

LSE Government Department

The HotSeat Videocast

Professor John Sidel discussing the role of religion in the Egyptian revolution.
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Ariane Sparks: Hi. I'm Ariane Sparks. Welcome to the HotSeat. With us today to discuss the role of religion in the recent political unrest in Egypt is Professor John Sidel. Thanks for being with us, John.

Professor John Sidel: Thank you.

Ariane Sparks: There have been some fears, particularly in the West, that Mubarak will be replaced by a more Islamist regime. Do you think these fears are justified?

Professor John Sidel: Well, I think these fears, in some measure, might represent a certain kind of Islamophobia. There might be concerns about what you might find in a Muslim democracy in which 80 million Muslims get to choose their own leaders. There might be concern about an Islamic revolution as you saw in Iran in the late 1970's but there also might be concern about how a democracy in which Islam has more strength and power over policy perhaps might promote a certain set of policies in terms of women, social issues, homosexuality, minority rights for the Coptic Christian minority in Egypt and lastly, perhaps under the rubric of concerns about an Islamist government are really concerns about Egypt's policy toward Israel and Egypt's involvement in the siege in Gaza in particular. So when people express these concerns it might be worth recalling that under that rubric there might be some specific concerns. So to answer your question, it seems to me there is little evidence of anything along the lines of an Islamic revolution unfolding in Egypt similar to what happened in Iran in the late 1970's. First of all, in terms of a real revolution, it doesn't seem, for better or worse, that the army is beginning to collapse, which was an element of the Shah's fall in the Iranian revolution so it isn't a revolution in that sense. It seems like what might happen, what hopefully will happen, is there will be a transition to democracy, elections, perhaps in September if not earlier and that's the so-called revolution we would see. Secondly, the leadership of the protests in the streets, the discourse being used, the idiom of protest, the organisations involved, the networks of people, are not predominantly Islamist or relying on Islam as an idiom of protest as they did in the 1970's in Iran. So in terms of an Islamic revolution, that's not on the horizon. What I think people are specifically worried about and repeatedly flagging in the media is the possibility of the Muslim Brotherhood gaining increasing power, if not, dominating electoral politics and thus parliament and perhaps even the presidency directly or indirectly in Egypt. The Muslim Brotherhood has done reasonably well for an opposition grouping when it has been allowed to participate in elections even under conditions of very restricted competition and a lot of advantages for the ruling party. So I think it is fair to say that the Muslim Brotherhood may win 20% of the vote, some say maybe 30% of the vote, but we don't know because, in point of fact, elections haven't been free and fair and judging from what we've seen in the streets and from what we know about the Muslim Brotherhood and what we've seen in a variety of other

countries, under conditions of genuine open electoral competition, Islamist parties don't do very well; they don't win majorities unless they transform themselves radically.

Ariane Sparks: Can you tell us about the Muslim Brotherhood and what role they are playing in Egypt right now?

Professor John Sidel: The Muslim Brotherhood was founded in the late 1920's by a man named Hassan Albana. It was an organisation that was founded by a man who was a school teacher and was finding himself increasingly disappointed, dismayed, distressed by the inroads of secularism, by Christian missionary activity and by the transformations of Egyptian life in the 1920's in terms of the Islamic precepts that he had grown up with and how they were being violated or ignored amidst great social change. So he began preaching and organising in the coffee shops among workers and lower class, middle class people and organising dahwas, sort of preaching sessions, proselytizing efforts to revive people's sense of the faith in the 1920's. And over successive decades, the Muslim Brotherhood evolved from those sorts of efforts into a broader network within Egypt and beyond of associational activity, famously sponsoring clinics and various kinds of localised, social welfare activities, especially among the urban poor. Overwhelmingly, especially in recent decades, the Muslim Brotherhood has been an association with a middle class constituency and has a very strong influence among the professional syndicates of lawyers, engineers, doctors and accountants and the like in Egypt's major cities so it's an urban, middle class movement that is committed to the promotion of an Islamic way of life in which, in various ways, has seen Islam, as they say in their slogan, Islam is the solution, or as a guiding idiom and a framework for understanding solutions to various kinds of problems in Egyptian society.

