

## Claiming the Center: Political Islam in Transition

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In the 1990s political Islam, what some call "Islamic fundamentalism," remains a major presence in government and in oppositional politics from North Africa to Southeast Asia. Political Islam in power and in politics has raised many issues and questions: "Is Islam antithetical to modernization?," "Are Islam and democracy incompatible?," "What are the implications of an Islamic government for pluralism, minority and women's rights," "How representative are Islamists," "Are there Islamic moderates?," "Should the West fear a transnational Islamic threat or clash of civilizations?"

### Contemporary Islamic Revivalism

The landscape of the Muslim world today reveals the emergence of new Islamic republics (Iran, Sudan, Afghanistan), the proliferation of Islamic movements that function as major political and social actors within existing systems, and the confrontational politics of radical violent extremists.\_ In contrast to the 1980s when political Islam was simply equated with revolutionary Iran or clandestine groups with names like Islamic jihad or the Army of God, the Muslim world in the 1990s is one in which Islamists have participated in the electoral process and are visible as prime ministers, cabinet officers, speakers of national assemblies, parliamentarians, and mayors in countries as diverse as Egypt, Sudan, Turkey, Iran, Lebanon, Kuwait, Yemen, Jordan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Israel/Palestine.

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, political Islam continues to be a major force for order and disorder in global politics, one that participates in the political process but also in acts of terrorism, a challenge to the Muslim world and to the West. Understanding the nature of political Islam today, and in particular the issues and questions that have emerged from the experience of the recent past, remains critical for governments, policymakers, and students of international politics alike.

### Origins and Nature

Political Islam is rooted in a contemporary religious resurgence that has affected both personal and public life. On the one hand, many Muslims have become more religiously observant (increased attention to prayer, fasting, dress, family values and a revitalization of Islamic mysticism or sufism). On the other, Islam has reemerged as an alternative ideology to the perceived failures of more secular forms of nationalism, capitalism and socialism. Islamic symbols, rhetoric, actors and organizations have become major sources of legitimacy and mobilization, informing political and social activism. Governments (Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Libya, Egypt, Pakistan, Sudan, Iran, Afghanistan, Malaysia) and movements (the Muslim Brotherhoods of Egypt, Sudan, Jordan, the Jamaat-i-Islami in South Asia, Turkey's Refah Party, Algeria's Islamic salvation Front, Tunisia's al-Nahda, Lebanon's Hizbollah, HAMAS and Islamic Jihad in Palestine, Gamaa Islamiyya and Jihad in Egypt, ABIM and PAS in Malaysia) that span both the religious and political spectrum from moderate to extremist have appealed to Islam to enhance their legitimacy and to mobilize popular support for programs and policies.

The causes of the resurgence have been many: religiocultural, political, and socioeconomic. More often than not, faith and politics (not simply one or the other) have been intertwined causes or catalysts. Issues of political and social injustice (authoritarianism, repression, unemployment, inadequate housing and social services, maldistribution of wealth, and corruption) are combined with those of religiocultural identity and values.

A series of crises and failures, beginning in the late 1960s, discredited many regimes and the western-inspired paradigms of modernizing elites, triggering a politics of protest and a quest for identity and greater authenticity. The result was the positing of an "Islamic Alternative," reflected in slogans like "Islam is the Solution" or "Neither West nor East." Among the more visible "failures" which proved to be catalytic events in the rise of political Islam are: (1) the 1967 Arab-Israeli war (Six Day War) in which Israel decisively defeated the combined Arab armies of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan, occupied Sinai, the West Bank and Gaza and East Jerusalem, transforming the liberation of Jerusalem/Palestine into a transnational Islamic issue. (2) 1969 Malay-Chinese riots in Kuala Lumpur reflecting the growing tension between the Malay Muslim majority and a significant Chinese minority. (3) The Pakistan-Bangladesh civil war of 1971-72 heralding the failure of Muslim nationalism. (4) The Lebanese Civil war (1975-90), among whose causes were the inequitable distribution of political and economic power between Christians and Muslims, which led to the emergence of major Shia groups: AMAL and the Iranian inspired and backed Hezbollah. (5) The Iranian Revolution of 1978-79, a pivotal event with long term global impact and implications for the Muslim world and the West. (6) The Arab-Israeli conflict that spawned its own Islamist movements, among them HAMAS and Islamic Jihad, which grew in strength during the Intifada in the 1980s.

