The Curious Case of Post-Authoritarian Politics: Explaining "Muslim Rage" and the *Innocence of Muslims* Protests

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As outrage at the release of a vulgar anti-Islam film continues to grip the Muslim world, scenes of angry protests at Western diplomatic posts from North Africa to Southeast Asia—not to mention the murder of the United States Ambassador to Libya—have shocked the world and left many questioning why the reaction has been so intense. Yet, the protests, and especially those in Libya, Egypt, and Tunisia, are in fact symptomatic of a wider political transformation taking place in these countries in which new-found political freedom is colliding with the corrosive legacies of decades of authoritarian rule.

History suggests that, at least over the short term, newly-democratizing countries have been overwhelmingly less stable than their authoritarian predecessors and that this instability frequently allows room for fringe elements to dominate the public discourse. In the absence of established political authority that is capable of effectively informing public opinion, many people are often inclined to rely on their past prejudices and revert to proven modes of political contestation.

Competing Explanations of "Muslim Rage"

The scenes of angry anti-American mobs and radical extremists attacking foreign embassies have led to a serious discussion as to whether the Muslim world is somehow fundamentally opposed to the West. Many international observers, from the U.S. to Korea, continue to debate the reasons why the protests have been so intense and widespread. Indeed, the volatile nature of this so-called "Muslim rage" makes clear that there are a complex variety of factors driving events. Arguably, the most widely offered explanations being discussed include perceived cultural and religious differences, entrenched anti-Americanism, the growing influence of Islamist political parties, and socioeconomic factors such as unemployment and economic stagnation.

1. Cultural and Religious Differences

A recurring argument over the past decade has been the perceived incompatibility of Islamic values with the liberal democracy of the West. Rooted in Samuel Huntington's 'Clash of Civilizations' thesis and the post-September 11 'War on Terror', some observers have argued that Islam, and particularly its more hard-line interpretations such as Wahhabism and Salafism, are fundamentally opposed to the West. In this analysis, the current protests are merely the latest in a long history of violent Muslim reactions to perceived insults to their religion. From the *fatwa* that followed Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* to the 2005 protests following a Danish newspaper's publishing of cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad and the more recent burning of Qurans in Afghanistan, the response by the Muslim community is often depicted as part of a much larger struggle with the West.

2. Entrenched Anti-Americanism

While the United States has never been particularly well-liked in much of the Muslim world from North Africa to Southeast Asia, the past decade has witnessed a significant increase in hostile attitudes towards both the Obama administration and the U.S. more generally. As numerous polls have indicated, the expectations that President Obama created in the Muslim world with his calls for democratic change and development in Cairo in 2009 quickly evaporated with his inconsistent support of the "Arab Spring", his failure to curb Israeli settlements, and his use of drone strikes. Consequently, the release of even an obscure but offensive film has been seen as more of a spark for long-standing grievances.

3. The Rise of Islamist Parties

The clear winners of the "Arab Spring" so far have been the political Islamists, the largest, most popular, and best organized groups which survived decades of harsh repression under secular dictatorships. Tunisia's Ennahda Party and Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood became governing parties, while Libya's Islamist organizations have also proven themselves quite popular. Presumably, angry protestors think that their new, populist Islamist leaders might allow them to express their rage and even support their anti-Western attitudes. Not surprisingly, leaders in democracies tend to listen to their constituencies, even though the election system is new and not yet institutionalized.

4. Economic Causes

Finally, a popular explanation for the current unrest and the broader upheavals in the Middle East and North Africa has focused on the serious economic challenges gripping the region. For instance, youth unemployment (which has now exceeded 25%, compared to just 10% in East Asia, and a global average of 12.9% according to the latest OECD figures) is often seen as creating a situation in which limited job opportunities coupled with poor living standards have unleashed millions of poor, unemployed, young men onto the streets. Similarly, the unprecedented rise in global food prices and cost of living

pressures have been said to affect the most marginal groups in society, as well as having a disproportionate impact on urban populations.

Critical Causes
While all of these causal factors undoubtedly offer important insights into the violence, they lack a definitive explanation for why the protests differed across the Muslim world. All of the explanatory factors that commentators have offered for the current protests, from anti-Americanism and cultural differences to economic challenges and radical movements, have frequently coalesced in other protests around the world, yet have produced a variety of outcomes.
For example, whereas violence has accompanied protests in many parts of the Arab world and South Asia, in places such as Southeast Asia, the protests have largely been non-violent, while they failed to materialize in others.

