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Are Egyptians now less “Islamic”?

Hani Shukrallah,

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Amid the present furore over what is Islam, we should recall something important: the Egyptian Revolution was not anti-Islamic or pro-Islamic, but non-Islamic, aimed at breaking the police state/Islamic state duality

A common friend/colleague’s name came up in a recent conversation. My memory for names was always abominable and is becoming increasingly so with age. To make sure we were, in fact, referring to the same person, I asked: “Is she the one with the ... ” gesturing with my hand across my head to indicate the headscarf, or veil — the non-verbal gesture very likely an attempt to blunt the edge of a possibly un-PC question. “Yes, she is,” came the answer, “but she’s taken off the veil.”

I’d known the person in question for over 10 years, have a lot of admiration for her as a journalist and consider her a friend — even if not close enough that her name would readily come to mind. But throughout our acquaintanceship she’d always been veiled. I commented, rather flippantly, that one year of the Muslim Brotherhood seems to have put Egyptians off religion.

This wasn’t the only case of “unveiling” I’d come across during the past couple of years. To take the veil or remove it is, presumably, a very personal decision, at least for an adult, professional,

middle class woman — a matter of conscience. Yet, I believe I'm safe in saying that — at least within the, albeit, extremely limited circle of my direct experience — the removal of the veil has been occurring with a degree of frequency unprecedented since Egyptian women began to take up the veil in the mid-1970s, when the opposite was true.

This is far from suggesting the country is witnessing a phenomenon of unveiling. Obviously, we have no figures, no reliable polls, while mere and highly unreliable personal observation (however coloured by anti-veil bias) is still obliged to acknowledge the ubiquitous prevalence of the veil in its various manifestations, ranging, as these do, from the trendy headscarf to the full veil of black robes reaching from head to foot, with only a tiny window for the eyes, which may also be covered by dark sunglasses or gauze.

If there is in fact a shift in the attitude to the veil, it is subtle and sedate rather than revolutionary and phenomenal. Meanwhile, Egyptian women — especially younger women — continue to subvert the idea of the veil, if not its letter. Half in jest, I have described this progressively trendy interpretation of the veil among urban young women of all social classes as a matter of “giving unto God the headscarf and unto our-bodies-ourselves the leggings and skinny jeans.”

Downtown Cairo is a favourite haunt of mine despite of — or rather because of — its transition from its initial “European”/upper middle class character to its current status as a dilapidated playground of the Cairene working classes. On my countless walks along downtown streets I'm always somewhat amazed and amused at the originality and imagination of young working and lower middle class women in transforming the ostensibly inherent sinfulness of women's bodies (as embodied in the concept of the hijab) into a modern fashion statement expressing pride in these very bodies.

In mid-April, veteran journalist and noted intellectual and writer Sherif El-Choubachi, in a Facebook posting, called on Egyptian women to stage an anti-veil (unveiling!) demonstration in Tahrir Square. It was nonsense, which in any half-rational setting would have been treated as most Facebook postings are, with a “like” or a “comment” (which can be particularly nasty). Yet, all hell broke loose, with a sensation-hungry, nonsense-loving media having a heyday, Al-Azhar issuing condemnatory proclamations, hosts of Azhar “scholars” pitching in to assert that the hijab was a divine and ordained command, even as liberal secularists pitched in with assertions on the “right” to veil. Rationalism is not a defining feature of post-counterrevolution Egypt.

Beside the fact that Mr El-Choubachi (with all due respect) is not really in a position to call for a demonstration of any kind (presumably, you need to belong to some sort of mass movement to be able to do so), the fundamental reason for the nonsense is that demonstrations are banned in today's Egypt, with only government sponsored, security body-backed demos occasionally allowed (usually to declare support for the president, the army and the police). Otherwise, a would-be demonstrator risks years of imprisonment — that is, if he/she survives the demonstration itself.

What I found especially perplexing was the reaction of many liberal secularists who saw in this pseudo debate an opportunity to reiterate their usual “right to veil, or unveil” mantra. The language of rights is always inadequate, but is especially so in this instance.

To be told, day in, day out, for over four decades, by each and every authority and media outlet in the land, by official (“moderate”) religious authorities no less than by the Islamist opposition (both “moderate” and militant), that the veil is an incontestable divine command not subject to questioning or varied interpretation — this is coercion. To construct woman’s bodies as “awra,” or source of shame, is coercion. For an unveiled woman to be branded a harlot bound for Hellfire is coercion. To hold the hijab as a universal indicator of a woman’s “virtue”, even as its absence is supposed to signal the opposite, is coercion. To repeatedly explain and justify rape and sexual harassment of women by referring to their “immodest” attire is coercion.

Sure, despite all of the above, an upper middle class woman married to a millionaire (or who has one for a parent), lives in Zamalek or in an exclusive gated community, moves around town by Mercedes or BMW (with tinted windows) and summers in London, Paris or the multitude of exclusive resorts along the nation’s shores, still has space for choice. Sadly, however, these women exercising their right to choose account for one or — let’s be generous — two percent of Egyptian womanhood.

