



Whatever Happened to the Arab Uprisings?

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This is the sixth of a series of nine posts that previews one chapter of the new book by Daniel Philpott, [Religious Freedom in Islam: The Fate of a Universal Human Right in the Muslim World Today](#). This article features edited excerpts from chapter 5 of the book and first appeared in [The Volokh Conspiracy](#).

To read all posts in this series visit: [Previewing Religious Freedom in Islam by Daniel Philpott](#).

At 11:30 in the morning of December 17, 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi, a produce vendor in the city of Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, set himself on fire in front of the [local](#) government headquarters in order to protest governmental corruption and in so doing provoked a historic wave of demonstrations and uprisings across the entire Arab world.

Did the Arab Uprisings succeed? While they overthrew dictatorships in four countries, they did little to replace them with democracies. Only one country, Tunisia—the one where it all started—now resembles a stable democracy. This wintry result explains much about why the media no longer refers to the uprisings as the "Arab Spring."

In my new book, [Islam and Religious Freedom: The Fate of a Universal Human Right in the Muslim World Today](#), I argue that religious freedom explains a great deal about why the uprisings failed (and succeeded in Tunisia). Admittedly, religion played only a bit part in initially provoking the uprisings. Most Arabs who took to the streets harbored the same sort of frustrations that led Bouazizi to his sad protest: corruption, lack of economic opportunity, unemployment, weariness with dictatorship, and a desire for democracy. Islam, however, entered the stage soon thereafter and critically shaped the course of the drama. Even more so, Muslims' political theologies of religious freedom were crucial to the plot. The importance of religious freedom, I argue, is one of the central lessons of the historic Arab Uprisings.

The Arab Uprisings reinforce the book's central argument regarding the possibility of religious freedom in Islam. From a satellite view, they appear to corroborate skepticism about this possibility. Five years after the protests of early 2011, the preponderance of these predominantly Muslim countries was not more religiously free.

As I argue previously in the book, though, zooming in on the cases reveals a more complex picture. Skeptics of Islam will depict this picture as one of traditional Islamic forces—radical *jihadi* militant groups, Salafists, and their ideological confreres—obstructing freedom's emergence. The power of

Salafists in Egypt, the need of Egypt's first post-uprising [president](#), Mohammad Morsi, to appease their demands, and Morsi's own Islamist signals stoked the fears of proponents of religiously free democracy, and even more so the fears of secularists and of Coptic Christians, that religious repression was in the offing.

In Libya, the refusal of radical Islamist militants and Salafists to join a nascent and fragile democratic government doomed its prospects more than any other factor. In Syria, radical Islamist militants took over the opposition to the Assad government and conquered a substantial portion of the country's territory, where they fomented a religious repression of beheadings and expulsion and fueled a civil war that continues to this day. In Yemen, too, radical Islamic groups, especially Sunni ones, have attacked members of the government, harshly discriminated against Shias, and ruled the territories they control with religious repression. In Bahrain, the Sunni minority government has continued to discriminate sharply against the minority Shias well after the Shias rose up. Without a doubt, bearers of the religiously repressive pattern of denying freedom have exercised strong sway over the direction of the Arab Uprisings.

To leave matters there, though, leaves a great deal unexplained. The secular repressive dictatorships that ruled Arab countries for decades also bear much of the blame for the failure of religiously free democracies to develop. (One of the book's central argument is that secular repressive regimes, rooted in European [ideology](#), are responsible for much of the denial of religious freedom in the Muslim-majority world.) Decades of secular repression in Egypt, Libya, and Syria choked off opportunities for Islamic parties with inclinations toward democracy or religious freedom to gain experience in organizing politically and participating in democratic governance. Many Islamic groups reacted to repression by becoming militant opponents of the political system. Thus, when secular repressive dictatorships fell, Islamic parties were ill-equipped to govern effectively, especially in the face of economic tumult and institutions rotten with corruption. Even in Tunisia, whose post-uprising trajectory was far more positive, the difficulty of facing these burdens rendered the pro-democracy Ennahda Party an electoral loser when it faced its second round at the polls.

Secular repressive forces persisted after the uprisings in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Syria, where they both weakened Islamic sectors who sought democracy and religious freedom and contributed to a mutually reinforcing polarization between secular and religiously repressive parties. While the powerful and secularist Egyptian army hung like a Sword of Damocles over Egypt's democratic experiment, the religiously repressive tendencies of President Morsi's government provoked protesters to return to the streets and gave the army the pretext to drop the sword and return the country to a secular repressive dictatorship.

In Libya, forces who carry the prospect of secular repression vie for dominance with Islamist forces who foment religious repression. The secular repressive government in Syria has not been overthrown but continues to fight a civil war in which both this government and its religiously repressive Muslim opponents have muffled moderate Muslim voices who call for democracy and religious harmony. A mutually fortifying opposition between secular repression and religious repression, then, accounts for freedom's failure better than religious repression alone.

The fate of freedom in the Arab Uprisings is made still more complex by the presence of Muslim proponents of religious freedom—that is, people and parties committed both to an Islamic vision for the society and to an expansion of democracy and religious freedom. Tunisia's Ennahda Party is

the best example of such a party, one that articulated principles of religious freedom and mostly resisted religiously repressive demands from Islamists. Ennahda is far from perfect in its fidelity to freedom, as is true of Tunisia's Constitution, laws, and democracy. But Ennahda represents a genuine force for religious freedom in the Arab world. In each of the other countries where major uprisings took place, there were also people and factions who stood for religious freedom on Islamic grounds.

The Muslim Brotherhood is more mixed in its support for religious freedom. For a generation now, in Egypt and in other countries, it has voiced its commitment to participating democratically in a political system that it coinhabits with secular parties. This does not mean, however, that the Brotherhood will cease supporting laws that confine the religious behavior of both Muslims and Christians. It favors religious freedom more than the parties on its right flank, but this is a low standard. The Brotherhood's performance in Egypt under Morsi leaves it lacking a track record of advancing freedom while actually in power, although it is difficult to know how much its behavior was due to the need to appease the Islamists with whom it shared governance. On the religious freedom spectrum, the Brotherhood lies between parties like Ennahda and the Justice and Development Party in Turkey (of 2002–2011) on the one hand, and Salafists on the other.

The fate of religious freedom in the Arab world, then, cannot be explained simply as an upshot of Islam or of Islamism. Rather, it results from the interplay among factions holding political theologies of religious freedom, secular repression, and religious repression. Where religious freedom champions were strong enough and could position themselves favorably to the advocates of the other two political theologies, as was the case in Tunisia, religious freedom could be advanced. In most cases, though, partisans of religious freedom did not enjoy such advantages.

The interplay between these factions in turn explains much about the fate of democracy, the aspiration of Mohamed Bouazizi and the other protesters who first took to the Arab streets. Political theologies of religious freedom, of course, are not the only determinant of the success of democracy. A country's level of economic development, the repressive capacities of the state, and other factors obviously will be crucial. Where parties or factions holding a political theology of religious freedom are relatively strong, though, democracy stands a much better chance, and where forces of secular repression and religious repression are relatively strong, democracy will be handicapped. Religion matters, and religious freedom matters.

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