Middle East Studies at The MacMillian Center at Yale. Several luminaries in the field, including Ambassador Sallama Shaker (conference program chair, Yale Divinity School), also attended. Gregory E. Sterling (dean, Yale Divinity School) opened the conference, and Ali A. Mazrui (former AMSS president, State University of New York) made welcoming remarks.

The first panel, “The Arab Spring: A Revolution towards Democracy,” was chaired by Narges Erami (Yale University). In his opening paper, “The Arab Spring and Democratization in Sub-Saharan Africa: Which Is Cause and Which Is Effect?,” Mazrui examined political processes, recent uprisings, and longer-term democratic trends in South Africa, Tunisia, Egypt, Sudan, and Yemen. He raised questions of chronology and causality, as well as how processes of colonialism and decolonization shaped contemporary political landscapes. After examining the concept of democratic contagion, he observed how democratic processes that occurred in many African nations during the twentieth century could serve as models for how to enshrine human rights and an independent judiciary in new constitutions. His paper ended with a detailed discussion of women’s contributions to shaping and buttressing a vibrant public sphere, the positive effects of which can be seen particularly strongly in Tunisia.

Ermin Sinanovic’s (United States Naval Academy) “Islamic Political Thought after the Arab Spring” presented a stimulating account of Sunni political thought post-Arab Spring by probing how the scholarly class’ responses

constitute new developments in Islamic political thought. He proposed that the current stage could be described as “post-Sunni Islam,” in the sense that the specific legal injunctions of particular schools of religious thought are less of a focus among the religious and scholarly elite; rather, it is appeals to higher injunctions (e.g., public order, justice, and accountability) that are forming the theoretical underpinnings of a new religio-political reasoning centered on the *maqāṣid al-Sharī‘ah*.

Furthermore, he elaborated on how parliamentary politics are attracting more attention, for political actors are showing signs of favoring legislative over executive power. According to Sinanovic, the concept of political obedience is also changing as scholars find new ways and outlets to participate, organize, and stay relevant in post-uprising political processes. For example, Salafis and other groups are overwhelmingly choosing to participate in the electoral process and affirming a constitutional state, which is a departure from pre-uprising Salafī discourses. In tracing these new developments, the speaker observed that even if certain discourses are being generated for the sake of political expediency, they nevertheless have unintended consequences and irrevocable purchase.

Continuing the rich discussion, Thomas Uthup’s (United Nations Alliance of Civilizations) “Towards a Sustainable Arab Spring: Locating Liberal Values in Islam” explored how post-liberal values (e.g., social justice, equity, tolerance, diversity, and pluralism) are theologically grounded within the Islamic tradition. He called upon scholars, public intellectuals, researchers, and private donors to support studies related to pluralism and various models of democracy; develop user- and tech-friendly mediums to promote cross-cultural dialogue; continue developing content and pedagogy for expanding and enhancing education on Islamic civilizations; and find proactive and salient ways to counterbalance the harmful rhetoric of Islamophobia. Discussant Jonathan Wyrzten (Yale University) probed the geographical, synchronic, episodic, and contingent dimensions of democracy and fleshed out how the trajectory of colonialism, decolonialism, post-colonialism, and imperialism has affected the ways westerners frame and understand the uprisings in the African and Arab regions.

In the equally provocative second session, “Religion, Politics, and Economics: Developing a Consensus Paradigm,” Meriem El Haitami (Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdellah University) presented “Morocco’s State-Sponsored Women Religious Guides (*Murshidāt*) and Scholars (*‘Ālimāt*): Reconceptualizing Female Religious Authority and Activism in Contemporary Morocco.” In it, she explored the strength and nuances of the country’s nationalist inter-

pretation of Islam, including the particular contributions made by state and grassroots women's movements. Haitami provided an excellent account of the contributions made by the state-appointed female religious authorities who provide religious instruction and spiritual counseling to a broad segment of the populous and, in so doing, forge novel forms of religious activism that seek social reform by cultivating individual piety.

In another informative paper, "Authoritarianism in Bahrain: Motives, Methods, and Challenges," Nabil Husayn (Princeton University) considered why Arab regimes in the Gulf have proved so resilient to democratization and have withstood secularism as well as other decentralizing influences. Providing a nuanced history of the sociopolitical, demographic, and religious factors that contribute to maintaining an authoritarian regime, he demonstrated how the ideological and the coercive apparatus work in tandem to repress the local Shi'i-majority population. Nabil (Bill) Mikhail (George Washington University), who spoke on "The Role of Al Azhar and the Coptic Church in Post-Mubarak Egypt," compared the roles and historical interactions of these two institutions as two ancient yet diverse and dynamic entities attempting to merge tradition and modernity in meaningful ways, while simultaneously acting as mediators between the government and their religious constituencies. The panel was chaired by Ambassador Shaker, and Yousef Casewit (Yale University) served as discussant.

