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A Book Review of: *After the Arab Spring: How Islamists Hijacked The Middle East Revolts* By John R. Bradley**Reviewed By:****Dr. Hassen ZRIBA**

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This is a review of John R. Bradley's new book entitled After the Arab Spring: How Islamists Hijacked The Middle East Revolts. It is published in 2012 by Palgrave Macmillan and contains 256 pages. This book is basically intended to an anti-thesis of the prevailing discourses about the Arab Spring. Unlike those optimistic discourses, Bradley holds in this book a pessimistic reading of what happened and what is likely to happen in the countries of the Arab Spring. He believes that the Arab revolutions were not basically a demand for political liberties and freedom of speech but rather they were for purely economic reasons. Also, he adds that such revolutions were hijacked by Islamists and are likely to beget regressive and repressive religious theocracies like those of Saudi Arabia and Iran.

John R. Bradley book is composed of an introduction and six chapters. It is published in 2012 as a response to the aftermath of the Arab Spring. Such Spring first took place in Tunisia, North Africa with the riots starting in 17 December in the town of Sidi Bouzid and culminating with the escape of the Tunisian dictator Ben Ali in January, 14th, 2011. Then it was followed by the more spectacular protest at the end of January in Cairo, Egypt that was ended with the overthrowing of the Egypt's strong man Hosni Mubarak. The same pattern was repeated in both Libya and Yemen but with more violent and bloodier conflicts. Such conflicts ended with the killing of the Libyan leader Moamer Ghadafi and toppling the regime of Ali Abdullah Salah.

As its very title suggests, Bradley's book argues that what seemed to be democratic processes in the countries of Arab Spring, notably Tunisia and Egypt was no more than a reshuffling of the governance game. This time the major players are Islamists and the hegemonic ideology is Political Islam. In the introduction, the author expresses his refusal of the post-Tunisian revolution hegemonic predictions in the West that Tunisia will be the beacon of freedom and democracy and that post-Ben Ali Tunisia will be a microcosm and a catalyst to the rest of the Arab and Muslim world. Bradley accuses the western political analysts and journalists of being simplistic in their readings of the Tunisian revolution in particular and the Arab Spring in general. Consequently, those who thought that disturbances in Tunisia were for the sake of more freedom of speech and political liberties were wrong. Accordingly, the author affirms that Tunisians revolted against increasing corruption of the "Trabilsiya", the family of the president. They also reacted against the increasing unemployment, inflation and the decline of the economic potentials of the Tunisian middle class. John R. Bradley postulates that the post-revolutionary conditions of freedom coupled with chaos would benefit Islamists to preside. Both in Tunisia and Egypt Islamists seem to play the democratic game perfectly in order to take power. Soon when they do so they would deny the very democratic principles that gave them power, he affirms.

In the first chapter devoted to Tunisian question and entitled “The Death of Tunisia’s Secularism”, Bradley starts scrutinizing the case of Islamists in post –revolutionary Tunisia. He shows how the well-established Islamist movement Nahda has succeeded to take control in post-revolutionary Tunisia. The author was an eyewitness to many pre- and post-revolution events in Tunisia. His job as a journalist allowed him get into contact with fieldwork data. Bradley initiates different comparisons between the socioeconomic and cultural situations of Tunisian before and after the revolution. He affirms that post-revolution Tunisian lost rapidly its secular aspects that have made it distinguished from the rest of the Arab and Muslim countries for decades. The new Islam-inspired behaviors and dresses invaded the previously most secular spaces like the Avenue of Habib Bourguiba in the downtown of Tunis which greatly marred the touristic assets of Tunisia. Tunisia thus was very liberal and a model to follow in the region. According to the author there was an implicit accord between the authoritarian regime of Ben Ali and the Tunisian people: political despotism in return for social and individual liberties. For instance, homosexuality was implicitly permitted and abortion was legally guaranteed. Yet after the collapse of the old regime, the situation worsened and many aspects of Islamist extremism became the bread and butter of everyday life in Tunisia. Artists were attacked; women were severely ostracized for not abiding with Islamic dress Hijab and Muslim codes of behavior and public spaces were Islamized (praying in streets in defiance of public rules). What was endangered was the Tunisian liberal secularism that was entrenched by the first postcolonial Tunisian president Habib Bourguiba. Habib Bourguiba has widely been regarded as the founder of modern west-oriented Tunisia. His promotion of education and women rights are seen as great asset to contemporary Tunisia. However, the author show how such secular modernist legacy was upset first by the greedy regime of Ben Ali and second (maybe more seriously) by the rule of Islamist Nahda. The leader of Nahda Party Rached Ghannouchi, the author affirms, claims to support the status quo in public while trying to topple it in private; a situation of social double-facedness and political hypocrisy that seems to characterize all Islamist movements in Tunisia and elsewhere in the region. To conclude this chapter, the author stated that the results of October 2011 elections emphasized his prophecies. The Islamist Nahda was victorious and it dominated the newly emergent National Constituent Assembly whose functions have been to draft a new constitution for Tunisia.

