

## Secularism, Islamism and Arab Spring

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***It is reasonable to assume that Egypt and Tunisia walk towards developmentalism, even without secularism***

In order to develop, the present middle-income countries, such as Brazil, experienced the classic contradiction between the developmentalist and modernizing forces oriented to industrialization and the liberal and dependent forces. On the other hand, it is usual to believe that modernization and secularism are twin brothers, although this is not what history teaches us.

The Arab nationalist movements believed in those two concepts, and tried to put them into practice. In the 1950s a Sunni in Egypt, Abdel Nasser, and a Shiite in Iran, Mohammed Mossadegh, were the leaders of this idea, but they have been defeated by the imperial powers. The same happened to the secularist regime of Iraq, defeated by its own incompetence and by imperialism, and is now happening in Syria.

After those defeats, in 1979, the Islamic revolution took place in Iran. There are many ways to understand it; my interpretation is that it reflected the failure of Arab peoples' attempts to carry out their national and capitalist revolution in a secular way, and the perception that they could achieve it with the support of religion. This may seem absurd for those – developmentalists or liberals – who have learned that modernization and religion are antagonistic. But, historically, this is not an absurdity. After all, from a political point of view, the foundation of the Anglican Church by Henry VIII was essentially a decision to use religion in order to unite the nation and strengthen the English State.

Two years ago we had the Arab Spring and, once again, the modernization issue emerged in full force. Liberals believed that now there was room for liberal and secularist democracies, but what we saw in Egypt and Tunisia, the two countries where this revolution was more vigorous, was the victory in the elections of Islamic parties – parties that, besides being Islamic, defend the integration between religion and State.

In Egypt, the government of the Muslim Brotherhood, confirmed in a referendum in which it won 64% of the votes, adopted a new Constitution in which the Sharia – the Koranic law – is recognized, and its

international policy is cautious, but clearly independent. And for this it is already being criticized by local elites and Western powers. In Tunisia as well, the general direction of change is similar. There is not yet a pure Islamic government, as it happened in Iran, but the country becomes more independent. Sunni Islamic parties, which not long ago were more concerned with religious issues and with the idea of a pan-Arab caliphate, are now more concerned with promoting national development.

Will this mean that the new Sunni Islamic governments are moving towards developmentalism? Since the industrial revolutions were almost always achieved in the framework of mercantilism or of its modern form – developmentalism – and since liberalism linked to the interests of the imperial powers did not lead the Arab countries to development, it is reasonable to presume that countries such as Egypt and Tunisia will head in that direction.

But this will not be an easy path. In order to succeed, it is not enough for the government to be supported by the people; it will also need a national development project, which will only be fulfilled with the contribution of its industrial entrepreneurs and part of its intellectuals.