Deja Vu in Cairo

by **Mehdi Khalaji (/experts/mehdi-khalaji)**

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Articles & Testimony

An Iranian scholar visits Cairo, prompting reflections on the role of religion in two revolutions three decades apart.

I arrived at the hotel at 4:30 p.m. I left my baggage in the room, picked up the map and went out. I had read on the plane that there was a demonstration in Tahrir Square organized by Salafists protesting against the drafted constitution, and instead arguing for Shari'a as the sole basis of legislation. I walked for about fifteen minutes and found my way through the square. It was my first time in Cairo. The polluted sky was darkening. The square was packed with women and men. There were two podiums in two corners of the square on which organizers were chanting slogans. People were shouting, "Allahu Akbar!" in approval of the speakers' messages. Some were holding signs supporting the place of Shari'a in the constitution, while others decried Mursi's record as president.

A sign caught my attention: "Shari'a is the main component of Egyptian identity, Muslim and Christian." I continued walking around the square, listening to the speakers and observing the protesters' expressions. The Nour party -- the major Salafi party -- and Muslim Brotherhood appeared to be absent. The square was full of radical Salafists, who did not take any part in the revolution that took place in Tahrir Square. In Egypt, the Salafists have only recently become politicized, in the aftermath of Mubarak's collapse.

My father was a revolutionary prior to the 1979 Iranian revolution. He spent a few months in prison until the shah left Iran and Khomeini came into power. Despite the fact that I was five years old at the time of the revolution, the events that transpired stimulated my interest in politics, especially the modern political history of Iran. The atmosphere of Tahrir Square conjured memories of my childhood. The looks of frustration and anger, groups of unfortunate women occupying the streets, and slogans advocating the superiority of Islam and the incorporation of Islam into political and social life were all too familiar from my life in Qom -- the center of the Shi'ite clerical establishment -- where political activism occurred with great frequency. Although it was my first time in Egypt, I could not help but feel a certain sensation of familiarity with my surroundings.

Two days later, while I was meeting a friend at Cairo University, I ran into Hassan Hanafi, a professor of philosophy

and a prominent leftist-Islamist intellectual. When I was introduced to him as an Iranian scholar residing in United States, his expression changed. He approached me and began to murmur: "When the Islamic revolution first took place in Iran, we were all excited here. Now we are deeply disappointed, because of Iran's support to Bashar Al-Assad." I wanted to respond, but he continued: "We don't care about the three disputed islands, we don't care about referring to the Gulf as 'Persian' or 'Arab,' but we do care about Syria. Iran shouldn't damage its revolutionary credentials by funding Assad in his crackdown on Muslims." There was no room for me to respond at this point. He seemed optimistic about the Muslim Brotherhood's new-found power in Egypt. I had heard that President Mursi addressed Hanafi in a meeting of scholars and intellectuals; the president had told him he owed much to Hanafi intellectually, and that he had read much of his work.

The university was full of young students. I have never seen any university, in any country, that was so crowded. To my surprise, almost all of the women were wearing hijab. I was told that only Christians were likely to forgo it, and that nearly all Muslim women were covered. As I entered the university, I thought to myself that compared to Egypt, Iran could not possibly be considered Islamic. In Iran, wearing hijab was a matter of choice before the revolution. It was only when Islamists came to power in 1979 that wearing hijab became mandatory for all women regardless of their faith. Nowadays Iranian women, especially those in metropolitan areas, accessorize the garment and use it more as a public statement, in a quasi-defiant act to show that the law is their sole reason for wearing it. It was my belief that when Islamists came to power in Iran, there was a need for the government to re-Islamize society. But in the case of Egypt, society has been greatly Islamized by organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists over the last forty years under Egypt's military government.

A friend of mine, who also teaches philosophy at Cairo University, asked me to give a lecture to his class on Iran's revolution and the consequent writing of a new constitution, so that his students could compare the Iranian experience to that of Egypt. I agreed.

I entered the class of around 150 students and proceeded to lecture in standard Arabic for about an hour and a half. I explained that immediately after the Iranian revolution, there was a dispute over the role of Shari'a, similar to the ongoing dispute in Egypt. Ayatollah Khomeini promised the implementation of Shari'a if he came to power, but his statements prior to the revolution insisted on concepts such as democracy, freedom of speech and the will of the people. Khomeini held that since Islam is superior to all other religions, it would translate into effective lawmaking, in turn creating the best society on earth. Who is the best person to take on the responsibility of implementing Shari'a? Who is best suited to rule an Islamic society or government? Khomeini's response was clear and decisive: an ayatollah, or Shi'ite jurist, one who is an expert in Shari'a and knowledgeable of its intricacies. As a result, the concept of vilayat-e faqih, the "rule of the Shi'ite jurist" was embedded into the constitution in 1979 in the office of the rahbar, or "leader."

Just as Egyptian liberal secular forces requested more time to draft the constitution while the Muslim Brotherhood was in a hurry to ratify it, Ayatollah Khomeini insisted on ratifying the constitution quickly, neglecting those who were not yet convinced of the concept of vilayat-e faqih. By accelerating the ratification process, Ayatollah Khomeini terminated public debate over critical disputes within the constitution and marginalized secular, liberal intellectuals and political activists.