The second chapter is entitled “Egypt’s Islamist Future”. It deals with the more complex situation in Egypt. Bradley had already wrote a book in which he predicted the eruption of a revolution in Egypt. His book was written in 2008 and entitled Inside Egypt: The Land of the Pharaohs on the Brink of a Revolution. The book was a taboo in Egypt and Mubarak forbid its distribution and publication in Egypt.

Egypt being the native land of the international Muslim Brotherhood faced a multifaceted problem. It was more than expected that such Islamist movement would lead the nation in any fair elections. The author was engaged in the same comparative task. He showed that Egypt before the revolution was more serene and safer despite the atrocities of the despotic regime of Mubarak. Bradley treated a specific feature of Egypt which is not the case in Tunisia.

Egypt has a Christian Coptic population of about 15%. Such population the author reported had a deep fear of the post-revolution new realities. Any Islamist rule is read as a clear and present danger to such Coptic minority. Yet in Egypt, Islamism is a diverse concept that includes different groups notable Salafism. Salafism is a extremist version political Islam that claims to strictly follow the teachings of Islam in all walks of life. According to the author, such movement could not accept the behaviors of ordinary Egyptian Muslims let alone Coptic ones. Egypt was thus at the brink of a possible civil war. Like Tunisia, Egyptian Islamists seized the dominant chaos to woo the more illiterate and economically-deprived masses and get their votes. Acts of Islamist charities were mainly steps to court the electorate.

Comparatively, the author exposed major differences between the Tunisian revolution and that of Egypt. Unlike Tunisia, the Egyptian army has always played decisive roles in administering the nation. Since 1952, the army has directly and indirectly intervened in Egyptian political affairs. Noticeably, Gamal Abdul Nasser, Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak were all influential men in the army. Thus the toppling of Mubarak regime was just a reshuffling of the political game. The already rich and prestigious military elite had nothing to do with the risky ideals and mottos of the revolution. Egypt moved from a military dictatorship led by a military man to a military dictatorship led by military elite. The democratic and liberal elites represented unpopular minority in Egypt. Moreover, they committed a strategic mistake when they confided the Islamists. Moreover, they lacked genuine political organization which tremendously affected their chances to champion their liberal causes. Such situation was further captured by the Islamists to eradicate any liberal cause and to alienate Egyptian liberals and democrats. The process of Islamizing Egypt has been supported by Saudi Wahhabi teachings. According to the author, Egypt has become a very conservative and retrogressive country which would provide a fertile milieu for Islamists to prevail. Also, the Egyptian Islamists did their best to go unnoticed during the revolutionary cacophony. They tended to deceive the West by indulging the discourses of pluralism and modernity in local and mainly international media. Islamists seem to use double discourses: one for the local consumption and another for the more literate and westernized audiences. Bradley thinks that they aspire to prevail not for the sake of authority and prestige but just to disseminate their "religious and cultural despotism". He believes that Muslim Brotherhood would certainly win any future elections as they proved to be the most organized and indoctrinated political community in post-revolutionary Egypt. They would, he added, substitute the conventional military tyranny by a religious and cultural one. Again what is suggested in this book is that Islamists were keen and ready to hijack the Egyptian revolution as they did with the Tunisian one.

The author moves in the third chapter to tackle the issue of what he called Wahhabi counterrevolution. Bradley explains the traditional hostilities between the Sunni denomination and the Shia one and their impact on the contemporary Saudi-Iranian relations. The beginning of the Arab Spring in Bahrain was stifled by Saudi military intervention since Bahraini uprisings were regarded as an Iranian Shia conspiracy against Saudi interests and royal family. Bradley believes that such Saudi intervention was an official declaration of the assumed Arab Spring. Consequently, what the Wahhabi Saudis did was a counterrevolution

against the Arab Spring. The book states some historical proofs that validate the thesis that there was a Wahhabi counterrevolution. First, the Saudi authorities provided a refuge to the first Arab president dethroned by a popular revolution Ben Ali. It still refuses to give him back to Tunisian justice. Moreover, there are strong rumors that Saudi Arabia seconds Islamists in almost all countries of the Arab Spring just to hijack such revolutions and redirect them to suit the ideology and the strategies of the Saudi dynasty. Intervention in Bahrain and mainly in Yemen is an outstanding example. Another example of anti-revolution policies was the decision of King Abdullah to introduce certain measures locally in order to “buy” the deference of his people and wipe out any possible seeds of wrath.

