On Campus

The Arab Reawakening

With rebellion sweeping the Arab world, Rashid Khalidi, the Edward Said Professor of Modern Arab Studies, talks to *Columbia Magazine* about the prospect for real change.

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Mohamed Omar / EPA / Corbis

The revolutions across the Arab world may have been precipitated by Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation in Tunisia, but how far back do we need to go in order to understand what has been happening?

During the Cold War there were authoritarian regimes on both sides of the Iron Curtain. At the end of the Cold War, there was a series of democratic transitions in many parts of the world: Latin America, East Asia, and ultimately the Communist bloc. It happened in Turkey. It happened in many Muslim countries, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Bangladesh. But it did not happen in the Arab world.

The Arab world had what analysts call a democratic deficit. The question was, Why was what was happening in South Korea or Taiwan or Indonesia or the Philippines not happening in the Arab world?

This winter's revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and elsewhere were long overdue. They show that a lot of what people glibly said about this region was wrong, not so much that it had a democratic deficit — it did — but that this was an area that was uniquely immune to democracy. Or that the values of ordinary Arabs differed fundamentally from those of people everywhere else in the world: that here people were more affected by extreme religion, that here somehow religion played a much larger part, that here somehow certain kinds of values that had become universal had not taken hold.

What does this tell us? For one thing, that everything we have been told systematically by talking heads, by pseudo- experts, by self-appointed gurus on the Arab world has been proven to be completely false. These people should be on their knees in sackcloth and ashes as far as I'm concerned.

I think what we have seen in every single Arab country where there have been demonstrations, or the beginnings of regime changes, are expressions of the same universal values that we've seen from East Asia to Latin America: democracy, social justice, rule of law, constitutions. Notably absent have been words like *Sharia*, or even *Islam*.

Religion obviously plays a role in the politics of this part of the world.

It certainly does. But the terrorists — people who believe that only violence will suffice to achieve change and who have an extreme vision of some kind of religious order they want to impose — are big losers; they're nowhere to be seen. Clearly, there are ways to change other than by guns and assassination and bombing. Moreover, even those religious parties that are pointed to as the great bogeymen — the Muslim Brotherhood, the Ennahda movement in Tunisia — are nowhere near the head of these movements. Some of the religious groups are barely involved; others,

like the Muslim Brotherhood, opposed the January 25 demonstration. The youth movement of the Muslim Brotherhood followed the groups that were organizing the demonstrations and split off from their leadership.

Clearly, if things do not play out positively for democratization, these parties could easily regain their footing; they do have a constituency. Polls suggest that the Muslim Brotherhood might get as much as 15 percent of the vote in Egypt. It's not a negligible force. Yet somehow these groups missed the bus.

Does that mean that the young secularists we've seen in the streets of Cairo and Alexandria can hold their own?

It's not just the young secularists; there's a huge middle class in Egypt. These are people who, whether they're pious or not, in their great majority believe that religion should not determine public life. In Egypt this belief is as strong as anyplace else in the Muslim world, and that transcends religious morals; it transcends political lines. It's a deeply ingrained feature of Egyptian public life, together with a lot of public piety. I don't think we should be so scared of public piety; we live in a country that is drenched in public piety. But we're also a nation that has established a separation between church and state. Admittedly, we've had a couple of hundred years in the U.S. to work on these things, while the Egyptians are in uncharted territory. In any case, I think this fear of an Islamist takeover is overblown.

What did the Muslim Brotherhood mean when it announced in February that it was going to run only for a certain percentage of seats?

The Brotherhood was explicitly trying to set to rest fears people had about them. They understood that they had been used by the Mubarak regime to scare foreign powers into backing the regime, and to scare the middle classes into backing the regime. The Muslim Brotherhood is the most tried-and-true bogeyman of every despot in the Arab world. Both Sadat and Mubarak inflated the threat of the Muslim Brotherhood, even as they sometimes covertly colluded with them.

How significant is the return of Sunni cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi to Egypt?

I think what al-Qaradawi said is what's significant, though the media couldn't *not* play up his return. After all, it's the first time he's been back in 50 years, and on February 18 he gave the Friday sermon to 1 million people. That's news any way you

look at it. No *Khutbah*, or Friday prayer, since the dawn of Islam, that I'm aware of, has begun with anything but "O Muslims." That's how the imam starts the sermon. It's been that way for almost 1400 years. Instead, al-Qaradawi began, "O Muslims, O Christians." He's addressing the whole Egyptian people, not just Muslims. He talked about secularism, about democracy. This was a service in which Muslims and Christians both prayed.

Editorial writers have been drawing parallels between this year and 1979, 1989 — even 1848. But is 2011 unique?

