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Democracy: Yes, But Not Enough

Michael Sean Winters | Feb. 3, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

Back in the early 1980s, when I was first studying politics here at the Catholic University of America, I recall the bafflement that attended some of my first encounters with Marxist thought. There was something unreal about the way Marxist analysis and ideas were presented. Marxist ideas were defended in articles and books in purely theoretical terms, as if it was somehow impolite to ask the simple question by which all political ideas should be judged: How do people live in countries where these ideas dominate? By the early 1980s, the verdict was in on Marxism. It was a failure and the people who lived under it lived miserable lives. I had a hard time giving much credence to ideas that yielded such misery in practice.

I have thought of those days so long ago this week as we hear people discuss ?democracy? and its prospects in Egypt as if the word itself was a kind of magic spell, capable of dispelling demons. Democracy is, undoubtedly, the form of government that best conforms itself over time to the promotion of human dignity and the common good. But, as a practical matter, democracy alone is no guarantee of such happy public outcomes. A democratic regime is capable of violating the rights of minorities, indeed, can be more successful in persecuting minorities, precisely because it reflects the will of the people. A democratic regime, unencumbered by other strong social institutions or traditions that place a limit on the exercise of government authority, is capable of the same crimes an autocracy can commit. Democracy can expel Mubarak but it cannot dispel some of the demons that haunt contemporary Arab societies.

The obvious example is, of course, Gaza. Hamas won elections there. The regime is a democratic one, but that does not mean it is a decent one. People voted for Hamas because they were sick and tired of the corruption and inefficiencies of Fatah. Many of those people shared Hamas? belief that Israel should be destroyed and were unafraid to employ terrorism to achieve that destruction. Many did not. But, armed with the political legitimacy an election confers, Hamas places its weapons? arsenals among its population, in schools and hospitals, so that Israel is reluctant to attack them, and if it does, Hamas will prate on about the innocent victims. In short, democracy is necessary to the flowering of a modern society, but it is not sufficient. You need a culture that respects individual rights, you need institutions of civil society, you need a cultural allergy to extremism and especially religious fanaticism.

This is a time for clear thinking about the Mideast. I hope that Egypt will find her Mandela or her Cincinnatus, someone capable of taking an explosive situation, directing it towards more peaceful ends, and then, if it be a military man like Cincinnatus, departing the scene. This is no time for the kind of crazy chatter at Fox, warning about the restoration of the Caliphate, comparing ideas about personal liberties with no awareness of the cultural differences between Arab cultures and Western ones, stoking fear for domestic political reasons. Mr. Beck and Mr. Hannity have been even more offensive, more unhinged, more crazy than usual this week as events unfold in Egypt.

It is also a time for clear thinking on the left. The organization Churches for Middle East Peace has issued a statement [1]calling for the United States not to veto a Security Council resolution regarding Israel, specifically Israel settlement policy. The resolution is sponsored by the government of Lebanon which is now in the hands

of Hezbollah. That is reason enough not to support it. But, with the U.S. being forced before the entire world to abandon a long-standing ally in Egypt, and abandon him we must, this is exactly the wrong time to take a step away from Israel on the world stage. As well, the good people at CMEP should use what influence they have to convince the Palestinians that as long as they insist on half of Jerusalem, they will never enjoy the secure hold on Nablus to which they aspire. History cannot be undone. Jerusalem is not going to be divided anymore than Manhattan will be sold back to the Native Americans. Yet even more importantly, there is enough going on in the Nile Delta to consume the attention of policy makers here and around the world. The last thing we need to focus on right now is the Israeli-Palestinian dispute.

Who knows how much of what we know about Cincinnatus is true, and how much is legend. Certainly, few predicted that Mandela would be as successful in affecting a political transformation as he has been. Yeltsin, the man of courage who stared down the last tyrants of the Communism regime, did not have the capacity to steer his nation towards the kind of civil society that would support democracy over the long haul. The historical record for such transformations is a mixed one throughout the world, so we should not be hoping for the eschaton in Egypt. The people on the streets ? and even people who embrace sound ideas are capable of becoming a mob ? have many aspirations, and no government will meet them all. Let us hope for small steps, in the right direction, for large goals in such circumstances are distractions or invitations to zealotry. Small steps. Peaceful steps.

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[1] http://www.cmep.org/content/statement-cmep-un-security-council-resolution-middle-east-feb-2-2011