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JINN IN THE BALLOT BOX

We were gazing over the roofs of Cairo through the windows of an elegant, modern office. My companion was a scion of the local aristocracy and one of the founders of Egyptian Marxism. “We must ally ourselves with the Muslim Brotherhood,” he said.

I was amazed. “But you are a completely secular person!” I exclaimed. “You are striving for a modern society. What do you have in common with those religious fanatics?”

“We Marxists have no roots among the masses,” he sighed. “The Muslim Brothers do. We must ally ourselves with them in order to reach the masses.”

I remarked that this had already failed in Iran, where, for the very same reason, the left-wing Tudeh party had allied itself with Khomeini before the revolution, only to be liquidated by him once he was in power.

“We have no choice,” he said.

This conversation took place more than twenty years ago. I was reminded of it this week, when I saw what is happening in Egypt now.

The Western (and, of course, Israeli) media publish enthusiastic reports about the demonstrations for democracy and against the regime of Husni Mubarak. Some of the demonstrators are leftists, but most of them are Islamic militants and their sympathizers. The police have made extensive arrests of political activists, most of them Muslim Brotherhood leaders.

There are no signs that the Mubarak regime is about to fall. He did promise that in the coming presidential election other candidates may stand, but that was said mostly to placate President Bush, who is desperately claiming that his invasion of Iraq inspired a democratic awakening throughout the Arab world. In practice, there is no chance at all that the situation in Egypt will change. No serious candidate will be allowed to stand against Mubarak.

But let us assume for a moment that Mubarak is compelled to give up his intention

of having himself reelected, and that truly democratic elections take place. In this hypothetical situation, who would win?

One of the plausible answers: the Muslim Brotherhood. They have, as mentioned, deep roots among the people. Their infrastructure has a history of fifty years and more. The Egyptian upper class, which is secular, liberal and open to the world, may find itself suddenly under the yoke of religious fanatics.

This dilemma exists in most of the Arab countries: in truly democratic elections, the Islamic forces will win – forces that completely reject the vision of a secular, democratic and liberal state that Bush talks so much about.

Such an experiment has already taken place. Algeria had democratic elections. In the first round, it became clear that the Islamic forces were poised to win a resounding victory. The army intervened and prevented the second round. This resulted in a vicious civil war with hundreds of thousands of victims. Now, years later, some compromise is being sought.

In the Iraqi elections, of which Bush is so proud, the Shiite-led Alliance has achieved an impressive victory. It is under the authority of a religious leader, Ayatollah Ali Hussaini al-Sistani, who is in total command. Fortunately, he is very different from his colleagues in Iran, the neighboring Shiite (but not Arab) country. Unlike the Iranian Ayatollahs, who rule their country, al-Sistani believes that the religious leadership would suffer damage if it were directly involved in political life. But he, too, wants the state to be subjected to Islamic law.

For the time being, this objective is meeting with resistance. In order to attain the required 2/3 majority for the election of a president and the promulgation of a constitution, the Iraqi Shiites need the support of the Kurds, who are overwhelmingly Muslim Sunnis. The Kurds want autonomy verging on independence, and they object to the imposition of Islamic law. The result so far: no president, no constitution, everything hanging in the air.

In neighboring Turkey (another Islamic but not Arab country) some years ago, an Islamic party won the elections. When it started to enact Islamic laws, the army intervened and kicked it out. The Turkish army considers itself the guardian of the secular teachings of the great Ataturk, the founding father of the modern, very secular Turkish state. In the last elections, a much more moderate Islamic party won. It is moving very cautiously, partly because it wants to be accepted by the European Union, which is rather wary of its first Muslim candidate for membership. The enactment of religious laws might result in the gates of the EU being slammed in Turkey's face.

In almost all Arab and many other Muslim countries, there is a real possibility that in free elections more or less extreme Islamic parties would win. The present

dictatorships in so many Arab countries – Libya, Jordan, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, among others – present themselves as a bulwark against fanatical Islamic forces.

We have already seen that democratic elections do not necessarily result in the election of democrats. The classic example is Germany. The Nazi party came to power through the democratic process (even though it never achieved 51% of the vote). A party like the Afghan Taliban could come to power through free elections, and then impose an extreme Islamic regime, oppress women and persecute opponents.

The elements of democracy – multi-party elections, free election campaigns, unimpeded access to the media – do not, in themselves, assure the victory of democracy. That necessitates a proper social environment, the strength of democratic values in the public mind, acceptance of majority rule and the safeguarding of the rights of the minority. In the absence of such a reality, elections are an empty vessel. The jinn of Islamic fundamentalism may emerge from the ballot box, much as the demon of Christian fundamentalism leapt out of the American ballot box.

What is the situation in Palestine? There is a great enthusiasm for democracy. It was not born after the death of Yasser Arafat, as many seem to believe. Already nine years ago, truly democratic elections took place in the territories of the Palestinian National Authority, as attested by international observers led by ex-President Jimmy Carter. But the dominant personality of Arafat and the concentration of executive power in his hands reduced the visibility of that huge achievement.

Now, new elections for the Legislative Council (the Parliament of the Palestinian Authority) as well as local councils are about to take place. For the first time, the religious Hamas movement will take part and is expected to do well. As in many Muslim countries, the religious party appears as a body with a strong social commitment, untainted by corruption. To this must be added, of course, the aura conferred by armed resistance to the Israeli occupation. (The name Hamas is formed from the Arabic initials of “Islamic Resistance Movement”).

I believe that the participation of Hamas in the elections is a good thing. Palestinian society itself must decide whether it wants a democratic-secular or a religious future. I hope, of course, for the victory of the secular forces. But I am convinced that the Turkish example is preferable to the Algerian one, that the integration of religious forces in the democratic process is preferable to their violent suppression. Integration can moderate religious movements, oppression will radicalize them.

(That was proved in our country, too: the integration of the orthodox Shas party in the democratic system was beneficial, while the rebellion of the Jewish fundamentalists – the settlers and their allies against the democratic system may have

grievous results.)

The outcome of the entire process in the Arab countries may be very different from the picture painted by superficial Western “thinkers” like Bush. Arab society is different from Western society and Arab democracy will not be a carbon copy of Western democracy.

To quote a great Prussian monarch on the subject of religious tolerance: “Everybody must seek salvation in his own way.”