The discussions continued as attendees enjoyed a luncheon buffet while listening to Cole's keynote Ismail Raji a-Faruqi Memorial Lecture, "The Arab Spring and Democracy." Taking his audience on a provocative tour through the landscape of modern and contemporary Middle Eastern political history, from the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood to the Wahhabist swell, the Iranian clerical establishment, Salafis of various persuasions, and to the Islamists' electoral successes, Cole provided a range of insights on the roles of religious coalitions in interrogating, implementing, and resisting popular sovereignty and parliamentary democracy. As he highlighted, Islamist movements in Tunisia, Turkey, Egypt, and elsewhere have met with success by spinning off civil political parties from religious organizations. Whereas throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries both secularists and religionists demonstrated a strong authoritarian inflection to their politics, this trend has recently been vigorously challenged by often loosely formed coalitions of pro-democracy sympathizers with left-of-center youth constituting the frontlines, if not the ranks, of the newly formed governments.

The third panel, "Moving beyond the Arab Spring: Challenges to Democracy, Identity, Social Justice, and Freedom in the Arab World," was chaired

by Muhammad Aziz (Yale University), with Joseph Cumming (Yale University) serving as discussant. Mubarak Awad (American University) spoke on “Challenges to Democracy and Justice in the Arab World,” and Christian L. M. Watkins (Yale Divinity School) followed with “Political Islam and the Egyptian Awakening: Re-Imagining Political Identity, Media Narratives, and the Future of Democracy.” Awad considered aspects of how the various Arab uprisings were played out on the ground as well as interpreted through the vantage point of western media. Specifically, he critically examined the notion that Islam is not compatible with democracy, taken by some as a truism, and showed how this particular idea serves imperial interests better than it represents local realities. Watkins examined how secular discourses of nationalism in Egypt have also served to delineate the nature and rhetoric of Islamist actors.

The fourth panel, “Confrontation, Reconciliation, and Empowerment,” was chaired by Muchit Bilici (John Jay College of Criminal Justice) and featured Frank Griffel (Yale University) as discussant. This panel was kicked-off by Celene Ayat Lizzio’s (Brandeis University) “Gender and Personal Status Law in the MENA Region: Between Secular-Liberal and Islamists Visions,” which analyzed gender-based activism and efforts at personal status law reform at the national level across North Africa and the Middle East. She stated that gender-based reforms initiatives have, in keeping with the region’s historic trends, fared better under authoritarian regimes than what early indicators suggest of their fate in the new democracies. Further enriching the discussion, Sumaiya Hamdani (George Mason University) used her “Conceptualizing the Rest: Political Islam and Historical Precedents for Minority/Majority Relations” to point out Isma‘ili precedents to provide a framework for incorporating Muslim-minority and non-Muslims into Muslim polities in ways that foster communal integrity rather than sectarian hegemony. Instead of a paradigm that governs minorities on a principle of separate and unequal, she pointed to the model of governance developed by the Fatimid Isma‘ilis for translating the Imam’s religious clout into a practicable political authority.

The panel concluded with Shenila Khoja-Moolji’s (Columbia University) insightful and reflective “Interrogating ‘Empowering’ Knowledges: Critical Reflections on Human Rights Education in Pakistan,” which thoroughly examined the construction of Muslim girlhoods by development organizations and activists in Pakistan and beyond. Based on her experiences in local human rights education camps for girls, Khoja-Moolji argued that the power dynamics involved in constructing, teaching, and advocating for girls’ empowerment

must take careful account of the ideological and perhaps unintended effects of such intervention projects on their lives, wellbeing, and local networks. In the weeks following this conference, the relevance of her analysis was made even more potent by the Taliban's near-fatal attack on teenage female rights advocate Malala Yousafzai, who at the time of this writing is reported to be recovering in a British hospital.

In all, the excellent turnout among Yale faculty and students, junior and senior scholars in the field from across the country, a number of activists and United Nations representatives, as well as long-standing and newer AMSS members, made for a highly enriching event that is sure to endender further discursive ripples in the months to come.

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