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SPECIAL TO THE NATION

THE Constituent Assembly of Tunisia – the first democratic Arab state – has started drafting a new constitution. There has already emerged a debate about references to Islam and the role of sharia in the constitution, to which there are two sides – in favour and against. The leading Tunisian Muslim party, Ennahda, supports Tunisia becoming a civil state in which religion has a place in the political sphere but is not the state ideology. Ennahda has declared that it accepts Article 1 of Tunisia’s 1959 constitution, saying that “the religion is Islam, the language is Arabic and the regime is a republic.”

The majority of Tunisians are of the opinion that the role of Islam has never been in jeopardy in that republic. Other secular-centrist and leftist parties are calling for more debate on the matter. Meanwhile, Egyptian secular politicians have withdrawn from their constituent assembly as Islamist forces have come to dominate it, making it a less cross-national representative body.

There are two versions to the debate about the relationship between religion and state – Western and Muslim, apart from those in other cultures not considered here. The Western and Muslim versions are based on diverse historical tracks. Europe adopted the separation of religion and state due to the humanitarian destruction and crisis created by the Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648) between Protestants and Catholics, which ended with the Treaty of Westphalia.

The British philosopher John Locke provides arguments for the separation of religion and state in his essay “A Letter Concerning Tolerance.” Locke argues that it is not the job of the state to enforce public morality, but only to protect the rights of men.

The Muslim world has not experienced religious wars, rather religion served as an effective instrument to either give or take away political legitimacy from caliphs if they became tyrants or spread fasad – corruption. The nature of the divide between the Sunni and the Shia sects is political-religious over the matter of leadership, whereas both follow the same theology.

The concept of secularist separation of religion and state was introduced in the Muslim world during the colonial era; it has since become a matter of political football. Hence, some in power have used religion to form theocratic states; others have used the concept of secularism to justify authoritarian rule and enjoyed support from external allies who in turn led to the rise of political and religious fundamentalism from the 1970s.

The recent Arab revolutions illustrate that the masses are not obsessed with the role of religion in state affairs, what they seek is economic security and political democracy in which Islam is only a reference to identity and not the main political ideology. In such a scenario, religion is one among other sources of political ideas. This development is a move away from using religion as a fig leaf, as done by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Suharto in Muslim Asia, and Hosni Mubarak and Ben Ali and others in the Middle East, most of whom were overthrown by people power. The Arab revolts call for the establishment of civil states in the Muslim world.

At the global level, there is not only one philosophy concerning the relationship between religion and state; different societies have different viewpoints on this matter. In the post-colonial era, the Muslim debate on this has gone through three phases. First, in the rise of Muslim nation-states from 1945 onwards until the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, engaged in by secular and religious nationalists, the latter representing political Islam and aspiring to an Islamic state.

Second, starting with the USSR’s invasion of Afghanistan, Saudi Arabian-sponsored jihad, until the collapse of communism, and the rise of the Taliban and international jihadism, the two Iraq wars, the 9/11 incident and the invasion of Afghanistan – this phase witnessed a separation between two types of Islamist – the jihadis a la Bin Laden and the Taliban, and the Muslim democrats such as Rachid Ghannouchi, the AKP Party in Turkey, Gus Dur of Indonesia, Anwar Ibrahim of Malaysia and Muhammad Khatami of Iran.

Third, the war against terrorism phase, which witnessed the strengthening of autocratic regimes in the Middle East through external support; the attempts by Hosni Mubarak and Mu’ammar Ghadafii to build republican dynasties until the emergence of the Arab Spring. This phase marked the beginning of the alliance between Muslim democrats and secularists against authoritarian regimes. In this period, several sections of Muslim societies have felt the effects of the clash between secular and religious forces in relation to the state-religion relationship. On the one hand, it has resulted in alienation from Islam among the young and old who have suffered under religious regimes, and on the other, alienation from secularism among those who have been the victims of its authoritarianism, corruption and failure to deliver economic benefits for all. Hence, the clarion call of the Arab Spring is for the formation of civil states – not fully religious nor fully secular, but politically pluralist, where political parties of all shades are free to contest elections while Islam becomes a reference point for the majority population.

We are observing attempts to form civil states in Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen. This development has implications for other Muslim countries, some of which have been only façades of theocratic or secular models of Muslim states. The formation of civil states in the Muslim world will help balance the relationship between religion and politics, protect personal freedoms and widen the space for public discourse; they will be an antidote to fundamentalism.

Failure to deliver political and economic development by those wielding power in civil states will mean their loss in elections. The success of civil states will put an end to the fear that Islamists believe in one vote-one time, for the lure of power makes everyone pragmatic.

The absence of civil states has been the main obstacle in terms of development in the Middle East, and the resultant political turmoil. External powers should welcome the Muslim civil state models for the sake of peace and security at the international level, and they will need to commit to the promotion of civil values rather than seek only their own economic and foreign policy interests. The civil state models born out of the Arab Spring will put forth Muslim models of democracy and secularism in the global era of multilaterialism where unilaterlism has no place.

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