While Iran offered the most visible and sustained critique of the West, embodying both moderate and more extremist/rejectionist anti-Westernism, the failures of the West (its models of development and as an ally) and fear of the threat of Westernization, its cultural penetration, have been pervasive themes of the resurgence. Many blamed the ills of their societies on the excessive influence of and dependence (political, economic, military, and sociocultural) upon the West, in particular the superpowers America and the former Soviet Union. Modernization, as a process of progressive westernization and secularization, has been regarded as a form of neocolonialism exported by the West and imposed by local elites, a disease that undermines religious and cultural identity and values, replacing them with imported foreign values and models of development.

While the primary concerns of Islamic movements are local or national, international issues and actors have also played important roles in Muslim politics: the Arab-Israeli conflict and the liberation of Jerusalem, the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, Bosnia, Kashmir, and Chechnya as well as the use of oil wealth by Saudi Arabia and Libya, to extend their influence internationally, supporting government Islamization programs as well as Islamist movements.

### **Issues of Development, Authority and Interpretation**

Political Islam has challenged governments, policymakers and analysts, both politically and intellectually, over issues of modernization and development, leadership and ideology, democratization, pluralism, and foreign policy.

The widespread reassertion of Islam in Muslim politics and society has challenged and discredited the western, secular bias as well as many presuppositions of modernization and development theory. Against all expectations, the so-called more modern/westernized societies (Lebanon, Egypt, Iran, Tunisia, Algeria, Turkey, and Malaysia) have developed into major centers of "Islamic" politics. The real direction has not been either "Mecca or mechanization," a static tradition or dynamic change, secular leaders/intellectuals or ulama leadership. Countries as dissimilar as Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, Pakistan and Malaysia demonstrate the complexity and pluri-form nature of Muslim experiences and experiments, their diverse patterns and paces of modernization and their differing interpretations/implementations of Islam.

The emergence of an alternative Islamically activist elite reflects the new realities of the Muslim world. The earlier division of many societies, rooted in a bifurcation of education, into a modern secular vs. more traditional religious elite (the ulama), is complemented today by a modern educated but more Islamically oriented sector of society. It has produced Turkey's Prime Minister, Dr. Necmettin Erbakan, leader of the Islamist Refah (Welfare) Party, and many of Turkey's mayors; Malaysia's Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, a founder of ABIM (Islamic Youth Movement of Malaysia); Dr. Hassan Turabi, former leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, and Speaker of Sudan's Parliament; Dr. Abbasi Madani, a leader of Algeria's Islamic Salvation Front, currently imprisoned by its military-government.

Islamic movements and organizations, both moderate and extremist, have proliferated, becoming major actors and agents of change. They establish modern political and social organizations and embrace modern means to disseminate their messages in the media, audio and videotapes, faxes and the internet. The majority function within civil society as social and political activists. They build schools, hospitals, clinics, and banks; offer inexpensive legal and social services; are leaders in politics and professional associations of doctors, lawyers, engineers, teachers. At the same time, a minority of extremists wage a war of violence and terrorism that has threatened the stability and security of many regimes and extended its reach to Europe (bombings in Paris) and America (World Trade Center bombing).

### **Leadership and Ideology**

The contemporary resurgence of Islam in Muslim politics has raised many issues from those of leadership to ideology and implementation. Most can be grouped or encapsulated in two questions, "Whose Islam? and What Islam?". Whose Islam, who is to interpret and implement Islam? Is it to be rulers: the vast majority of whom are unelected kings, military, and former military (eg. the House of Saud in Saudi Arabia, Qaddafi in Libya, Omar al-Bashir in Sudan), the ulama or religious elite as in Iran, or elected prime ministers and parliaments or national assemblies?

