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ABSTRACT

“Towards a Sustainable Arab Spring: Locating Liberal Values in Islam”

By: Thomas Uthup, Ph.D.
(Binghamton University, Binghamton, NY)

Much excitement of the positive variety has characterized the emergence of what has been called the Arab Spring of 2011. Yet, even in the euphoria of the popular elections and the demise of dictatorial regimes, there is some trepidation about the sustainability of liberal practices in the Arab world. This paper will argue that sustainable liberal practices will require the location of liberal values in Islam in order to garner the support of the large portion of the populations that are religious. In the first part of this paper, I will begin with a general discussion of the importance of three sets of values - liberty and individual freedom; pluralism, diversity, and tolerance; equity and social justice - for peace, prosperity, and democratic governance. I will also discuss the possibility and necessity of locating these values within religions for legitimacy and popular acceptance. The second part of this paper will offer possible ways of locating these values in Islam, based primarily on the Qur'an, but also from historical examples in Islam. My approach is necessarily interdisciplinary, drawing as it does from fields as diverse as theology, political theory, history, philosophy, to name but a few. I conclude with some tentative observations about the implications of this effort and suggestions for further research and political action.