

The Arab Spring: too radical or not radical enough?

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To most people, the idea that Mahatma Gandhi was more violent than Adolf Hitler would seem preposterous. When you're speaking to Slavoj Žižek, however, such a suggestion is par for the course.² Žižek has argued that Gandhi led a movement that challenged imperial hegemony and articulated an alternative to it, whereas Hitler's violence was oriented towards refining and protecting the system rather than altering it in any way.

Similarly, the Arab Spring is often understood and analysed in terms of its potential for radicalism. This test of being, or not being, radical forces it on the defensive. As opposed to the idea that the Arab Spring may become too radical, I would like to advance the proposition that it is not radical enough. It aims at more widespread participation in the system rather than any change in the system itself. An examination of the discursive frameworks within which the Arab Spring has been understood will help clarify this position.

People in different countries, in different socio-political conditions, some Arabs and some not, came together to protest the everyday conditions imposed on them and effect regime change.

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2 Shobhan Saxena, 'Was Gandhi more violent than Hitler?' interview with Slavoj Žižek, *The Times of India* blog, 12 January 2010, <http://blogs.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/Main-Street/entry/was-gandhi-more-violent-than>, accessed 16 January 2012.

The movement was termed the ‘Arab Spring’ and the initial international reaction to it was surprise. After all, these popular uprisings were happening in Tunisia, in Egypt, in Libya – places and people ‘without history’, not expected to have a political identity or consciousness.³ These were places and people who were always represented within western democracies through orientalist tropes: either indifferent to democracy or a threat to it. To an orientalist sensibility, the fact that these citizens had opinions or the courage to act on those opinions seemed in itself revolutionary.

Surprise soon gave way to other feelings. In large sections of other parts of the world, there is admiration for the movement, and it is credited with being the inspiration behind the Occupy Wall Street protests and other Occupy movements around the world. Orientalist fears are not too far behind. Variations of ‘the Muslim brotherhood will now take over Egypt’ appear from time to time, raising spectres of visible Muslim populations and visibly Muslim governments haunting the ‘secular’ West. If one of the consequences of the movement is that it allows religion greater sway in political processes, the revolution shall be retrospectively identified as ‘too radical’. If the Arab Spring were to put any system in place that is not western democracy the way the West defines it, rather than practises it, it would be deemed too radical. A too radical governing apparatus needs correction, through sanctions, invasion and so on; as the West still remains the arbiter of what is religious, what is radical and what is secular.

Speaking of secularism, how secular is the West? If the secular is taken to mean that religion is immaterial to political processes, American democracy would not count as secular. Fox News, which berated Obama for not mentioning God in his Thanksgiving address to the nation, does not have the moral right to tell others to ‘separate religion and politics’.⁴ Religion is as much a part of political debate in western democracies as it is in other parts of the world, and sometimes more so. Emotionally charged and hotly contested debates for and against abortion and/or homosexuality are rooted in alternative readings of religious strictures.

³ Eric Woolf, *Europe and the people without history*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 1982.

⁴ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ICA7KZXQk6s&feature=related>

The liberal ideal of a secular separation of religion from political life is used frequently by the West to demonstrate its superiority to other parts of the world. It is somewhat similar to the use of feminism by western governments – an ideal of equality is set up in the developed world and then constructed as universal. If one were to examine the application of this ideal carefully, it would soon be seen that feminist projects in the western world are as incomplete as those in the non-western world. But this ideal is accepted as universally true and valid for all other nations and peoples, who are then judged and ranked on the basis of this ideal. Thus, non-western nations ‘fail’ the tests of democracy, of feminism and so on.

A similar failure on the altar of radicalism and secularism awaits the Arab Spring. It is radical in terms of what it achieved, but it has not been revolutionary enough in the sense that in many of these countries the emerging alternatives to deposed dictators are not very different or alternative. It is when the Arab Spring is not judged on the basis of how secular it is, when it is accepted that the people currently homogenously identified as ‘Arab’ have the right not only to write their own history but to write it in whichever way they want, that the movement will have achieved a revolutionary end.