

# Arab Spring: Islam in the Political Revolution and Middle Eastern Development

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## Abstract

The social movements that were present during the Arab Spring have caused political upheaval in Middle Eastern countries. Starting from Tunisia, the revolution spread to neighboring countries namely Egypt, Libya, and Syria. Present in the midst of a prominent Islamic religion and culture, the aim of the revolution is to bring democracy into the government systems of countries that have long been in an autocracy system, but so far democracy with Islam has often been considered incompatible with each other, especially in countries with values deep-rooted Islamic values. This article focuses on the use of Islamic values in the global civil society movement that takes place in the Arab Spring. Reviewing the revolution in a macro, the main argument of the author is that the Arab Spring became a phase which brought Islam a certain degree of flexibility towards democracy and brought democracy to the Arab world. This article generates the conclusion that the trigger for the revolution was not due to religious matters, the demonstrators who joined were not one hundred percent Muslim, and the issue demanded was not related to the religious life of the people, but that Islam, whether its values or religious practices, could not be separated in organizing the masses during the revolution.

**Keywords:** Arab Spring, Islam, democracy, social movements



## A. INTRODUCTION

The self-immolation incident of Mohammed Bouazizi, a Tunisian fruit trader, before the court of the Regional Council Office Sidi Bouzid sparked the biggest wave of democracy in the Middle East. For months, demonstrators demanded an end to the regime which had long ruled and was considered corrupt. Protests that continue to this day in several countries continue to challenge Western perspectives on the Middle East. The social movements present in this revolution are closely related to the presence of religious values. Islamic groups in the Middle East incorporate the values of beliefs, rituals, and religious practices in carrying out the revolution in a forum of social movements. Many opinions regarding the relationship between religion and politics in the Arab Spring. On one hand, Arab Spring exists as a phenomenon driven by secular liberal groups who want democracy, not theocracy. On the other hand, demonstration groups gather in crowded centers, demanding the decline of the ruling regime, with religious lectures as motivation and a mosque as a gathering place for demonstrators before taking to the streets. In early 2011, protests and riots spread to almost all Arab countries. The protests were 'cross-border' in nature, even the participants involved came from various ideologies. Regional mobilization is no longer directed against external enemies such as Israel or the United States, but rather to voice concerns over the situation in Arabia itself, creating its own solidarity from various circles. Thousands of

demonstrators killed in fighting for the fall of an autocratic government will fall like dominoes. This article tries to explain the role of religion in protests in Arabic which were passed down through social movements. Reviewing the background of the problems that have been presented, this article seeks to answer the question of how are Islamic values included in social movement organizations in the Middle East? To what extent has Islam become one of the processes that shaped social movement solidarity in the Arab revolution? And how do these movements answer the doubts of Western groups over the compatibility of Islam with democracy?

## **B. METHOD**

This research is a type of descriptive research that uses literature to get data, and then analyzed based on the theoretical basis used to frame the analyzed data. The theoretical foundation used is religion and behavior, as well as Islamism and social movements.

## **C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Religion and Political Behavior**

Religion can be one of the factors that motivates and unites demonstrators. Understanding in religion can reduce the risks arising from collective action carried out because of increasing individual trust with other members in social movements. Communal religious practices become easier media than individual behavior to promote demands in protest actions because the mechanism in religion is social capital to organize a movement (Hoffman & Jamal 2013: 6). To increase this social capital, communal religious groups become important organizers in shaping the political behavior of a group. Johnston & Figa (1998: 33) state that there are many variants regarding how religion plays a role in the processes of opposition. This difference was also expressed by Durkheim who distinguished "belief" and "ritual" by writing that religious phenomena naturally divided into two categories: belief and ritual. Beliefs contain opinions and representations, while rituals are actions carried out in certain beliefs. Loveland (in Hoffman & Jamal 2013: 6) also found that prayer accelerates cognitive connections to one's needs which are then manifested in religious choices. Religion, therefore, greatly influences political mobilization and protest behavior in various ways by various means.

