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THE CHALLENGE OF **RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE** IN THE MIDEAST

EGYPTIAN Copts gather at the final resting place of Coptic Pope Shenuda III, the spiritual leader of the Middle-East's largest Christian minority, at the Bishoy Monastery in Beheira, 150 kilometres northwest of Cairo, on March 20. The late pope died on March 17 at the age of 88 after a long battle with illness.

IMTIYAZ YUSUF
SPECIAL TO THE NATION

THE Middle East is the birthplace of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. These three Semitic religions have co-existed socially, are scripturally inclusive but have been historically exclusive. In the past few days, Sheikh Abdul Aziz bin Abdullah, the grand mufti of Saudi Arabia has called for the destruction of all churches in the Arabian Peninsula. Such an aggressive statement only serves to embolden Muslim religious fanaticism in an age that is moving away from religious exclusivism towards religious pluralism.

Societies and religious authorities that cannot envision the future multicultural shape of the world can only sow the seeds of their own ruin. Such a statement by the grand mufti stands in direct contrast to the Prophet Muhammad's offering of personal guarantees on protection of the Christian faith in his promise to Christians on freedom of worship and movement, freedom to appoint their own judges and to own and maintain their churches and property. The case of St. Catherine's Monastery of Mount Sinai is one example. The Prophet's hospitality towards the Christians of Najran is another case in point, as he allowed those Christians to worship in his mosque in spite of doctrinal disagreements.

The statement by the Saudi mufti has grave implications. What if the Pope and the leaders of other religions called for the destruction of mosques in their countries? The fact is that many Muslim governments and associations are actively involved in constructing mosques in non-Muslim countries, without facing much hindrance.

There has to be equal Muslim reciprocation when it comes to the construction of churches and temples, for the freedom of religion is guaranteed in the Koran: "For, if God had not enabled people to defend themselves against one another, all monasteries and churches and synagogues and mosques – in all of which God's name is abundantly extolled – would surely have been destroyed" (Koran 22:40). The founders of religions are universalist and inclusivist; it is the followers who discriminate in the name of religion, giving it a bad name.

The Arab Spring was led by the largely unemployed Arab youth, the subalterns, the middle-class poor, and suppressed political groups. It was a revolt against authoritarian rulers who applied the divide-and-rule policy. Besides political freedom, it was also a call for building a pluralist Middle East. It started from mosques and churches and was engaged in by Muslims and Christians united against oppression.

One of the events behind the anti-Mubarak Egyptian revolt was the suicide attack on a Coptic church on New Year's Day 2011. And on the "Friday of Rage" on January 28, 2011, 26 mosques and seven churches were the rallying points from which protestors marched onto the Tahrir Square.

Christian communities face discrimination in both Muslim countries and Israel. They feel that they are being treated as second-class citizens. As a result, they are emigrating in large numbers. So far these people have supported authoritarian regimes in the Middle East for the sake of their security. The problem of minorities in the Muslim world can only be addressed through the formation of civil states that protect the rights of minorities through the powers of the executive, legislative and judiciary.

These civil states should not merely

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guarantee religious freedom constitutionally, but must also see that religious leaders encourage tolerance and inclusivism, and repel religious extremism. This requires Muslims and non-Muslims to become tolerant, open-minded, trustworthy and overcome the mutual biases and prejudices spread by those holding the reins of power, be they in politics, religion or academia.

The ideal future democratic Middle East will have to be a united entity but ideologically diverse and multi-religious, where minorities have the freedom to practice their religions and enjoy the protection of their faiths and institutions. Discrimination in the name of religion should have no place. Such an option is favored by a majority of Middle-Easterners but there remain some groups who oppose this.

This requires the development of the Islamic philosophy of democracy, which promotes the formation of a civil state and not an Islamic state. Historically, there has never been any model Islamic state that Muslims can emulate. The social contract of Medina drawn up by the Prophet Muhammad in 622 CE did not mention the term dawlah, or state, in Arabic; rather it was a charter concerning managing inter-group relations between Muslims, Arab pagans and the Jewish community in Medina. The term was also not used during the rule of the first four caliphs. It came into usage during the Abbasid Caliphate in the 8th century. The term "Islamic state" was given ideological colouring in the post-colonial era, which saw the establishment of secular Muslim nation states. It was used by religious nationalists to rebut the capitalist, socialist and communist models.

The Arab Spring revolutions triggered by economic, political and social factors are not centred around the demand for an Islamic state, nor jihad. The demands are for social justice, human dignity and human rights, gender equality, economic and food security, and religious freedom for all. This reality is forcing political thinkers in the Muslim world – from Morocco to Indonesia – to examine and rethink the shape of possible pluralism in Muslim polities today. They are forced to come up with pluralistic models of a Muslim state suitable for the contemporary age.

This challenge is not an easy task, especially in the face of ongoing instability, continuing economic hardship and differing views about the shape of the post-authoritarian Middle East. This is a test for the Islamic parties that have won a majority of seats in the new parliaments.

The contemporary Arab revolutions are going to affect all Middle-Eastern countries, even those that are trying to deflect them or change their course. Issues of political pluralism, religious freedom and the status of minorities are crucial issues facing all Middle-Eastern countries including Israel. This matter has global implications for the Muslim world both as a religious community and as a member of world civilisation.

DR IMTIYAZ YUSUF *is professor of Islamics and religion at the Graduate School of Philosophy and Religion, Assumption University, Bangkok.*