Middle East Upheavals:
More Politics than Religion

By Saleena Saleem

Synopsis

The perception of the Muslim world's association with violence and extremism has become progressively entrenched in mainstream consciousness during the post-9/11 years. This is partly due to power shifts in the Middle East and the consequent response of a struggle for a new political order.

Commentary

THOSE WHO claim Muslims are unusually inclined to violence often cite the late Samuel Huntington's assertion that Muslim societies are more "bloody" than others because they experience more intra-state violence. But American political scientist M. Steven Fish dispels Huntington's unsupported claim through rigorous quantitative analysis of data between 1946 and 2007.

In his book *Are Muslims Distinctive*? Dr. Fish finds no evidence that countries with a larger share of Muslims experience disproportionate acts of mass political violence. In fact, Dr. Fish notes that when it comes to violent crime such as murder, Muslim-majority countries have consistently low rates compared with Christian-majority countries. Such facts get lost when the focus is on the Muslim extremists who commit the majority of violent political and terrorist acts on a global scale today.

The notion that Islam is a religion that somehow leads its followers into violence is reinforced by the various confrontations playing out in the Middle East, and closer to home, deadly acts such as the Jakarta bombing in January. However, the tendency to attribute causality to extremists' religious identities obscures the underlying pressures which they purportedly respond to.

In South-east Asia, certain extremist groups have pledged allegiance to the self-styled Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in the Middle East (or ISIS as it is also commonly known), including most recently groups in Central Mindanao. However, framing ISIL's appeal in this region as only religiously-driven is limiting. In fact, one way to diminish ISIL's influence in South-east Asia is to emphasise that violent upheavals in the Middle East are driven by regional political interests rather than religion.

Power Balance Shifts

Present-day Middle East violence is often portrayed as a continuation of an age-old Sunni-Shia conflict. However, rather than ancient hatreds, the current bout of violence is driven by political aspirations unleashed by power shifts in the region since 2003.

These political aspirations arise from interpretations of relatively recent events by regional powers — Shia Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia. It begins with Iran's 1979 Islamic revolution, which garnered Sunni admirers drawn to notions of a Pan-Islamic revolution, which Saudi Arabia and other Sunni leaders interpreted as an ideological and political challenge. In the ensuing decades, the tacit rivalry for regional influence between the two countries resulted in an uneasy equilibrium.

This changed with the 2003 US invasion of Iraq and the deposing of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, which marked the first in a series of significant Middle East power balance shifts. The persecution of the Sunnis, who held political power under Saddam, by the newly installed Shia-dominated Iraqi government, demonstrated that power had shifted from one group to another.

Shia Iran's influence in Iraq grew, which reinforced Sunni fears of marginalization, aggravated by the Nouri Maliki government's systematic discrimination of the Sunni population. The subsequent Arab uprisings across North Africa and the Middle East caused further instability though initial successes of the revolts sparked hopes of political change with the potential to shift power from repressive and corrupt governments to the people.

Struggle for New Order

Sunni Iraqis predictably responded to the Shia persecution with armed resistance. The confluence of Sunni interests allowed even Saddam's secular-oriented Baathist officers to re-align themselves ideologically with ISIL's Islamist objective. ISIL's territorial advances in Iraq were also made easier by the willing capitulation of a disenfranchised Sunni populace.

A second response was the struggle against the failed Arab uprisings. The uprisings had reinforced a collective recognition that the old order of repressive and corrupt regimes had to go. However, apart from Tunisia, the outcome elsewhere was dismal. Egypt's popularly elected Muslim Brotherhood government was forcibly replaced by the military while Syria and Yemen descended into bloody civil wars, whose different actors were aided by Shia Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia.

By the time ISIL had proclaimed an end to Sykes-Picot's imposed-upon borders in the Levant (the agreement between United Kingdom and France of 1916), and as the regional and Western powers jockeyed for influence, a violent revolution with its multitude of actors was already well under way.

The violent struggles now create an unstable situation, where power vacillates between old and new actors. Given the fast-changing landscape, each actor has an incentive to increase violence so as to wrest power.

Rationale for Adoption of Violent Ideology

The violent extremists in this revolutionary mix offer a narrative towards self-determination, a regaining of the dignity and justice denied the Arabs and now apparent with the instability caused by power balance shifts.

This narrative resonates elsewhere in the Muslim world where similar pressures exist, such as in Mindanao, where long-standing territorial disputes have divided the Muslim Moros from the Christian majority in the Philippines. The unwillingness of repressive regimes to rectify injustice and inequality gives space for extremists to legitimise their violence in the religious discourse of seeking redress for past wrongs. A populace preoccupied with power struggles and threats of violence have ample reason to adopt an ideology that strengthens their communal position.

While Islam is misused by actors to justify their violence, the root causes are political and not religious. Experience with extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda has shown that military force may subdue, but not completely eradicate eruptions of violence, particularly when there is a possibility of the political status quo of repressive and corrupt regimes prevailing.

If the international community hopes to quell the violence in the Middle East, the political aspirations of the major actors must be addressed through a dialogue that works towards a political compact. Such a compact should include a framework for fair political representation of all of the actors concerned.

Anything less would mean continued violence until all parties exhaust themselves to a stalemate and the heaviest toll would be borne by the weakest victims, the majority of the people who are caught in between. History will not look too kindly at this failure.

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