

# Perspectives

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## Now is the Time for Religious Freedom in Post- “Arab Spring” Societies

by Jennifer Bryson

Promoting religious freedom in the post “Arab spring” environment is vital for the people of this region and for the strategic interest of the U.S.

However, at a time when one might see the emergence of the Muslim Brotherhood and even salafi political parties as dark clouds on the horizon, there may be a temptation to downplay or even reject religious freedom promotion in U.S. foreign policy. Such hesitancy to include promotion of religious freedom in the enterprise of championing democracy tends to reflect misunderstandings about what religious freedom is.

### *Wouldn't Religious Freedom Risk Opening Floodgates?*

Religious freedom does not mean allowing one religious group the “freedom” to seize political control and in turn crush all who do not share their views. Rather, sustainable religious freedom must be robust. Sustainable religious freedom rests on a framework of constitutionally secured state neutrality in matters of religious affairs, keeping the state out of religious affairs of individuals and organizations, and keeping religious affairs separate from the power mechanisms of the nation-state.

Religious freedom fully understood is inimical to theocratic dominance by one group through political power, because full religious freedom is by its very nature a two-way street. If individuals and groups are to enjoy the benefits of religious freedom, they must also give it to others. Do unto others as you would have done unto you lies at the heart of religious freedom. (Receiving and enjoying religious freedom while denying it to others – “religious freedom for me but not for thee!” – is not religious freedom but rather tyranny.)

### *Isn't Religious Freedom Just Something for Minorities?*

Protecting minority believers, including those who in response to conscience have changed belief, is important, whether they be Christian, Bahai, Jewish, or atheist. Religious freedom for minorities is necessary. But it is not sufficient. Authentic religious freedom must include freedom for religious believers to debate and seek truth regardless of whether they are in a minority or majority faith.

Consider for example societies that are composed in majority of Sunni Muslim. Religious freedom does not mean that Sunni Muslims holding political power could allow Christians or other minorities to build houses of worship and attend worship services, but then at the same time leverage state power to censor books and even

imprison fellow Sunni Muslims just because of differences in religious doctrine.

A case in point is that of Egyptian Quranic studies professor Nasr Abu Zayd (1943-2010). Due to his application of critical thinking in his analysis of the Quran, Nasr Abu Zayd, a Sunni Muslim living in majority Sunni Muslim Egypt, faced persecution for expressing his views in Egypt. He ended up exiled to Holland. It is significant that it was the protection of religious freedom that made it possible for this Sunni Muslim to continue his intellectual pursuits in Quranic studies. Lack of protection for religious freedom in Egypt stifles not only religious minorities and non-believers, but also Sunni Muslims in their intellectual inquiries into their own religion.

### *Doesn't Stability Need to Come before Religious Freedom?*

Consider the American experience. In the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1660 Mary Dyer, a Christian Quaker, was taken to her execution because another Christian group, the Puritans, leveraged state-power in the Colony to impose religious conformity by any means, even killing dissenters.

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This brutality ended not by development of a solid constitution guaranteeing religious freedom; such a framework of protection was not to come for another 100 years. Rather, development and implementation of religious freedom, e.g. putting an end to executions for disagreement in religious doctrine, came first and helped to create an environment in which development of a solid constitution backed by popular support was possible.

A lesson from our own American history is that religious freedom emerged not after the resolution of, but rather out of and in response to, and as a solution for, deadly sectarian violence in the early colonies.

If we think a society needs far-reaching stability first

before opening the way to freedom, we are putting the cart before the horse. Religious freedom needs to be part of the democratic development process, not a result. Religious freedom can contribute to helping a society attaining robust, democratic stability.

In the American Colonies those mired in the violence of one religious group against another who found a way out through development of religious freedom. Those mired in cycles of violence today too can find a way out if religious freedom is integrated and allowed to be part of the process of moving beyond cycles of sectarian, religious, and ethno-sectarian violence.

Religious freedom helps to build stability by fostering the practice of disagreeing by means of offering better ideas than one's opponent(s). Religious freedom builds the capacity to "agree to disagree" without coercion or violence.

*What about Aspiring Theocrats?*

Religious freedom removes the possibility of using nation-state powers, including use of force, to compel religious conformity. Religious freedom takes this option off the table, and a strong constitution keeps it off the table. In this way, participating in a system with religious freedom can do more to transform religious fanatics than fanatics can do to transform the state. When solid constitutional protection of religious freedom assures that seizing state control just isn't a viable option, this can increase the incentives for religious believers to utilize non-state mechanisms of influence. (See for example recent research on this across the globe, in *God's Century: Resurgent Religion and Global Politics* by Monica Duffy Toft, Daniel Philpott, Timothy Samuel Shah, 2011.)

*Religious Freedom: It Needs to Be Part of Democracy Promotion Now, Not Later*

Precisely at this crucial juncture religious freedom is more necessary than ever to assuring a continued thrust along the trajectory for democratic development.

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