The path through which religion moves the group can be classified as follows. First, religion presents social capital and trust, which can reduce the risks that may arise in holding joint actions. Religious institutions fulfill the social capital. Individual religiosity can be added value in increasing group trust in collective action carried out. Secondly, the mechanism implemented also involved political mobilization, "from the mosque to the field". The mosque is a vehicle for political mobilization because: not only

does the mosque create a participatory structure, it also equips participants with organizational needs to participate in collective action. Finally, religion provides social justice mechanisms and creates compliance for individuals regarding the concepts of justice and equality (Durkheim in Hoffman & Jamal 2013: 8).

### **Islamism and social movements**

Islam became part of social movements through ideology (Hatem 2012: 6). This is known as Islamism. Islamism is a modern phenomenon in Islamic groups around the world that describes political and social expression whose purpose is to integrate Islam in politics, state affairs, economics, and law (Chamki 2013: 4). The most accurate definition is presented by Mohammad Ayoob who explains Islamism as an instrumentalization of Islam by individuals, groups and organizations to achieve political goals. Islamic politics makes Islam more viewed as a politics of contemporary ideology than as religion or theology. The Arab Revolution illustrates how Islam has become more influential than before. Reform groups also invite individuals who were often involved in previous Islamic movements, integrating them into a new social movement that wants the presence of democracy, social justice, and freedom.

In the Middle East, Islam itself is a part of people's lives. Asef Bayat emphasizes the concept of religious activism as a basis for understanding how Islam is the basis of a social movement. Activism is an unusual practice or behavior, carried out collectively or individually, institutionally or formally, to cause social change. The terminology describes phenomena that are in harmony with active behavior based on religious foundations. Islam, in this case being Islamic activism, illustrates how unusual behavior is created by Muslim groups in the modern era. Politics can be one of the targeted aspects (Bayat 2005: 894).

Apart from Islam as an ideology, in general there are two interpretations that try to be created to understand the political movements of religion in the modern era. Traditional groups describe Islam as a reactive movement of modern values that are closely related to Western culture, generally anti-democracy. This group is concerned about the importance of religious revivalism. How religion is strived to triumph as the achievements of the previous era and self-identification through a picture in the past about the birth of religion that is "quasi-religious". Meanwhile the second interpretation views that Islam is a religious movement which is a manifestation or reaction to postmodernity. Social movements represent differences, culture, and morality against a universalized secular modernization. Foucault described the Iranian Revolution as the first post-modern revolution in history. Castells responded as 'exclusion of the excluders by the excluded'. Esposito describes it as a request for identity and community, as well as a desire to establish order for groups in personal and social life. Islamism in this approach is a manifestation of the search for certainty in an uncertain world (Bayat 2005:

894). The second perspective becomes a compatible explanation of the Islamic social movements taking place in the modern era. In the current global conditions, many social movements before the Middle East Revolution emerged under the agendas of Islamic leaders such as Abul-ala Mawdudi, Ayatollah Khomeini, Ali Shariati, Musa Sadre, Sayed Qutb, and many others.

Social movements in reality are entities that are so dynamic, constantly moving and flowing. EP Thompson (in Bayat 2005: 897) explains that social movements are not objects. Social movements are processes and must be studied as historical phenomena within a certain time frame. The narrative of the movement contains a process that offers comprehensive ideas about certain characters. One cannot ignore Iranian Islamism without regard to historical aspects. Therefore, it is important to understand the focus and direction of social movements because changes can occur very quickly. The factors can come from inside or outside. Social movements can also change steps and direction. The dynamics contained therein can change what is intended when a movement is formed for the first time. This is not only due to external pressures, but also social control and international factors that influence social movements. They can change in certain circumstances in different political and international conditions (Bayat 2005: 898).