The fourth chapter deals with what Bradley called “The Shia Axis”. This chapter compares the Iranian Shia regime with the Saudi Sunni one to discover that both nations despite their hostilities share many aspects. They are both theocratic regimes that stem their assumed legitimacy from their religious discourses. Both suffer from increasing corruption and both have the financial capacities to subdue potential rebellions domestically and to stir ones outside their borders. Thus both nations attempt to take advantage of the Arab Spring and tailor it to their needs. The author then shows the Shia axis is working diligently to avoid the dangers of the Islamist-led Arab Spring. The Shia Axis is led by Iran and includes notably Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Syrian regime of Bashar Asad. Such axis was greatly activated after the onset of the Syrian crisis. Hezbollah and Iranian revolutionary army were reported to intervene in Syria even during the first days of the Syrian conflicts. Iran has used its entire political and diplomatic arsenal to prevent any international military intervention in Syria like the one that happened in Libya in 2011. Also it has assisted the Asad regime financially and economically to survive the chaos that the revolution brought about. However, it seems that the failure and fall of Asad’s regime will provide other opportunities to Islamists to fill the void. The Gulf countries and especially Saudi Arabia are still supporting the Syrian Free Army to topple the Alawite regime and then curb Iranian and Shia influence and ambitions in the region.

Bradley then scrutinizes the impact of Wahhabi Islamism outside the Middle East and the Arab World. He invites his readers to draw “Lessons from Southeast Asia”. In July, 2011 thousands of Malaysians demonstrated in Kula lampur to ask for more honest elections. They were fed up with the increasing corruption of central authorities. However, seen in perspective, the Malaysian experience with Islamists was considerably successful. The Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad did his best to incorporate the Islamist leader Ibrahim Anwar. Anwar became a part of Mahathir’s party the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). Yet, the author argues that such membership was no more than a cover to hidden Islamist plots to overthrow Malaysian secularism and liberal aspects. Saudi-led Wahhabi creed could be noticed in other Southeast Asian countries like Indonesia and Thailand. Due to Saudi financial supplies, Wahhabi beliefs were disseminated throughout the region. And the previously multicultural and open societies of Indonesia and Thailand became in many respects a distorted copy of Saudi Arabia. The aim of such Wahhabi projects was to create a huge Wahhabi empire that would wipe out any Shia potential influence. What looms large from Southeast Asian experience is that Islamism has always been source of constant conflicts and restlessness. Yet importantly, there have been some hints of hope according to

the author. This hope arises from the fact that Islamists seem to lose ground in 2009 elections in Indonesia which is indicative that political Islam is in regress.

The final chapter exposes the potential avenues that could be taken to deal with increasing Islamism. What Next? That is the question that needed immediate and comprehensive answer. However, no readymade answers are available. The writer shows that Islamists are very likely to take power in the countries of the Arab Spring but they would provide no practical and acceptable solutions to the chronic socio-economic problems. Their belief that “Islam is the Solution” will not feed the hungry nor employ the jobless. Nevertheless, Bradley believes that Islamists if given ample time to entrench their theocracies, it will be almost impossible to overthrow them via democratic means. He gives the examples of Saudi Arabia and Iran and how they succeeded to immunize their despotic religious theocracies against any potential rebellions. Even in democratically elected Turkish government, there are strong symptoms that Islamic dictatorship is on the way. However, the United States supports such theocratic regimes because they seem to serve best its vital interests in the regions. The authors, consequently, believe that American pragmatism has been the source of many disappointments to liberals and democrats throughout the world. Such pragmatism did not learn the lesson from past experiences where America supported Islamism and extremism and the result was catastrophic on American itself. The writer believes that what is called “moderate Political Islam” is just a myth or at best a lie that some westerns want to believe. Islamism is then a political ideology that distorts the teachings of Islam in order to serve certain political and ideological aims. To finish Bradley seems to represent a pessimistic picture of the future of the countries of the Arab Spring under the Islamist rule; a picture that mixes despotism with violence and military coups with expected civil wars. And the only benefited here seem to be the Wahhabi Saudi Arabia along with its traditional allies the United States and Israel.

To evaluate this book, we believe that the aim of the author was to persuade his readership of perhaps the futile project of the Arab Spring. He seems to indulge the conventional “Conspiracy Theory” discourses. The Arab peoples seem to be mere passive tools to American and Wahhabi Saudi projects and plans which we believe is an exaggeration. The author’s journalistic background did bestow the book with a clear and straightforward style. He relied heavily on his personal observations in almost all the countries where the events took place. However, his very journalistic style lacked necessary academic rigor in his analysis of the events. Nevertheless, the book remains an interesting one despite some subjective evaluations and appraisals of the events in question.

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