

Conference, Symposium, and Panel Reports

Reflections on the Aftermath of the Arab Spring

On November 18, 2014, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, founder and board member, IIIT; leader of the Malaysian opposition; and former deputy prime minister of Malaysia, shared his “Reflections on the Aftermath of the Arab Spring” with the general public at the IIIT headquarters in Herndon, VA.

He opened with “O you who believe! Obey Allah and obey the Apostle and those in authority from among you” (Q. 4:59), which he considers one of the Qur’an’s “most used and abused verses.” In addition to being used to support democracy, it is abused by many others to demand the masses’ support for dictators, authoritarian, and military junta rule regardless of how they are treated. This verse also highlights an issue that has rocked the Arab world ever since December 17, 2010, when Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire to protest the continued abuse and harassment inflicted upon him by the Tunisian police force: the issue of governmental legitimacy, which is a problem in both the West and the Muslim world. Anwar stated that the government must represent a majority consensus, respect some process (e.g., democracy), and allow people the freedom of expression so that they can express their support, disgust, or opposition.

The Arabs’ demand for legitimate governance has been on the mind of IIIT as well, for its leaders have spent the last decade addressing this concern from the point of view of the *maqāṣid*. Anwar traced this concern back to a long-ago meeting when several of the IIIT founders were discussing why there was no Muslim equivalent of the “Western canon,” the “Great Books,” a “great intellectual tradition.” This was the start of an ongoing process to fill this gap in contemporary Muslim literature.

The outbreak of Arab Spring clearly revealed that there is still a need to deal with ethics in governance, for lasting reform can only be actualized in the form of systems. The ongoing abuse, corruption, repression, and brutality inflicted upon the people by their own leaders is, according to him, something

“shameful”: “The context of the atrocities inflicted upon by the masses was shocking.” The entire upheaval was unanticipated and unexpected. Moreover, the “experts” said that it would not spread beyond Tunisia for they were completely unaware of the pervasive nature of Arab demands and expectations that finally took the form of “a movement against decades of oppressive rule.”

There was great hope that this uprising would succeed in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. However, such expectations turned out to be unrealistic because these countries were basically bankrupt. In addition, the Islamists had only theoretical ideas of how to rule – ideas that quickly turned out to be both simplistic and unrealistic. As frustration grew rapidly due to the new governments’ inability to pay salaries, no help was forthcoming from Turkey and Qatar, the most sympathetic nations. Even worse, most of the Arab governments did not want Tunisia and Egypt to succeed.

On the whole, Anwar considers the Arab Spring a catastrophe for the Arab world in terms of the numbers killed and destruction caused, which he claimed was even worse than what had occurred during the anti-colonial struggles because now it was the countries destroying themselves. Another factor was the West’s, especially the United States, failure to develop a firm policy toward Syria and ISIS. In effect, Washington’s “policy of ambivalence” allowed Bashar al-Assad to consolidate and strengthen his position. One major criticism of all of this was the assertion that the West claims to “want to support democracy, the rule of law, and freedom,” but then sends troops to occupy Iraq, support the overthrow of a democratically elected leader, and support the new Egyptian dictator Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Seeing such inconsistency, the region has no idea of what to expect or whom to believe.

Anwar then asked what Muslims can learn from all of this. First, according to him, is that Muslims will only continue to be relevant if they become inclusive. In other words, Islamist groups and individuals cannot just remain a *da‘wah* organization; they need to join together with others to pursue common goals. Second, there is a need for more literature on applied ethics in governance and other national systems to ensure social justice and that the people’s legitimate demands are met. Arabs also need to look at the experiences of non-Arab Muslim nations such as Pakistan (under Muhammad Ali Jinnah), who understood the importance of negotiation; Indonesia’s peaceful transition from the Suharto dictatorship to a functioning democracy; and Turkey’s successful campaign to get the army to return to the barracks.

He spent time talking about Indonesia, which, despite the fact of being the world’s most populous Islamic state, refuses to declare itself an Islamic state;

rather, it developed the idea of Pancasila (i.e., the “Five Principles”: belief in the one and only God, just and civilized humanity, the unity of Indonesia, democracy guided by the inner wisdom in the unanimity arising out of deliberations among representatives, and social justice for all the people of Indonesia). He praised this high degree of inclusivity, for even though Indonesia is 90 percent Muslim a serious attempt was made to consult and deal with the non-Muslim’s concerns and issues right from the outset. The lack of a similar degree of inclusivity was a major reason why the Muslim Brotherhood failed in its attempt to rule Egypt and made so many enemies.

Speaking on ISIS, Anwar maintained that its creation and existence is partly due to the failure of particular western and regional governments as well as the region’s numerous western-supported rotten dictators and corrupt/illegitimate leaders.

He concluded his lecture with several points:

- Of all the Arab Spring countries, only Tunisia seems to be succeeding.
- Joko Widodo, Indonesia’s new president, has to contend with many ulema who remain uncertain of his commitment to Islam, a very strong parliament comprised of 60 percent members of the opposition parties, and a powerful party president (former president Megawati Sukarnoputri) who may have different ideas.
- The Arabs should study how Jusuf Habibie, Indonesia’s first post-Suharto president, managed the country’s peaceful transition from a dictatorship to a democracy, for this achievement remains unique in the Muslim world. For example, on the first day he freed all political prisoners and later went on to implement a whole series of freedoms for individuals and newly formed political parties.
- There is also a need to reduce combative rhetoric, for it serves no useful purpose. Rather, Muslims need to understand history and respect the non-Muslims’ viewpoints.

During the Q&A session, he made a couple of other points, among them the following:

- The Arab Spring has been temporarily hijacked by the rise of ISIS. However, the struggle is far from over for none of the underlying causes have changed.
- The new leaders were making promises without having any idea of what processes and interests come into play when running a country. Unfortunately, one result of living under a dictatorship is that those who eventually come to power have had no chance to learn how to govern. It will be many years, most likely decades, before they can move beyond their theories,

gain the necessary experience and negotiating skills, and realize that they cannot achieve all of the goals (or promises) at once.

- What is needed is “constructive intervention” instead of more constructive engagement. ASEAN must realize that its member countries cannot keep on killing people, especially the Rohingya (Burma/Myanmar) and Muslims in Pattani, the southern Philippines, and Aceh. The true problems, underdevelopment and marginalization, cannot be resolved by military force; rather, one must stand up and say “The killing must stop!” and then devise realistic and fair solutions to the existing problems. It does not matter who is being killed – Muslim or non-Muslim – just stop the killing.
- There is a dearth of understanding among Muslims about what the *maqāṣid* are all about. As a result, dictators can turn minor details into national issues in order to deflect attention from their own corruption, abuse of power, and similar issues.
- A major problem is that Islam is being taught in a very narrow-minded fashion. Although a lot of work has been done to correct this, much more remains to be done.
- The Muslim Brotherhood and similar groups must become more flexible and learn how to adapt to existing and new situations to govern the country. They have to find a way to remove the military from the corridors of power, be patient and practice restraint in order to achieve their goals, become humble enough to admit that they need to help to govern because they do not know everything, and need to show more compassion.
- Freedom of speech is fundamental. The ulema often view this idea as a challenge to their power, which has inflicted a great deal of harm upon the Muslim world in the past, such as fatwas forbidding printing presses and computers. Such intolerance and self-righteousness must be changed if the Muslim world is to democratize.

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