Historically, the ulama were the advisers to rulers, guardians of religion who enjoyed royal patronage. While in contrast to the Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran, the vast majority of ulama today do not seek to rule, they continue to see themselves as the primary interpreters of Islam and thus a necessary part of any process of Islamization. However, in the twentieth century their role and effectiveness have been challenged by secular as well as Islamic modernists and activists. Critics note that Islam knows no clergy, that the classical Islamic educations of many ulama ill prepare them to respond creatively and effectively to modern realities, and that the notion of scholar (alim, pl. ulama) or expert must be broadened today to include many new areas of expertise (modern economics, medicine, biochemistry etc.).

The vast majority of Islamic organizations and leaders have been laymen who have claimed the right to interpret Islam. The roles of Hasan al-Banna, Sayyid Qutb, and Mawlana Mawdudi and, more recently, Hasan al-Turabi, Rashid al-Ghannoushi, and Abbasi Madani as intellectual/activists has challenged the ulama's sole prerogative as Islamic scholars and leaders. The call in recent years for greater political participation and democratization with its implied empowerment of elected national assemblies further challenges the traditional authority of the political and religious establishments alike.

The second question, "What Islam," questions whether the process of Islamization of state and society is to be one of restoration or reformation. Some call for an Islamic state based upon the reimplementation of classical formulations of Islamic laws. Others argue the need to reinterpret and reformulate law in light of the new realities of the contemporary society. Several important historical facts are important to remember: while the period of Muhammad and the Medinan state remained the ideal paradigm, historically there was no single, detailed model of an Islamic state; Islamic law itself is the product of divine prescriptions and human interpretations conditioned by social contexts; contemporary Islamic activists have generated their own interpretations or paradigms which are themselves human constructions based upon sacred texts.

Islam, like all religious traditions, is an ideal which has taken many forms historically and which has been capable of multiple levels of discourse, conditioned by reason or human interpretation and historical/social contexts. For example, much of the debate over the relationship of Islam to women's rights must be seen in terms not only of religion but also, as in other religions, of patriarchy. The status and role of Muslim women in law and society was defined in a patriarchal past and by a male religious elite, ulama, who were the interpreters of religion.

There continue to be multiple interpretations, or perhaps more accurately reinterpretations, of Islam today as in the past. While some tend to totally equate their preferred interpretation of Islam with the sacred, in fact the line between the divine and human, revelation and reason is often blurred and a subject of debate. Historically, this diversity is reflected in the fact that despite enormous areas of agreement in faith and practice, many differences exist between Sunni and Shii Islam, as well as within Sunni Islam itself.

### **Islamic Threat or Clash of Civilizations?**

In recent years, there are those who speak of a clash of civilizations, a clash between Islam and "our" modern secular (or Judeo-Christian), democratic values and culture or between Islamic civilization and the West. —

The underestimation of religion in modernization or development theory as a source of identity and a potential force in politics has led today to its overestimation. New recognition of religion's significance in international affairs has reinforced an exaggerated belief among some in the impending clash of civilizations. The clearest, most provocative and influential articulation of this position is Samuel P. Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" in which Huntington declared that in the post Cold War period: "The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future... The next world war, if there is one, will be a war between civilizations." — Religious and cultural differences are emphasized in this position over similarities; political, economic, and cultural differences are necessarily equated with confrontation. Areas of cooperation and the fact that most countries are primarily, though not solely, driven by national and regional interests are overlooked or de-emphasized.

The creation of an "imagined" monolithic Islam last led to a religious reductionism that views political conflicts in the Sudan, Lebanon, Bosnia, and Azerbaijan in primarily religious terms -- as "Islamic-Christian conflicts." Although the communities in these areas may be broadly identified in religious or confessional terms as Christian and Muslim communities, as is the case of Northern Ireland's Catholic and Protestant communities or Sri Lanka's Tamil (Hindu) and Buddhist communities, local disputes and civil wars have more to do with political (eg. ethnic nationalism and autonomy and independence) and socioeconomic issues/grievances than with religion.