### **Arab Spring: Religion and revolution**

What happened in Arabia, from Tunisia to Egypt, from Benghazi to Tripoli, has captured the attention of the world because the waves of protests did not stop. Revolution to demand the presence of democracy, freedom of public space, and demands that countries that have long been in the form of autocracy join the modernism of other countries until now in a situation that is vulnerable to crises and conflicts. The date of the Bouazizi self-immolation event on December 17, 2010 is considered the initial momentum of the Arab Spring which then spread to other Middle Eastern countries. Within hours and days, solidarity emerged for the demonstrators who were killed. They are considered dead as martyrs. The Al-Jazeera Arab news broadcast, became the most influential and provocative media by showing self-immolation pictures and demonstrations that were taking place. The protest quickly spread to the capital, even to neighboring countries. Individuals from various walks of life soon became part of a wave of protests: young men, women and men, religious groups, and so on. In less than 2 months, 2 autocrat leaders in the Middle East were overthrown. Ben Ali stepped down from the leadership of Tunisia on January 14, 2011 and Egyptian leader Husni Mubarak followed a month later, on February 11, 2011 (Rosiny 2012: 2).

The ongoing revolution includes the participation of various groups with different backgrounds. No wonder that many say that the Arab Spring is a completely secular movement. The mass movement was mobilized not only to oppose the ruling regime, but also to oppose ideological extremism. Knickmeyer (in Hoffman & Jamal 2013: 2) states

that, "Unlike Arab groups that are generally suspected, like groups that grow beards or young left movements, but the main driver of Arab Spring is the lack of economic opportunities available to the people Arabs, who are willing to fight despite being aware of the magnitude of the risks faced." Houeihed and Warren also stated that "Arab Spring is not an Islamic Spring. The main trigger is not religion, but an expression of anger over corruption by elites, economic inequality, widespread social injustice, and dictatorial leaders."

It should be understood that in the process of revolution, Islamic culture and Islamism cannot be separated from the revolution that is happening. A Middle Eastern expert named Jane Kinnimont stated that diversity can be in an Islamist movement by finding inspiration, values, and legitimacy taken from Islamic teachings (Hughes 2013). In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood is the group that won the 2011 elections. The group is known for the slogan "Islam is the Solution," indicating that Islamism is a pulse in the socio-political movements that are carried out. Until 2 years of the Arab Spring, Hashemi (2013) stated that religion is not free from politics for Muslim groups who are on their way to democracy. The role of political parties and religious intellectuals is very important in the democratization of each country, especially because of the combination of politics and universal standards on human rights, as well as demands for modern democracy.

Lynch (2012 in Hoffman & Jamal 2013: 3) states that Friday (as Muslim day) becomes "days of rage" in Egypt and many other places because mass organizing is carried out during Friday Prayers. The mosque liaised the demonstrators and became the logistics and preparation center for the demonstrators, giving birth to a term known as "from the Mosque to the Field". The Friday that is used by Muslims to worship has turned into an important political moment. Communities gather from all cities to show solidarity through demonstrations. In Friday worship there are always lecture sessions that also discuss social, political, educational issues, along with religious material. The mosque is no longer a place of worship, but also a congress for Muslims to meet once a week and discuss public issues.

This is what happened in Egypt on January 28, 2011, as the first Friday revolution that marked Egypt's 'participation' in the revolution. Tahrir's field was soon filled with crowds after Friday's service was over, and protests against Mubarak were carried out since then (Mackay 2011). The mosque and worship on Friday became a social capital that represented the beliefs of his followers and then organized a joint action. The change in the meaning of Friday worship from previously only limited to worship, then turned into a symbolic force of the revolution indicates that the practice of worship is one way to go through 'resistance'. Thousands of people unite and form solidarity so that it gives strength to others. In terms of strategy, the selection of a symbolic day is an attempt to attract attention and focus resistance for one day a week. It is difficult to protest with such

a large number of people throughout the week. Then one day is chosen, which is a short day and is known to everyone to focus their attention totally on that one day.