It certainly is, though one can understand the comparisons to Tehran. People are afraid, and there are those who fan the flames of that fear. Any serious analyst who knows *anything* about this region would talk about the differences between Sunni and Shia, and the differences between the roles of the religious establishments in Iran and in Egypt. One has to understand that Khomeini telegraphed his intentions to establish a theocracy long before he got back to Tehran. One has to understand how he took over leadership of the movement, why there was an Islamic Revolution in Iran, and the other ways in which the shah's regime differed from the Mubarak regime. Tehran is not Cairo, Iran is not Egypt, and Sunni is not Shia.

For all the corruption of Tunisian president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, Tunisia was at least a secular state. Is it likely to survive as a secular state?

I think so, for reasons that are very specific to Tunisia. First, Tunisia has a union movement with half a million members, which always managed to maintain its independence from the regime, unlike the Egyptian union movement, which was once very powerful but has been under the control of the regime for several decades, since even before Mubarak. Second, women have all kinds of rights and are active in the workforce. Third, the population, including women, is literate and well educated. Fourth, Tunisia has a well-organized civil society, even though the regime was authoritarian. Finally, there is a big middle class, and a huge diaspora of Tunisians in Europe — mainly in France, as well as in Germany and in Italy.

Are discussions in Tunisia addressing the question of a presidential versus a parliamentary system?

That constitutional debate is going on in Egypt as well. People are asking whether they should continue with a top-heavy, presidential, executive-dominated system or whether it should be balanced not only with a strong parliament but also with an

independent judiciary, which everybody agrees should be easy in Egypt but very hard in Tunisia. The Tunisian judiciary had been castrated by the Ben Ali regime, whereas in Egypt the judiciary *ferociously* maintained its independence from the executive branch. These questions are being debated in both countries, as is the nature of the constitution, the balance of power between the executive, the legislative, and the judiciary, the relative independence of each, and how soon to have elections. There is the question of how long it will take to put together viable political parties without having the only two parties that could run in these elections — in the case of Egypt, Mubarak's National Democracy Party (NDP) and the Muslim Brotherhood — having an enormous advantage because they're the only ones who know how you run an election. I lived in Chicago for 15 years; I know what a machine is. A machine is something that gets out the vote and provides jobs for the boys, and in some cases the girls, and at the moment, there are only two of those in Egypt. One demand of the popular movement in Egypt is for the dissolution of the NDP.

If the regime of Bahrain's King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa, a Sunni, were to be seriously threatened by his largely Shia population, would Saudi Arabia, which has its own troubles, come to its rescue?

Saudi Arabia is already coming to the rescue of its sister Sunni monarchy. The king of Bahrain was in Saudi Arabia to welcome King Abdullah back from his three-month recuperation after his operation at Columbia University Medical Center. There is no question that for Saudi Arabia the reason there's a causeway between the two kingdoms is not just so Saudis can go to Manama and get drunk and consort with loose women. It's there so that Saudi Arabia can exert its influence as directly as it needs to.

The same kind of entrenched interests that exist in the Mubarak and Ben Ali families exist in spades in the royal families of these countries. You have succession issues; you have governments in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain where all the major portfolios are in the hands of the royal family. The prime minister of Bahrain is the king's uncle and has been in office for decades. If those kinds of things don't change, there are going to be problems. Even in Saudi Arabia, there's unrest because all the king seems to do is to generously condescend to give his subjects money rather than listen to their demands for political participation, for profound reform, for some kind of representation. That's what people want. Bahrain is way ahead of Saudi Arabia; it has an elected parliament. It may be a gerrymandered

parliament, like Jordan's, but it's a parliament.

Do you think the role of Facebook, Twitter, and other social media has been overstated?

I'm sure these things played a role, but I would remind you that the people of Cairo rose up and drove out a hated regime and had to be brought back under control by artillery fire from the citadel during the French occupation of 1798–1801. The Egyptian people were involved in similar uprisings in the 1870s and early 1880s, and in 1919, when there was an enormous revolution that eventually forced the British to grant them independence. It didn't take Facebook, it didn't take radio, it didn't take Al Jazeera to create these major popular upheavals in the past.

However, I'm sure that the specific nature of what happened, and the way in which groups managed to organize, owed a great deal to modern means of communication. The young people used it very well to outwit a smart regime.

You and many others have written about the image of the Arab in the West. But how do Arabs view themselves? A young Egyptian told the BBC in February: "We have felt passive and had always been told that our problems were someone else's fault — America, Israel, the Jews." He went on to say that in Tunisia and Egypt they've seen what they can do themselves. Does this represent a major change in the way Arabs see themselves?

Across the Arab world, these patriarchal, patronizing, autocratic regimes — whether monarchies or nominal republics — have infantilized their citizens. They have treated them as subjects and taught them that they're incapable of doing anything themselves. The rage that develops in response to being treated without dignity diverts into all kinds of perverse religious, sexual, violent, and criminal behavior. Now that there is a sense of agency, there's a desire for dignity that was denied by the regime and which is now being achieved.