The challenge in an increasingly global, interdependent world is to recognize both competing and common interests. America's policy towards Japan or Saudi Arabia is not based upon a sense of shared culture, religion, or civilization but upon national or group interests. Cooperation can result from common religious and ethnic backgrounds; however, more often than not it comes from the recognition of common national and strategic interests. While a clash of civilizations can become the clarion call that justifies aggression and warfare, future global threats and wars will be due less to a clash of "civilizations" than a clash of interests, economic and otherwise.

Implicit in the analysis of many critics of political Islam is a "secular fundamentalism," a modern secular perspective which views the mixing of religion and politics as necessarily abnormal (departing from the secular norm), irrational, dangerous, and extremist. Those who do so are often dubbed "fundamentalists" (Christian, Jewish or Muslim) or religious fanatics. Thus, when secular minded peoples (government officials, political analysts, journalists, and the bulk of the general public) in the West encounter Muslim individuals and groups who speak of Islam as a comprehensive way of life, they immediately dub them fundamentalist and simply equate them with retrogressive forces, obstacles to change, zealotry that is a threat.

The assumption that the mixing of religion and politics necessarily and inevitably leads to fanaticism and extremism has been a major factor in concluding that all Islamic movements are extremists and that Islam and democracy are incompatible. Failure to differentiate between Islamic movements, that is, between those that are moderate (willing to participate within the system and seek change from below) and those that are radical (violent) and extremist is misleading and counterproductive. Few equate the actions of Jewish or Christian extremist leaders or groups with Judaism and Christianity as a whole. Similarly, the American government does not condemn the mixing of religion and politics in Israel, Poland, Eastern Europe or Latin America. A comparable level of discrimination is absent when dealing with Islam.

Many governments identify political Islam, simply equated with Islamic fundamentalism and extremism, as the primary threat to national, regional, and international security. (This has also become an excuse for backing away from the promotion of democratization.) Bombings and assassinations in the Middle East and in Europe and America reinforce this charge. However, questions remain. Can the ills of societies be reduced to a single cause or blamed on "fundamentalist fanatics"? Are the activities of a radical minority a convenient excuse for the failures of many government's to build strong and equitable modern states. Does this perceived threat support authoritarian, military/security governments, whose non-elected rulers primary wish is to perpetuate their own power? The use of violence is a particularly contentious and difficult issue. Distinguishing between moderates and extremists can be difficult. The line between movements of national liberation and terrorist organizations is often blurred or dependent upon one's political vantage point. America's revolutionary heroes were rebels and traitors for the British crown. Menachem Begin and Yitzak Shamir, the Irgun and Stern Gangs, Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress, and until recently, Yasser Arafat and the PLO were regarded by their opposition as terrorists leading terrorist movements. Similar questions or issues exist elsewhere. Is Christian liberation theology and its derivative movements in Latin and Central America simply a crypto-Marxist revolutionary force or an authentic populist movement? Yesterdays terrorists may be just that - terrorists, or they may become today's statesmen.

The challenge is to move beyond an imagined monolithic political Islam. The diversity reflected in differences between state Islam as seen in Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Malaysia, Iran, Sudan, Pakistan, Libya or Afghanistan can also be seen in differences among Islamic movements from moderate/pragmatist, those that participate within the system, to radical extremists, those that simply seek to overthrow regimes and impose their own brand of Islam. The Muslim Brotherhoods of Egypt and Jordan, Pakistan's Jamaat-i-Islami, Turkey's Refah Party, Tunisia's al-Nahda, and Algeria's Islamic Salvation Front, to name a few, eschewed violence and participated in electoral politics. At the same time, Egypt's Gamaa Islamiyya, Algeria's Armed Islamic Group, and Jihad organizations in many countries have engaged in violence and terrorism.

The challenge for students of Muslim politics is to avoid an easier, monolithic approach and instead to evaluate each country and each Islamic movement separately and within its specific context. Just as democratic, Western Christian, European, or Chinese nations,

despite commonalities, possess distinctive differences and national interests, so too a rich diversity of peoples, governments and interests are found in the Muslim world and within political Islam.