Mr Choubachi’s call may have been misguided, impractical and wholly unrealistic, but he made it. The fact that he dared to do so is not without significant implications. Something’s in the air.

Take the concurrent fracas over Islam El-Beheiry, a media figure specialised in Islamic issues with a TV show of his own, predictably named “With Islam El-Beheiry,” who has been at the centre of yet another, even fiercer uproar over religion. El-Beheiry, known for his “unconventional” readings of Islamic tradition, had lashed out at a statement by Al-Azhar on ISIL (the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant) in which the supreme religious authority in the land condemned the monstrous group but added that, nevertheless, their doctrine and behaviour did not put them outside Islam; they were not apostates or infidels.

In his reply, El-Beheiry did not dispute the Azharite assertion viz. ISIL’s Muslim credentials, but rather took the issue into a new — and for many, shocking — dimension. In brief, El-Beheiry suggested that ISIL’s extremism and criminality was embedded in Islamic tradition itself; in particular in the interpretive teachings of the four accepted interpretive traditions of Sunni Islam, each associated with one of the four great imams (all of whom lived during the first two centuries after the Prophet), namely Abu Hanifa, Malik Ibn Anas, Al-Shafei and Ibn Hanbal.

Today’s Egyptian TV presenters are by and large “rabble rousers,” bringing to mind some of the more frenzied soapbox speakers on Hyde Park Corner on a Sunday morning, or — for that matter — American televangelists. El-Beheiry does not stray from that particular interpretation of a TV presenter’s job description. As such, and apparently in the (often scorching) heat of the moment, he would say something to the effect that the real criminals were the four founding Sunni imams and their followers, including Al-Azhar’s ulema. On one occasion, he said their books should be burned. He would later, and in more reasoned debates, modify these statements, reserving a special, unconstrained and, very likely, justified wrath towards the latter-day Imam Ibn Taymiyyah (8th century of hijra).

His fundamental argument, however, is apt. The continuous contention over what “real” Islamic doctrine — or for that matter, real Islam — is supposed to be has been befuddled by the simple

fact that the warring schools, from Al-Azhar to ISIL, base themselves on the same texts and interpretive tradition. The verses of the Quran and the “correct” Sunna (or the tradition and sayings of the Prophet as relayed by “accepted” authorities) are held to be set in stone, unchanging, unchangeable and beyond ijtihad (or independent reasoning). Added to which is the so-called “consensus” of Ahl El-Sunna wal Jamaa, presumably embodied in whatever the four abovementioned imams and their various followers agree on.

The problem, however, is that these very texts (in fact, like all religious texts) say a great many very different, often contradictory, things — e.g., are Christians and Jews part of the “faithful,” “People of the Book,” or dire enemies of Islam and Muslims who should be fought and killed? There are sacred texts to support both positions.

The only way out of such an impasse is to impose a monopoly on “interpretation,” to set up some sort of clergy that alone reserves the right to eclectically decide what text is relevant and what isn’t, in general or in a particular situation. This is a highly paradoxical situation, if only for the fact that these very traditions do not recognise a clergy, which would make the blood-lustful interpretations of Bin Laden, Ayman Al-Zawahiri and ISIL’s would-be caliph, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, at the very least as good as those of the more “disciplined” Al-Azhar, so long as they can support their interpretations with the relevant sacred texts — which, in fact, they do.

Why, for instance, should the texts upon which the hijabis declared an incontestable, unquestionable divine ordinance (according to Al-Azhar’s “official Islam”) be any more applicable or legitimate than those that presumably sanction the killing of apostates, or the taking of the women of conquered enemies as slaves, as ISIL would have it? There are indeed “texts” to support this, that and the other.

In their uproariously frenzied counter-attack on El-Beheiry and El-Choubachi, the most coherent argument posed by the Azharite ulema was that they alone have the right to pick and choose, they alone decide which text is set in stone and which may be ignored, glossed over or deemed unsuitable to our time. It’s not the interpretive tradition itself that is in question, but who holds a monopoly over its deployment in the here and now.

Some ulema could not resist resorting as well to a more secular attack, one which has been in great currency in post-revolution/counterrevolution Egypt: El-Beheiry and El-Choubachi are agents of an American/Zionist (Masonic?) conspiracy to undermine the Egyptian state and society and — why ever not — Islam itself.

Still, the mere fact of the twin boisterous debates (inconceivable a few years ago) seems to indicate that something new is in the air.

Many have suggested that this is little more than a distraction. While every single achievement of the Egyptian Revolution is being trodden in the mud, the Mubarak regime almost fully restored, its repressive character, if anything, doubly vicious, the eruption of such ideological/cultural issues is aimed at drawing people’s attention away from the urgent realm of politics, wherein — during the heydays of the revolution — millions of Egyptians were united in heroic struggle under the banner of “freedom, human dignity and social justice.”