One such case has been Turkey, which has many of the factors that should have facilitated major protests. First, despite being secular, Turkey is nevertheless an overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim country and has been an active supporter of the Arab uprisings across the region and the current conflict in Syria out of a sense of common religious affinity. Second, even as it has sought EU membership and remains a major U.S. ally, its citizens have also exhibited remarkably high degrees of anti-American sentiment over the years. Third, the country has lived under an Islamist party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), for more than a decade which has seen the empowerment of the conservative religious population. Finally, it is only economically where Turkey really differs from its Arab neighbors. While youth unemployment has certainly decreased, internal migration has stretched its urban centers to the breaking point, and the economy is in serious danger of becoming caught in a middle income trap and economic stagnation.

1. *The 'Politics of Protest'*
Consequently, a major variable in understanding the different types of public reaction, from mass demonstrations and violent attacks to small-scale protests, lies in the different experiences among Muslim populations with political engagement. What has occurred in much of the Arab Muslim world over the past two years since the Arab uprisings has been a growing perception of public protest as the only avenue for expressing political opinions. In the past, anger at perceived insults to Islam was often used by authoritarian leaders to serve their own interests by directing attention away from their own policies. But now, this history of taking to the "Arab street" has become accepted as the natural, legitimate form of politics.

This trend is not unique to the Middle East. For instance, in Korea, long after the country's political transition from authoritarianism in the 1980s, a significant proportion of the public has remained quick to take to the streets. From the countless demonstrations over stalled political reforms throughout the 1990s to the past decade's numerous anti-American protests, public anger has often been expressed in the form of street protests.

2. *The Active Minority*

A second factor underlying the protests stems from the role of an active minority of protestors. While the overall number of protesters in most cases has been remarkably small, mostly numbering in the hundreds or a few thousand, this small minority has been portrayed as representing the views of all Muslims. Only in countries where anti-Americanism has reached extreme levels, such as Pakistan, or where the political parties mobilized citizens into the streets, such as Iran, did we even see protests over a few thousand people.

The fact is that most of the protests have involved predominantly young men aligned with radical Islamist movements of varying persuasions. Mobilized by religious leaders, these men—and they have been overwhelmingly male—have been at the forefront of the violent confrontations with governments and police forces. While the exact composition of the protesters has differed between countries, they are primarily comprised of an eclectic mix of hard-line Salafists and other extremist religious factions, those affiliated with militant organizations, and even remnants of the old regimes. Again, this trend of a marginal group positioning itself at the center of political action also has its parallels in Korea. For instance, during the country's struggle for democracy, a hard core of activists and trade unionists often focused on battling with the police and government.

Insights from Korea

For those in Korea watching events in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya, there is the widespread perception that despite the overthrow of authoritarian leaders and the holding of democratic elections, these countries remain far from becoming stable, business-friendly environments. Furthermore, there remains the fear that this intense public anger and violence could one day be directed at Korean interests in the region. For instance, amid the state of lawlessness that enveloped Libya during the 2011 uprising against Muammar Qaddafi, there were reports of mobs—from both pro- and anti-Qaddafi forces—ransacking the offices of major Korean companies. Even now, there is great hesitance among Korean companies and organizations to more fully engage in the Middle East out of security fears. Not surprisingly, some within U.S. policy circles are focusing on disengaging from the Arab Muslim world while protecting U.S. diplomatic assets in the region.

Yet, thankfully, both the Obama administration and many Muslim leaders have taken a more balanced approach by condemning both the film and the violent protests. The Obama government has tried to show the Muslim world that it is not behind the video while emphasizing its respect for free speech. The Libyan government continues to hunt the killers of Ambassador Stevens, while many of its citizens have protested against the attacks and moved to oust the militias. Ordinary Muslim citizens know that violence cannot be tolerated. The film maker, an Islamophobic, anti-Semitic, con-artist, did not violate law. This ridiculous and racist behavior must be tolerated within the system more than physical violence.

The newly-elected leaders in North Africa are confronted with the challenge of trying to develop state institutions and their attendant features such as political pluralism, respect for the rule of law, and civic rights and responsibilities in the post-authoritarian political vacuum. For these leaders, the challenge of trying to institutionalize political norms will continue to conflict with the unleashing of often-distorted public sensitivities. However, this short-term instability can be diminished via an effective state-building project under legitimate governments with strong public support. This is the only way that populist, extremist sentiments and violent, angry fringe elements can be brought under control.

Korea has great interest in newly-democratizing Muslim countries as important sources of future stability and prosperity in terms of the energy trade and huge untapped trade relationships. Given its high stakes in economic and security interests, the Korean government should support the new governments in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia in their state-building project. For instance, it could share its own developmental experience, particularly focusing on strengthening state capacity in the police forces and courts to enforce the rule of law against those who engage in violent protest. Similarly, emphasizing the importance of creating an independent and transparent public service will be central to initiating this state-building project.

The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies.

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