However, when Khomeini actually implemented Shari'a, he soon realized that Shari'a was not compatible with Iranian society. Conversely, Egypt initiated its process of re-Islamization under its military state, and lost the liberal spirit that thrived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Iranian modernization took place under the Pahlavi monarchy, making it difficult for the population to accept a transition back to a society lacking the modern institutions they had become accustomed to. For example, under Shari'a, women are forbidden from appearing on television, acting in movies or playing music. But how could radio and television function without women? How is it

possible to enforce a ban on women playing music?

Khomeini decided to loosen his grasp on Shari'a, and gradually one religious duty rose in importance above the others: the safeguarding of the Islamic regime. Khomeini's idea was that safeguarding the Islamic government was of such importance that drinking wine or lying were permitted if it served this purpose. In other words, a ruling ayatollah differs from other Muslims in his ability to override Shari'a in instances of conflict between Shari'a and reasons of state. As such, Shari'a was placed in a position to complement the will of the ruling ayatollah, instead of being the foundation of legislation. It was what the ruling ayatollah recognized as the interests of the Islamic regime that dictated the government's behavior, not Shari'a. To take it one step deeper, it is the personality of the ruler that replaced the institution of Shari'a; in essence, it became a complete Islamic totalitarianism.

I could see that the students were quite shocked by the contents of my lecture. The story of the Islamic Republic is not well known among the public in Arab countries. I exited the class and university and became lost in the polluted streets, which also reminded me of Tehran. Driving in Tehran is eerily similar to driving in Cairo. A passerby would have a really hard time crossing the street. Drivers have the right of way at all junctures; powerless people have fewer rights.

My hotel stopped serving alcohol in 2010, when a Saudi merchant bought it. There was once a famous nightclub that occupied the hotel's penthouse, which had closed too. If one was familiar with Egyptian society, one should not be surprised by the influence of Islamist thought in the country. Much of Egyptian society had been taken over by Islamists long before the government fell under their control.

The really striking phenomenon of the revolution in Egypt is the presence of Salafists. In Iran, we also had religious fundamentalists who did not participate in the revolution but who demanded a share of power once the revolution had subsided. One example is Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi, who was not politically active prior to the revolution. He even discouraged people from participating in the Iran-Iraq War. When Khomeini died, he suddenly became immersed in the political scene. He denies every democratic interpretation of existing political institutions in Iran. He firmly believes in the sacred status of the ruling ayatollah, and is known as the ideologue of violence in Iran. Figures like Mesbah -- who refuses to acknowledge elections as a democratic procedure -- are useful instruments of the government for making the ruling ayatollah look moderate. The current supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, often uses people like Mesbah as leverage to advance his policies in the face of his critics.

Salafists also seem to be useful in this sense for the Muslim Brotherhood, despite their theological differences. The Muslim Brotherhood seems moderate and a somewhat pragmatic party in comparison to the Salafists. In particular, I was astonished by the number of Salafist, anti-Shi'a books in bookstores. It occurred to me that one of the biggest challenges in the Arab world -- and also elsewhere in the Islamic world, like Pakistan -- is the rising tension between Shi'ites and Salafists (not Sunnis). This transcends the historical conflict between the two branches of Islam. The Salafist version of Islam is rooted more in the modern history of Islam than in its past.

In Iran, we were always amazed that the first so-called Islamic revolution took place in Iran, a country in which Islam forms only a part of national identity. To clarify, the revolution was not originally Islamic, it became Islamic after two or three years as Islamists consolidated their power. The Islamization of a revolution is a process. Many Iranian intellectuals thought that since Islam is a greater part of the Arab identity, the emergence of an Islamic government would naturally come about in an Arab country first. But history is not mathematics, nor is it based in actuarial science. Iran was the first country to install an Islamic government, but if history teaches us anything, it is that people rarely learn from it. Iran was so modernized before the revolution that the government failed to make the country an example of Islamic utopia. This was not the case in Afghanistan, Iran's neighbor. Because that state was particularly poor in terms of modern institutions and the incorporation of aspects of modernity into its culture, the Taliban succeeded in creating an Islamic utopia, suppressing freedom and annihilating politics in the process. The

Taliban government was overthrown not by the Afghan people, but through an invasion of allied forces led by the United States. Absent this invasion, nobody can guess how long it could have lasted -- perhaps decades.

Things in Egypt are different. When I was walking in the streets and looking at old buildings, a sense of regret and pity overwhelmed me. Those bourgeois buildings have history, and their current state reveals many of the ideological, class and cultural failures associated with them. The buildings looked as pitiful as King Lear in Shakespeare's play. Iranian Islamists have control over the oil reserves. This is the only way Iran could afford an eight-year war and also pursue its nuclear program. Egypt is not an oil-rich nation, and its economy is in a far worse state than that of Iran's in 1979. Islamists -- both the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafists -- depend on foreign aid. The Islamic Republic had so much money that it was able to place the "exportation of revolution" at the top of its agenda. Egypt is a part of the Arab world. The Islamic Republic is an increasingly isolated government. The overwhelming amount of power that Islamists possess in Egypt did not start two years ago. If the government in Iran became devoid of Islamists, Iranian society would show its true secular face. The situation is complicated in both countries, and no one can predict how much longer the Islamists' reign will last in either one.

The significant source of hope should be the intellectuals in both countries. Enabling society to reflect on its experience is the only way to escape political crisis and avoid repeating past mistakes. This is how Egyptian and Iranian intellectuals can benefit from each other most in helping liberate their political and social imprisonment, by serving as the living memory of both societies, of their triumphs and mistakes.

Mehdi Khalaji is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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