This may well be true — in part. Religion, after all, is especially malleable to this very function. Byzantine theologians may not really have argued over how many angels could dance on the head of a pin, but theological debates — in all religions — often come pretty close.

The full picture, however, is considerably more complex, oblique and contradictory. The Egyptian Revolution was profoundly secular, if not secularist. After more than nearly four decades of the inexorable rise of Islamism came a popular revolution of millions that conspicuously made a point of putting religion (with all its uncomfortable impedimenta) on the backburner. Similarly to all the Arab Spring uprisings, Egyptians in motion spoke not of Sharia, rule by what God ordained or the restoration of the Caliphate. As the whole world came to know, the banner of Tahrir was freedom, democracy and social justice. They did not speak of an Islamic nation, but rather reclaimed the flag, redefining Egyptian nationhood as one arising from the fundamental human dignity of its citizens.

It went even further. As if picking up from where the previous popular revolution in their history (the revolution of 1919) had left off, the young men and women of Tahrir and elsewhere around the country took the hitherto stunted notions of citizenship and equality to new and unprecedented heights. Women, veiled or unveiled, were now fully equal to men — their bodies, which for decades had been put at the very heart of the symbolic battle over the nation's identity, its political, social and cultural makeup, its present and future, were rendered a non-issue. The Egyptian Revolution did not debate thehijab; it ignored it — and in doing so dismantled its very basis, symbolically and practically.

Similarly, Coptic/Muslim Brotherhood was an overriding theme of the Egyptian Revolution. Previously inconceivable images of demonstrators holding aloft the Quran and the Cross, Coptic human shields around Muslims performing their prayers, seemed to roll back, within weeks, decades of effective disenfranchisement of Egypt's Christian minority, holding Copts hostage to the Islamist/police state contestation, with each side taking a swipe at what had become the country's preferred whipping boy.

And herein lay a fundamental feature of the Egyptian Revolution (indeed, the whole Arab Spring), which many commentators have failed to grasp. And this is that in neither targeting nor deploying religion, it sidelined it, pushed it out of the political realm, and rendered it politically, ideologically and culturally neutral. It was not anti-Islamic or pro-Islamic; it simply was non-Islamic. Not anti-religious but non-religious.

This is the very definition of secular.

Certainly, the Egyptian Revolution has failed, and so did the whole domino of Arab Spring uprisings. In their failure to follow through they had the paradoxical effect of reinvigorating the forces they had set out to dismantle. Yet, the police state/Islamic state duality that had held the region in its iron grip for close on four decades has been shaken to its very foundations. The whole theoretical edifice of Arab/Muslim “exceptionalism”, said to be inherent to their intrinsic, immutable and unchanging “Islamic identity,” lies in the rubble of revolution and counterrevolution, having been made nonsense.

In late April, an administrative court in Alexandria issued a ruling banning the expression of religious opinions (fatwas) by any non-officially sanctioned persons or bodies. The ruling was celebrated by governmental and religious authorities. The “renewal of religious discourse,” now advocated by all and sundry (not least the Wahhabi Saudi rulers themselves) is to be reined in, tightly controlled, and held as an exclusive monopoly.

It is stupid and futile. What the contest over thehijab, Islam El-Beheiry, or for that matter the ludicrous panic raised by Al-Azhar and the media over the alleged spread of atheism among Egyptian youth, actually show is a most profound ideological crisis. The Egyptian Revolution, indeed the Arab Spring as whole, pushed the overwhelmingly predominant police state/Islamic state paradigm into a spiral of descent. Historically defunct, their twin competing/overlapping ideological bases lying in tatters, their frantic struggle for survival has transformed them into caricatures of themselves as they engaged in a heinous, blood drenched death dance most starkly exemplified by Bashar Al-Assad and ISIL.

How it all unfolds is yet to be seen. But let me leave you with this quote from a brilliant Egyptian scholar, the late Nasr Hamid Abu Zayed:

“In order to understand the Quran, we must recognise that, even though it is the speech of God, it has historical context; it was spoken, proclaimed, and written down in a specific historical situation, in the intellectual milieu and the language of the 7th century. Only an understanding of the basis of this comprehensive historical knowledge enables us to interpret the Quranic texts correctly. This allows us to grasp the core of the message which transcends its historical context and to decide what it means for us, the believers of today.” (From the paper, “The Quran, Islam and Muhammad,” 4 August 2012)

You cannot “renew” religious discourse by picking and choosing according to political exigency backed by monopolistic power. Every sacred text is as good as another, unless they’re contextualised and, as such, relativised. Unless we look for “the core of the message” rather than embroil ourselves in deciding which text expresses “true Islam,” while surreptitiously shoving others under the rug, we might as well all of us assert, as the late grand mufti of Saudi Arabia used to, that the Earth is flat, its alleged roundness a Western/atheistic conspiracy.