Sometimes when we hear calls for dignity, what is meant is not just human individual dignity, but the dignity of whole countries whose regimes have allowed them to become weak, submissive, and passive. The Arab world was once upon a time a region where there were powers that played a role in the world. Today there are three Middle Eastern states of any importance: Israel, Turkey, and Iran. There's

not an Arab country that has any weight in international affairs at all. So the call for dignity means: “We’re a people of 300 million. Why do we have no weight whatsoever in the world? Why do we have no self-determination? Why is our future determined from outside the region?”

The degree to which Egyptian television has been exuding patriotism since January 25 is impossible to overstate. The old nationalist anthems are being dredged out of the archives. You hear Umm Kulthum, you hear Abdel Halim Hafez, you hear the great singers from the ’50s and the ’60s talking about the glories of Egypt, how we all love Egypt — stuff we hadn’t heard for decades. Until January nobody was proud of Egypt — and Egypt stands for the rest of the Arab world. When Egypt is in an ignominious situation, to some degree so are all Arabs.

Is there a secular, noncorrupt figure waiting in the wings in Egypt or elsewhere? An Ataturk, perhaps?

I can’t talk to a journalist, American or Arab, without being asked, “Where are the leaders?” The activist and journalist Nawara Negm, a wonderful young woman who is one of the organizers in Egypt, as far as one knows, was asked about this. She said, “The age of zaims is over.” *Zaim* means “strongman.”

The Middle East had that. There was the shah in Iran, Abdel Nasser in Egypt, Hussein in Iraq. That model decisively failed. Mubarak is the last in the line of such zaims. At least we *hope* he was the last. I don’t think that the kind of society that’s thrown up this movement is going to tolerate another zaim, and I think this society has moved beyond that, at least in the case of Egypt. That doesn’t mean that such a system may not be imposed, but that is a recipe for instability and it wouldn’t last.

The Egyptians have shaken off a lot. They have not yet succeeded in finally and fundamentally making a lot of changes, but one of the things that they have changed is the sense that you need a supreme leader.

I’m a historian; I’m never happy predicting the future. I don’t see the Ataturk model. But if you say to me the *Turkish* model, with a military that eventually ceases to intervene in public life; with an evolution of a secular system, which can incorporate religious parties; with a greater and greater degree of democracy, which is what the Turkish model so far represents, that I can see. That has a lot of appeal in the Arab world, partly because Turkey is a little bit like the Arab societies, partly because it is so successful. It is a model in multiple spheres, not least of which is the

constitutional and political, but also the economic and the cultural. At the same time, Turkey is a modern society. And it's rich. There is *humongous* Turkish investment in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Egypt, and North Africa.

Is democracy necessarily the way to go? And, at least outside Egypt, will democratic institutions have to be constructed from scratch?

Each country differs. There's a democratic tradition in Egypt and in a number of other Arab countries. It doesn't exist in Yemen or Saudi Arabia.

But frontiers and minds are more permeable in the 21st century than they ever were before. It does not take three generations for someone to understand some aspects of Jeffersonian democracy. One thing that's been astonishing to me is that across the Arab world, the same basic ideas about constitutions are being expressed. Clearly, there are prerequisites for a successful democratic system to be established — people have to be educated, they have to be literate — but for a number of these countries, those conditions do exist. And even in those where they don't, it's possible to make a beginning.

Jordan has had parliaments. Before the dictatorships that started with the Baath coup of 1963, Syria had a parliamentary regime inherited from the French mandatory period. Egypt had a parliamentary regime from 1922 to 1952, and there were constitutional debates going on in Egypt in the 1870s and early 1880s. There were elections in the Ottoman Empire, which included much of the Arab world, in 1876, 1908, 1912, and 1914.

My point is you're not building on sand. There are countries with respected legal professions: Egypt is the most notable case of this, but it's also true in Lebanon and Kuwait, where the idea of an independent judiciary is respected.

Democracy by and of itself won't solve everything. It may not even be achievable in some of these countries. And then there are powerful vested interests, a problem not unfamiliar to Americans. It's been a problem in all democracies, ever since democracy began. In many cases, the reason democracy failed in the Arab world is that democratic parliamentary regimes were unable to deal with those countries' problems in the '20s, '30s, '40s, '50s, and '60s.

Problems such as education and literacy?

There is a huge youth population in Egypt and a large educated population for which suitable jobs don’t exist, as well as serious problems of infrastructure, housing, and inequality of income. Cairo has a community living in obscene luxury, in gated communities around the ring road that circles Cairo, while millions of people in the city live on $2 a day. That’s hard to sustain without its breaking down from time to time. Addressing these issues will not be easy; the Mubarak regime failed in that regard. Then sustaining economic growth, bringing down the birthrate, educating whoever is born, and getting them into decent jobs — you’ve got to get 7, 8, 9 percent growth in these countries to keep up with this youth boom. Well, good luck to the democratic regime that has to deal with that. So democracy is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for real changes.



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