### **The Democracy Debate**

A similar diversity of voices, some harmonious and others strident, may be heard in the discussion and debate in recent years over political participation and democratization. There are in fact a range of Muslim positions regarding democratization. Secularists argue for secular forms of democracy, the separation of religion and the state.

Rejectionists maintain that Islam has its own forms of governance and that it is incompatible with democracy. This position is held by moderates and militant Muslims, from King Fahd to radical Islamists. Accommodationists believe that traditional concepts and institutions: consultation (shura), consensus (ijma), reinterpretation (ijtihad) can be utilized to develop Islamically acceptable forms of popular political participation and democratization.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, both the economic failures of governments and the euphoria that accompanied the fall of the Soviet Union and liberation of Eastern Europe, led to an opening of political systems and elections. To the surprise of many, Islamist candidates in Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan emerged as the leading opposition and in Algeria, after sweeping municipal elections and the first round of parliamentary elections, the Islamic Salvation Front seemed poised to come to power through ballots not bullets. Islamists subsequently proved equally successful in elections in Kuwait and Yemen, and most recently in Turkey where the Prime Minister, members of parliament and the mayors of major cities are now Islamist.

The response among governments in the Muslim world and the West was one of shock and consternation. The 1980s had been dominated by the equation of "Islamic fundamentalism" or political Islam with radicalism and violence, fears of Iran's export of revolution or attempted coups by clandestine organizations, and the belief that Islamists were not representative and thus would be rejected in popular elections. Instead, Islamic activism or Islamism had moved from the periphery to the Center. A "quiet revolution" had resulted in the emergence of Islamists as mainstream (not just the radical fringe) political actors whose social institutions and services (schools, clinics, publishing houses) and political parties or candidates presented an effective alternative to the establishment was a cause of alarm for many.

Ironically, the non-violent participation and apparent strength of Islamists in mainstream society led to government attempts to limit political liberalization and democratization in the 1990s, with the charge that Islamists were out to "hijack democracy" and destabilize society. The Algerian military seized power, imprisoned and denied Islamists their victory. Tunisia and Egypt backed away from their commitment to open elections and instead crushed (Tunisia) or curtailed (Egypt) Islamist participation, leaving little space for the distinction between moderates (those who operated above ground and within the system) and violent revolutionary extremists.

The question of whether Islamists are out to "hijack democracy" has been counterbalanced by the attitude of rulers who, in the words of one Western diplomat, believe in "risk free democracy" or "democracy without dissent." In contrast, Jordan, Kuwait, Yemen, Pakistan, Turkey and Malaysia have permitted Islamists to participate in electoral politics.

The thwarting of the political process by governments that cancel elections or repress populist Islamic movements as in Algeria and Egypt has contributed to the growing radicalization and polarization of society and the creation of a "self-fulfilling prophecy." Regime repression of moderate (as distinguished from violent radical) Islamic groups creates conditions that lead to political confrontation and a spiral of regime violence and movement counter-violence, events that seemingly "validate" the contention that Islamic movements are inherently violent, anti-democratic and a threat to national and regional stability. Contrast the experience of government indiscriminate repression and Islamist counter-violence in Algeria with that of Turkey, Jordan, Pakistan, or Malaysia where a policy of inclusion, cooption or control has led to Islamist non-violent participation in electoral politics.

A major question faced by Islamic movements, surrounds their ability, if they come to power, to tolerate diversity. The record of Islamic experiments in Pakistan, Iran, the Sudan, and Afghanistan raises serious questions. The extent to which the growth of Islamic revivalism has been accompanied in some countries by attempts to limit or silence political and religious opposition, to restrict women's rights, to separate women and men in public, to enforce veiling and to restrict their public roles in society remains a serious concern. The situation is further compounded by the example of the Sudan where Hasan Turabi, leader of the Islamic Front, has supported the government's implementation of policies that directly contradict his earlier more liberal, pluralistic Islamic ideology. Turabi's "about face" has led many to question whether what Islamists say when out of power is what they will do when in power.

