The Arab Intellectual and Tiananmen Square

Azzam Amin[1]

Book Title:	The Arab Intellectual and the Tiananmen Square Syndrome
Author:	Amro Othman and Marwa Fikry
Place of publication:	Beruit
Date of publication:	October 2016
Publisher:	Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies
No. of pages:	144

Introduction

The *Arab Intellectual and Tiananmen Square* by Amro Othman and Mrouwa Fikry provides answers to one of the most controversial questions gripping the Arab world since the outbreak of the Arab Spring. That is: Why did some Arab intellectuals fail to embrace the uprisings of the Arab Spring, particularly when it embodied the people's right to demand change and freedom, ideals that Arab intellectuals have long defended?

The book deals with the problematic relationship between the Arab intellectual and the concept of freedom and democracy, and is framed around key critical questions. How do Arab intellectuals perceive themselves and other members of society? What position does democracy hold in their list of priorities? Why did some Arab intellectuals cooperate with repressive authoritarian regimes? And, is there a link between their views towards democracy and their ideological convictions?

Othman and Fikry, in this compelling analysis, argue that the Arab intellectual might suffer from what they term the 'Tiananmen Syndrome', or an 'intellectual elitism', entailing contempt toward other social classes and toward a democratic process that ensures equality between all members of society. The term 'Tiananmen Syndrome' is used in reference to the events that unfolded in Tiananmen Square in Beijing in 1989, where large, mostly student-led, protests calling for democracy and reforms in Communist China took place from the 15th of April to the 4th of June, and which were brutally repressed by the Chinese army. Chinese intellectuals at the time were divided along two currents:

---

1   Professor of Social Psychology at the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies and the University of Lyon II in France. Teaching researcher at the University of Lyon II and the Catholic University.

The first current, elitist and most widespread, called to ban peasants and workers from joining the protest movements. China's intellectuals believed that establishing and consolidating public freedoms (such as freedom of speech, freedom of ownership, freedom to work etc.) preceded the pursuit of democracy. In other words, the struggle to obtain public freedoms of human rights had to come before the struggle for democracy.

The underlying rationale is that a democratic system would completely restrict political participation to the intellectual class[2], as it is a privileged and independent class compared to other uneducated classes of society (workers, peasants and unemployed), and it is the only one capable of specifying the form of the political system and society's political values[3]. These intellectuals believed that leadership was a right reserved exclusively for intellectuals.

The second and less-widespread current considered democracy as a priority, noting that public freedoms have no value without a system of representative democracy, whereby the people elect a parliament and a government, as a democratic system establishes and guarantees public and personal freedoms.

In the introduction, the authors note that the idea of the title 'The Arab Intellectual and the Tiananmen Syndrome' came from the glaring similarity between the position adopted by Arab Intellectuals towards the Arab Spring and those held by Chinese Intellectuals during the Tiananmen Square protests. Divided in two parts, the book's first section deals with the intellectual's individual and communal identity and is largely theoretical. The second part deals with the Arab Intellectual and his/her relation with democracy, relying on the writings of several contemporary Arab Intellectuals on the subject of democracy.

The Intellectual's Individual and Communal Identity

The first chapter opens with a discussion on the definition of the 'Intellectual', both as an independent entity and as a member of society, pointing to the inevitable dilemma in separating the 'object' and 'self' when defining the 'Intellectual'. For whoever indulges in the definition of the intellectual, argue the authors, is him/herself an intellectual, which has led some scholars to look at the problem of defining the intellectual as a 'post-modernist problem *par excellence'* (p. 23). This could be the reason why studying the relations between the Intellectual and society, political power, rebellion and culture constitutes research dilemmas rather than questions with self-evident answers.

Who is the Intellectual?

The number of definitions and representations describing an intellectual are many, and often radically different from one another. For some, the intellectual is an educated person with academic qualifications. For others, the intellectual is a thinker, such as a philosopher, a historian and a specialist in the different social sciences. There are those who define the intellectual as a function of a thinking methodology, and others who emphasize

the intellectual's interaction with and influence on the present. Such differences and variations in definitions are due to the confusion between the 'standard' approach which sets criteria for defining the intellectual, and the 'historical' approach which considers the specificities of the spatial and temporal context.