### **Pairing Islam and democracy**

How the thick value of Islam is presented in social movements raises questions about the future of democracy carried by global civil society. Samuel P. Huntington argues that religion, especially Islam, places limits on democratization. In 1993, Middle Eastern historian Lewis tried to answer questions about Islam and liberal democracy. He questioned, can democracy work in a community inspired by Islamic beliefs, experience and traditions? His research offers several conclusions that the prospects for democracy in the Middle East are not good, and when viewed from a political perspective, Islam offers the worst prospects of liberal democracy (Lewis in Cook & Stathis 2012: 178). Some attributes in Islam present complex variables towards democracy, especially in the transition period as happened in Arabia. Religion can be a motivation in an individual's life. For Muslims, Islam is more a moral philosophy, belief system, or spiritual command: Islam is a complete and comprehensive guideline for its adherents (Geertz in Cook & Stathis 2012: 179). In the Middle East, Islam occupies a special position as synthetic between individuals, groups, religion and politics, as well as human holistic life. Religious practices and social interaction are almost indistinguishable. Under ideal Islamic state conditions, political authority must be based on God's law, not in the form of a theocracy or autocracy that gives sovereignty to the government elite. On a minimum scale, the state must provide protection for Muslims to carry out worship practices. This form is seen as an ideal state model.

This situation often becomes a claim that Islam is not in harmony with democracy, and the movements that occur in Arabia will not be easily resolved because of this fundamental problem. However, the Arab Spring phenomenon shows that presenting democracy is extremely important to create development and eliminate inequality. Establishing democracy is certainly a complex procession, especially for countries that have never known democracy before. For Arab countries, democracy is certainly an abstract concept. For more than 40 years, Iraq, Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Yemen, have lived under an authoritarian system. However, it should be understood that although Islam is often contrasted with democracy, there is actually no inherent contradiction between the two (Cook & Stathis 2013: 177). Islam and democracy are not impossible to be juxtaposed as long as it meets the basic principles needed by placing Islam as the basis of national law and religion, but does not create laws that contradict democratic principles (Cook & Stathis 2013, 183).

During the presidential election in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood said that women have the right to occupy all positions except in presidential matters. This attitude is taken as an appreciation of women's rights, but does not conflict with Islamic law

(Tashijan 2013). This means that Islam as a theology has not changed, but its religion has changed (Roy 2012: 10). This religion, whether liberal or not, is in fact compatible with democracy because democracy which is demanded to be present in the government system links personal beliefs from tradition, collective identity, and external authority. Muslim demonstrators who were mostly young found that they could voice their aspirations by joining a small group (peer group) or using the internet as a medium. They criticized the Islamic culture that their parents brought and tried to construct Islam in a new religious nuance.

Arab Spring shows that for many Muslims, democracy is an appropriate way to create the ideal form of the state. Tunisia and Egypt, are two countries that have dropped their dictatorial leaders, Ben Ali and Husni Mubarak. The two countries have also held elections, even Egypt has run elections twice, namely in 2011 and 2013. Tunisia became the first country to face democracy with the election of president Habib Bourgiba. Bourgiba politically limited the political movements of the military, supported the Tunisian workers' movement, and carried out a secular political vision (Sorenson 2011: 31-2). It is true that there are things that cannot be negotiated in Islam, but the separation between religion and government is a big agenda in the Arab Spring. The 2011 revolution was not the same as the revolution that occurred in Iran in 1979 which made religion the basis and purpose of the revolution. Unlike Ayatollah Komeini in Iran, Egypt and Tunisia are not places to present Islam as a justification for certain actions. Religion becomes plural and open to democracy.

The Arab Spring became a phase that shows how Islam found its new form in the political arena. This does not mean Islamism is gone. The wave of protests that occurred contributed to the creation of religious diversification which put Islamists in a set of religious actors among others (Roy 2012: 13). Egypt and Tunisia did not undergo a revolution that brought down two dictators without arranging replacements. Elections have been held and parliament has been created. This new movement is not easy to change because of the nuances of protests that still remain and are still present in the efforts of the two countries to build a new country system. As has happened in Afghanistan and Iraq, Islamic movements from various regions will be concentrated and operate in an arena that should be democratic but not create democracy and legitimacy in the eyes of the people. Elections in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011 have shown that no Islamic political party can monopolize the expression 'Islam' in politics. In general, the Islamist movement in the Middle East has taken a step further in understanding the concept of democracy in their ideological discourse (Dalacoura in Chamki 2013: 4). The new Islam combines technocratic modernism and conservative values and the Arab Spring transforms Islam into more universal values.