The issue of authoritarianism cuts across the political and ideological spectrum of Muslim politics. The track record of many governments non-Islamist (Algeria, Tunisia, and Egypt) and Islamist (Iran, Sudan, Afghanistan), demonstrates an inability to tolerate any significant opposition of whatever ideological orientation. For example, despite his pledge to open up the political system after seizing power in a coup, Tunisia's President Zeine Abedin Ben Ali crushed al-Nahda, his Islamist opposition, after their impressive performance in elections, and won recent elections by 99. 91% of the vote. The issue of political participation and democratization in Muslim societies is not primarily one of religion but of political culture. Failure to strengthen civil society and support the values and culture of political participation contributes to the dangers of both religious and secular authoritarianism.

### **Political Islam and Foreign Policy**

Cognizant of a Western tendency to see Islam as a threat, many Muslim governments use the danger of Islamic radicalism as an excuse for their suppression of Islamic movements. Much as anti-communism during the Cold War was a convenient excuse for authoritarian

rule and the need for aid from Western powers, today some governments and experts charge that "there are no Islamic moderates." Faced with a purportedly global, monolithic, violent, fundamentalist threat, the attempt by some rulers to crush all movements is legitimated as is the continued substantial (and otherwise difficult to justify) preferential foreign aid to Israel and Egypt. No longer bastions against the spread of communism, they now are touted as critical players in blocking the spread of "radical Islamic fundamentalism" and its threat to the twin pillars of U.S. Middle East foreign policy, access to Arab oil and the Peace Process.

However, while some argue that Islamist movements are inherently radical or militant, others maintain that a critical distinction must be made between a moderate majority and a violent extremist minority. In addition, they question whether Islamic movements' responses (participation vs. violent confrontation) are primarily driven by ideology or by governments' failed policies and repressive actions. Thus, those who see political Islam as a monolithic threat are countered by others who warn that such a charge creates a "new communism" that becomes an excuse for the support of authoritarian rulers, ignoring the deep seated political and socioeconomic problems of societies, a selective approach to the promotion of democratization and human rights, and a rationale for continued foreign aid to "old allies."

The United States and Europe have been confronted with the specific political policy issue: What are the rights of Islamists to participate in politics and society? Recent American Assistant Secretaries of State (Edward Djerejian in the Bush administration and Robert Pelletreau in the Clinton administration) have addressed this issue as has the French government with regard to Algeria in diverse ways. Their responses touch on a variety of questions: Are self-determination and democratization to be promoted universally or selectively? Do Islamist groups represent authentic populist movements? Is their participation a tactic or are they willing "to play by the rules of the game"? How representative are Islamist organizations and do the advantages outweigh the risks (an Islamist seizure of power) to opening up the political system?

The strength of Islamic organizations and parties, which often represent a minority of the population, is in large part due to their being the only viable voice and vehicle for opposition in relatively closed political systems. The electoral strength of Tunisia's Renaissance Party, Algeria's FIS, Egypt or Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood, or Turkey's Refah Party came not only from a hard core of dedicated followers but also from the fact that they were the most credible and effective "alternative game in town." Thus, their support included both those who voted for their Islamic agenda as well as those who simply wished to cast a vote against the government.

Opening up the political system enables the growth of competing opposition parties and can challenge Islamic parties' monopoly of opposition voters. They would be forced to compete for votes and, if in power, to rule amidst diverse interests as well as to move beyond the promises of slogans to the solution of problems. Islamic groups or parties, like secular political parties, would be challenged to adapt or broaden their ideology and programs in response to domestic realities, diverse constituencies and interests.

The process of democratization is an experiment whose outcome is unpredictable but one whose short term risks must be balanced against long term consequences. Issues of political legitimacy, popular political participation, national identity and socio-economic justice can not continue to be defined, determined and imposed from above without paying a heavy price, if not now then in the future, in terms of political development and national as well as regional stability.

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