The authors of this book use the definition proposed by sociologist Edward Shils (p. 30) who believed that the intellectual is the person who is endowed with the ability to question and think rationally and systematically beyond everyday life matters, yet bring his/her thinking to the public by interacting with society and playing a role in public affairs based on his/her general and comprehensive knowledge.

What is the intellectual's relationship with power and rebellion?

Othman and Fikri note how the intellectual's role and ability to interact with and influence his/her surroundings differs from one society to another, depending on the level of stability in society, the intellectual's identity, and the level of freedom or repression. For example, the intellectual's role in a liberal democratic environment differs from the

---

2   Which is what the author refer to as "elitist democracy"; as for democracy that considers all citizens equal, the authors refer to it as "popular democracy"

3   In the sense that democracy is limited to intellectuals, and for the rest of society to participate in it, a period of 'enlightened repression' is needed, a certain level of economic development must be reached, and learning about democratic practices is a must. This idea echoes the theory of the 'Just Despot'

intellectual's role in an authoritarian or totalitarian environment (p. 33). There are evidently other factors that affect an intellectual's role in society, the most important of which, according to the authors, is the status of the educated, culture-consuming class. If important, this would greatly enhance an intellectual's self-sufficiency and his/her independence from the ruling power and the confines of institutional work.

There is a general consensus in literature dealing with the intellectual's role in society that the intellectual is rebellious by nature, striving for change. Such a view has been subject to much controversy as historical analysis and facts have proved that intellectuals have also stood against change fearing to lose their gained status if change were to happen[4] (as in the case of the privileged opposition intellectuals). In this respect, Sociologist Lewis Coser presents five possible options for the positions that an intellectual may hold towards authority. In his view the intellectual can be: (1) in power, (2) an adviser to authority, (3) included in authority, (4) challenging authority and (5) seeking to overthrow it.

The Arab Intellectual and Democracy

The second part of the book discusses the crux of the topic, that is: Does the Arab Intellectual suffer from 'Tiananmen Syndrome'?

Othman and Fikri begin by presenting a historical overview of the views held by some Arab Intellectuals towards democracy showcasing the literature from the 19th and 20th centuries (the period of the 'Arab Renaissance', or the *Nahda*) which has become widespread and has contributed subsequently to the formulation of views regarding democracy (p.58).

The authors provide several historical examples to illustrate that the majority of these intellectuals spoke about freedom and not democracy; which can suggest that "some of these intellectuals evaded discussing the role of democracy in achieving the goals of *Nahda*, including freedom, either due to their lack of conviction in it by describing it as a tool for reform (as in the *Nahda* era), or because of their perception that democracy is quasi-impossible to achieve under the prevailing authoritarian political systems and their repressive security measures in most Arab states" (second half of the 20th century and beyond) (p.73). The authors conclude that democracy, as a tool for reform, does not appear to be a priority in the literature examined, and even when it is mentioned, a counterargument is always presented.

To reach these conclusions and to ascertain whether Arab intellectuals truly do suffer from a 'Tiananmen Syndrome', the authors examined 248 articles from the Egyptian periodical '*Democracy*', published between 2000 and 2014 (the first decade of the 21st century and three years after the outbreak of the Arab Spring protests). The journal was chosen because of its focus on democracy, and the fact it published material best reflecting Arab Intellectuals' view on democracy and related issues.

Results of the Study

The results of this study, comprising both qualitative and quantitative analysis of the articles, reveal that 28 % of Arab intellectuals focused on discussing the problem of democracy and democratic change, 14.8% on post-Arab Spring political administration, 10.4% on political reforms and 9.6 % on the relation between State and Religion. Yet the highest percentage (around 69%) focused on secularism and its necessity for democracy. Contemporary Arab intellectuals are thus categorized by the authors within three trends:

The Liberal Democratic Trend

Sixty-seven per cent of the study's sample consists of those intellectuals who believe that the safeguarding of individual rights and freedoms is a necessary condition for the presence of democracy and its proper functioning. Such intellectuals openly called for a slow implementation of democracy, noting that an accelerated adoption of a democratic political system would allow the opponents of democracy and freedom to access to power, thus aborting the whole democratic operation.

Intellectuals within this category do not view democracy as a means to obtain individual freedoms and rights, and political awareness, but an end in itself, where the first focus should be on endorsing a set of principles (supra-constitutional principles)

---

4   For culture to belong to everyone, and for the system to become democratic for example, what is lacking is the advantage of opposition and struggle for freedom

agreed upon by all political actors prior to holding any election. This suggests an elitist view that fears elections on the grounds that people are not ready for and do not have the necessary level of awareness to engage in democracy[5].