### **The prospect of democracy brought by the Arab Spring**

When the global civil society movement in the Middle East demands the presence of democracy with various bets, the question that needs to be answered next is, if democracy is present in the governmental systems of those countries, will it survive, and what are its prospects for the future? One thing that needs to be understood is that even if Mubarak, Ben Ali and other leaders were dropped from the top of government, democracy needs time to grow (Sorensen 2011: 33). Jack Goldstone stated that even through a peaceful revolution, it would generally take half a decade for a regime to consolidate with society in a stable manner. Democracy is a system that requires a large 'cost' in its development. The democratic system in the West is characterized by: power separation, free elections, civil liberties, the law, and respect for human rights such as private ownership, freedom of speech, and religious tolerance. This principle is a completely new value for Middle Eastern countries. Arab countries are in the process of fulfilling democratic principles in their government system. Of course the way to bring democracy in the region is not easy.

Apart from the efforts of community groups, efforts to transfer power from the old elite leaders to their successors were very open to the threat of disturbances, as seen in Tunisia and Egypt. Actors in the old regime are still present and making the transition an increasingly complex process. Bringing down a dictator is simple, but combating a corrupt political system, full of nepotism and patronage is a greater challenge. It takes years before government actors can be the only legitimate actors. Before that, civil society was still a watchdog and a jury who assessed the government's performance (Hashemi 2012: 219). In addition, efforts to political secularization become a major agenda that has not yet been completed. Although it has been discussed about how Islam has transformed so that it is more flexible to democracy, negotiating the normative role of religion in politics is a complicated and vulnerable process to conflict. The reason is because religion is an emotional and sensitive subject and is directly related to personal issues and group identity. The diversity of religious groups in society creates different thoughts about how religion should be practiced in political life. Doing it democratically will spend a lot of time and is prone to conflict (Hashemi 2012: 219-20).

However, it is not wise to say that the prospect of democracy in a Muslim country is not bright. Islam and Islamic culture do not contain certain obstacles to democracy. Arab Spring actually shows that there is a synergy between the two that can produce accommodation. What is happening in the Arab world shows the presence of the need for public space and community self-esteem to participate in politics. In other words, social movements in the Arab Spring present better prospects of democracy in a place that has never known democracy before.

## D. CONCLUSION

Arab Spring is not an Islamic movement. The trigger for the revolution was not due to religious matters, the demonstrators who joined were not one hundred percent Muslim, and the issue demanded was not related to the religious life of the community, but Islam, whether its values or religious practices, could not be separated in organizing the masses during the revolution. The mosque became a 'pivot area' which provided the needs of demonstrators and the masses were moved after Friday worship to be the strategy chosen by this social movement, besides that the similarity of identity, especially religious identity, provided its own capital for demonstrators to build trust and solidarity during the demonstration and voicing its demands on the government. The presence of Islam in describing political and social expressions shows that Islamism is an inseparable way for the global civil society movement in the Arab Spring to achieve their political goals.

The Arab Spring also became a phenomenon that 'forcibly' brought democracy to the Arab world which during the previous decades generally adopted an autocracy system. Pessimistic views continue to emerge considering that up to now the upheaval is still happening, but it must be realized that democracy is a process that is not short and is never fully finished. Society can voice its demands, women recognized their rights, law and constitution as the basis of the state, showing that although still far away, there is a system that is trying to be built on the basis of democracy in the Middle East. The revolution also shows that Islam is able to transform in the modern political arena and shows the separation between Islam as a belief and Islam as a religion. When interpreted as a belief, Islam is theological and static, but its religion shows dynamics when juxtaposed with democracy, which has often been antithetical to Islam.

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