Ariane Sparks: There has been a lot of cooperation between Muslims and Christians during the protests. Will Egyptians build on this cooperation or do you think the religious tensions will resurface?

Professor John Sidel: Well, I think if you look at Egypt in a broader comparative context it is comparable to other countries, Indonesia for example, where you have a small but important non-Muslim minority, the Coptic Christians in Egypt with seven million or so are about ten percent of the population and there have been, quite recently, occasional terrorist bombings and other incidents of violence and tension under authoritarian rule so what would a democratic opening mean? Would it mean more likelihood of persecution or difficulty for a minority, especially if the Muslim Brotherhood had increasing influence over government policy. I think the Muslim Brotherhood to date has shifted in it's public statements from 15 years ago or so in terms of openly, assiduously articulating a strong commitment to protecting the rights and being concerned for the rights of the Coptic minority and saying no, we were wrong once upon a time to say that Copts could not be president of Egypt, could not serve in the highest ranks of the military and so forth. So I think in terms of those sorts of pronouncements and understandings there has been a decided shift. I also think the historical record for other democracies is pretty clear. If you look at a country like Indonesia, the small ethnic Chinese minority that is overwhelmingly non-Muslim has

done much better under democracy than under authoritarian rule. In a variety of other settings, this notion that a sort of pariah, entrepreneurial religious or ethnic minority would effectively be protected by an authoritarian regime and then rendered vulnerable by democracy ignores both the predatory nature of the authoritarian regime and how they manipulate and prey upon that minority. But also how under conditions of elections, except under certain very specific local conditions of competition and rivalry on a local level often, the tendency is for such issues to be sublimated under a larger logic of machine politics or other sorts of issues in which the mileage to be gained by going after the Copts is really minimal. I think those sorts of fears which you can see in certain kinds of email, websites, blogspot and newspaper postings, I think they are exaggerated. I certainly hope they are.

Ariane Sparks: What are the regional implications of the unrest in Egypt?

Professor John Sidel: The regional implications are potentially important but indeterminate at this stage. The Mubarak government has been well known as an important ally of the United States and Israel over the past few decades. And in addition, in recent years, playing a crucial role assisting Israel and the United States in creating an effective siege on Gaza to prevent Hamas from accumulating arms and logistical support for attacks on Israel and effectively maintaining a siege on Gaza to punish the population for voting in Hamas in the first place. In so far as Hamas is really a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood that emerged out of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood once can see in Egypt that the sympathy is for Hamas and the possibilities of people wanting to change that policy might really be there under democratic conditions that would challenge the existing policies. On the other hand, it's worth noting two things. First of all, there are many democracies across the world where the military and the intelligence community still enjoy prerogatives over foreign policy and the levers that the United States might try to use to promote continuity in this policy, even under democratic auspices, might be considerable. The other thing is we could look at Turkey where you see a party in power today that we might describe as having an Islamist background and orientation but which has remained effectively an American and Israeli ally despite a kind of shift in the tone and style of the relationship. So I think even under a scenario, which takes some imagination to envisage, in which the Muslim Brotherhood, in particular, has more power and is part of some kind of government or effects policy directly or indirectly there is no guarantee of a dramatic shift in policy. But certainly with democratisation in the Middle East, and in Egypt in particular, the United States and Israel should be on notice that, in fact, they have to take into account the wishes, preferences and beliefs of ordinary people in a region that has been overwhelmingly authoritarian in which the wishes of ordinary people have been ignored for so long.

Ariane Sparks: Alright, we'll leave it there. Professor John Sidel, you are off the HotSeat. Thank you for being with us. And thank you for being with us. Please tune in next month for our next edition of the HotSeat.