Another assumption through which such intellectuals justify the non-priority of democracy concerns is the relationship between religion and politics; secularism, according to them, is an inviolable necessity to achieve modernity and democracy, and in its absence, ballot boxes will be the 'death boxes', as expressed by the liberal thinker Murad Wehbe in his article 'The Democracy Package' published in 2004 (p. 90). In reality, argue Othman and Fikry, a large part of this fear of democracy found among Arab intellectuals derives from their fear of the masses immaturely electing religious political parties.

Othman and Fikhri point to a number of flaws in the literature of such intellectuals: First, their failure to realistically assess the power of the military state, by equating it to the religious state in its opposition to the secular state, despite the overwhelming presence of the military state in contemporary Arab experience. Secondly, their self-assigned role as the educator of the masses, endowed with all the cultural requirements for the implementation of democracy, reflects an elitist view that can be easily used to justify an 'enlightened' liberal repression, similar to the elitist view held by the leaders of the 'Tiananmen Movement'. Lastly, most intellectuals within this trend favor the French model of secularism, which Azmi Bishara has coined "Hard Secularism" as being "not only limited to separating the state from religion, but also holding a negative view towards the role that religion plays in society, viewing the decline of faith as a positive sign, at least in the public sphere", in contrast to what Bishara calls "Soft Secularism" which is a "muzzled form of secularism that essentially means ensuring an impartiality between the State and religious matters".

The Popular Democratic Trend

This trend is based on contradictions of the representations assumed by intellectuals in the first trend; intellectuals of the Popular Democratic trend see the imposition of democracy and the holding of elected officials accountable as a priority. They also

believe that civic values and individual freedoms and rights are a result of democracy, and not a cause of it. They insist that the development of democracy in Western countries was linked with the expansion of political participation to all citizens.

After the outbreak of the Arab Spring uprisings, proponents of this trend stressed the principle of popular executive democracy as the sole means to make sure power will not be seized, once more, to the benefit and interests of a narrow strand of society. Thus, "the democratic political culture for the intellectuals of this trend is more a result of the democratic experience and practice than a cause of it, in the sense that executive democracy is the necessary prerequisite to develop the political, cultural and economic infrastructure in society; thus, democracy paves the way for a meaningful competition that disrupts traditional practices" (p. 97). This view echoes the radical current within the 'Tiananmen Movement', which believed that democracy is a practice refined by practical experience.

The Participatory Trend

This trend goes one step beyond ballot boxes and individual rights and freedoms; it emphasizes the necessity to provide the needed conditions that allow all citizens to make choices that match their true desires. Intellectuals within this category agree that democracy would be fake if limited to the right for elections (executive democracy) and if it does not empower the citizen with a positive perception of the practice of public political duties. Thus, democracy is a means through which to elect representatives, actively involving the people in political life; democracy is not merely a form of party pluralism, or free elections or parliament and constitution, it is also a combination of goals toward which political parties work, ensuring citizens' participation in their realization (p. 100); democracy is seen as a bottom-up mechanism of dialogue and participation.

It is important to note that intellectuals within this category are interested in the political culture of both the public and the educated elite. Some also believe that the masses have proved, contrary to popular assumptions about the non-qualification of the Arab people for democracy, that they are ready for the

---

5   This reminds us of the negative attitudes held by some intellectuals regarding change after the Arab Spring uprisings, justifying this by stating that Arab societies are not ready for democracy, which would bring to power Islamists.

democratic experience, as opposed to the elites who have failed in that matter.

How do Arab intellectuals view themselves and authority?

The analysis of the articles indicate that Arab intellectuals, in general, believe in their privileged position in society, and that this privilege allows them to impose their intellectual custody over the people. The study also concluded that most intellectuals of the sample believe in the enlightened role that an intellectual plays in society, as he/she is the only one capable of confronting authority through reason and it is his/her task to lift the popular political insight from a culture of submission to authority and ruler-idolization to a culture which advocates citizens' dignity within the respect for Law, reinforcing rational and scientific values and criteria, and fighting generalizations and prejudices.

Interestingly, the findings also suggest that Arab Intellectuals refuse and oppose authority not because it does not comply with democratic principles and the exercise of freedom, but because authority ignores intellectuals (p. 107). In this context, Othman and Fikri state that such Arab Intellectuals are not interested in proving their elitist merits based on historical achievements (if found), nor are they interested in revising their elitist discourse or questioning their superiority over the people in light of the Arab Spring uprisings; instead, rather than exercising self-criticism and reflection, they resorted to victimizing themselves, and either blamed the repressive regimes, the people that did not respond sufficiently to their rhetoric, or radical Islamist political currents and opportunist fraudulent intellectuals.

The relation between intellectuals and authority, according to this the study remains obscure in their writings, which is understandable given the repressive political climate they live in. Thus, one cannot establish a link between the three above-mentioned trends and the position that intellectuals have towards authority. However, the authors made some interesting observations. Firstly, they observed how the Arab

intellectual's relationship with the state is based on the belief of engendering change, as most authors in the sample favoured a top-down approach, while a smaller number called for a bottom-up approach. Significantly, the majority of intellectuals examined, regardless of their political orientations, see the state (or the authority) as the main means through which change and reform can be achieved, as it is the only entity capable of enacting laws to protect individual freedoms that help engender a democratic transition, and forbid the formation of religious parties that are ideologically opposed to democracy. Secondly, and within the same vein, most of these intellectuals are doubtful of the capacity of the people to help engender a democratic transition, which explains the antagonistic stance held by most of them towards the Arab Spring uprisings. Thirdly, in light of the previous two points, some intellectuals attempt to justify the repressive measures adopted by the Arab authoritarian regimes by pointing to the immaturity of the masses and expressing their fear of the fall of the current "state" authority (p. 114).

Within the same frame of justification, some Arab Intellectuals believe that Arab societies are not ready to fight colonialism, and that such a struggle with foreign powers will not allow for an internal struggle for democracy, hence why democracy should not be a priority. In this context, in an article published in 2013 in the periodical '*Democracy*', Mohamad Ibrahim Mansour states that "nationalist thinking adopted a rhetoric steeped in demagoguery, turning a blind eye to the organic consistency between goals, in spite of the evident truth that nations cannot be freed but by free citizens and a nation's security cannot be ensured but by the security of its citizens; in this case, the freeing of nations took precedence over the freeing of its citizens, and national security preceded individual security, and thus the goals were used , even on the eve of the Arab uprisings, as a shield to justify the violence and the repression of democratic movements calling for citizens' rights, with the slogan 'no voice is louder than the voice of battle' clearly illustrating this orientation" (p. 115).

Conclusion

Othman and Fikry reached an answer to the questions raised in their research through the study of a sample of articles published in the Egyptian periodical '*Democracy*'. The book is lauded for its simple writing style which makes it accessible to the ordinary reader as well as the specialist. In addition, the ideas and questions are organized in a clear way, which makes for a smooth and enjoyable read[6]. As in every work, this book is not without its flaws, the most important of which being its methodology, in particular the selection of the sample and its representativeness of the original community under study[7], thus limiting the possibility for generalization. Despite the fact that the authors tried to use articles by authors from as many Arab countries as possible, more than half of the articles studied (135 articles) were written by Egyptian authors and focused on the case of Egypt. In this case, generalization of the results on all Arab intellectuals is risky and may reveal an ideological bias and à priori judgments.

Within the same context, it is fair to question the objectivity of both authors in their historical presentation of the Arab intellectuals' relation with democracy, as well as their reliance on three books only, and using these to generalize the views that all Arab Intellectuals of the *Nahda* held towards democracy. Objectivity in critical observation of the above-mentioned two points necessitates pointing out that the authors did caution on more than one occasion (p. 58, 77, 119) to the limitations of the selected articles and books, be it for works written during the *Nahda*, or more recent works written in the 21st century and in the years following the Arab Spring uprisings, thus acknowledging their insufficiency for safe generalization.

Despite these observations and the book's limited length and scope, it is an important addition for the Arab World, helping to understand why Arab intellectuals sided with repressive authoritarian regimes following the outbreak of the Arab Spring uprisings, in spite of their previous call for change. The book thus opens new gateways for further research on the topic.

---

6   Contrary to what the title implies

7   The 'original community under study' refers to the community that the study deals with and about whom it aims to reach generalizable results; in this study, the community refers to the 'Arab Intellectuals'