Political Islam After the Arab Spring - *Between Jihad and Democracy*

By Olivier Roy

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The term "Islamism" and its watered-down equivalent, "political Islam," sprang into widespread use after the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and soon became permanent fixtures of contemporary political discourse. They were coined to describe an allegedly new phenomenon: political movements headed by educated Muslim laymen who advocated the "re-Islamization" of Muslim-majority countries (and Muslim communities elsewhere) that had, in their eyes, ceased to be sufficiently Islamic. These movements promoted sharia through modern forms of popular mobilization—for example, creating branches specifically for young people, women, and workers. They adopted a hybrid organizational structure, a cross between a traditional Sufi brotherhood, in which members pass through different steps of initiation, and a modern political party, where an advisory council appoints a leader who oversees technical committees devoted to particular policy areas. Islamists worked on two tracks: fostering a social movement that would partner with community organizations and charities and establishing a political movement that would compete in elections while pushing its members into the state bureaucracy.

By the 1970s, such organizations were hardly novel. The first and most famous Islamist group was the Muslim Brotherhood, which was founded in Egypt in 1928 and later established branches throughout the Arab world. Over time, similar organizations cropped up elsewhere in the Sunni Muslim world. But the Shiite Iranian clergy and militants who took part in the overthrow of the shah of Iran in 1979 helped define political Islam in the public imagination—possibly because they were the first Islamists to control a modern state. Their rise helped popularize the term "Islamist" in the media, academia, and government.

Today, unfortunately, journalists, scholars, and politicians apply the phrase liberally, attaching it to a broad range of figures and groups—from Rached Ghannouchi, the leader of the Ennahda Party of "Muslim democrats" in Tunisia, to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the self-appointed caliph of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (or ISIS). This is akin to using the term "socialist" to describe both U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un.

One of the many qualities of Rethinking Political Islam, a thoughtful and useful collection of essays assembled by Shadi Hamid and William McCants, two prominent American experts on the subject, is how it sharpens the debate over political Islam by identifying what they call "mainstream Islamists." Hamid and McCants use that term to refer to Islamist parties "that operate within the confines of institutional politics and are willing to work within existing state structures, even ostensibly secular ones." Groups fitting this description include the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Jordan, the Islah Party in Yemen, the Prosperous Justice Party in Indonesia, and many others.

Hamid and McCants' definition leaves out movements, such as the South Asia–based Tablighi Jamaat, that seek to re-Islamize society through proselytizing rather than politics. It also excludes extremist groups, such as al Qaeda, that advocate and practice violent jihad. But the book's focus on mainstream Islamists is warranted, because although terrorist groups generate headlines, more moderate groups enjoy far deeper and broader support in the Muslim world—and thus pose a more profound long-term challenge to secular states of all kinds. They are genuine social movements with concrete, near-term goals: if they support the idea of a global caliphate, they consider it a distant dream. In the here and now, they seek accommodation with existing institutions and build support by setting up charities that fill the gap left by poor governance in much of the Muslim world. With the goodwill this generates, they try to persuade people to "return" to Islam through piety: attending mosque, praying openly in public spaces, and, for women, wearing the veil. They do not overtly contest the legitimacy of secular governments but instead try to influence them; they enter into the electoral arena when allowed to do so and are open to joining political coalitions. They reject the practice of takfir (accusing other Muslims of apostasy) and do not promote armed insurrections—except against Israel. They take up arms rarely, only when under attack. And although they accuse Western powers of neocolonialism and "cultural aggression," they always keep the door open to contacts and negotiation. (It should be noted that critics and opponents of such groups have long accused them, usually without much evidence, of having hidden agendas and of practicing doublespeak to disguise far more radical intentions and beliefs.)

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This is a somewhat familiar portrait. But in recent years, it has been placed in an unfamiliar frame, owing to what Hamid and McCants call "the twin shocks": the 2013 military coup in Egypt, which brought down a freely elected Islamist-led government after it had spent barely a year in power, and the 2014 emergence of an ISIS statelet in the wake of the group's brutal rampage through Iraq and Syria. There was, of course, an earlier shock, as well: the so-called Arab Spring of 2010–11, which brought mainstream Islamists more influence and power than they had ever enjoyed before.

But far from clarifying the nature and trajectory of Islamism, these shocks have seemed to only further muddy the water. As Hamid and McCants write, "After decades speculating on what Islamists would do when they came to power, analysts, academics—and Islamists themselves—finally have an answer. And it is confusing."

CONTEXT VS. ESSENCE

To illuminate the subject, the contributors to Rethinking Political Islam wisely set aside theoretical debates about Islamist ideology and examine the practices and policies of Islamist parties in recent years. The book devotes chapters to developments in nine countries in the Middle East, North Africa, and Asia. Their experiences run the gamut. After the 2010–11 revolutions, Islamists won elections in Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia, whereas in Libya, Syria, and

Yemen, they were immediately embroiled in messy civil wars. No uprisings took place in Jordan or Kuwait, but Islamist parties in both places—which have a long tradition of participating in elections and working within existing institutions—were nonetheless energized by the upheavals elsewhere. The same was true of Islamist parties in Pakistan and Southeast Asia.

Despite this variety, analyses of political Islam in these places tend to fall into two categories. The first might be called "the contextualist view," which holds that the policies and practices of Islamist movements are driven less by ideology than by events and sees such groups as reactive and adaptive. So, for example, the harsh repression faced by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in the 1960s produced a more cautious approach from the movement's leadership, coupled with radicalization on its fringes. In turn, the political opportunities supplied by the 2010–11 revolts led the group to enter into the electoral game, as the political scientist Steven Brooke notes in his contribution to Rethinking Political Islam. Contextualists believe that Islamist groups seek to adapt to circumstances and country-specific norms (for example, by recognizing the monarchies in Jordan and Morocco). The groups' main goal is to survive as coherent organizations and political actors. And their use of religious rhetoric is often little more than "Muslim-speak" (in the words of the French political scientist François Burgat)—a way to express a unique identity and articulate grievances, especially against the West.

The second school of thought might be called "the essentialist view." It holds that Islamists are fundamentally ideological and that any concessions they make to secularist principles or institutions are purely tactical: their participation in electoral politics hardly precludes them from calling for violent jihad, as well. According to this view, the true Islamist conception of democracy is "one man, one vote, one time." In other words, Islamists see the ballot box as little more than a path to power; once there, they would replace democracy with theocracy. A corollary to this argument is the idea—extolled by critics of Islamism but also some of its adherents—that Islamic theology recognizes no separation between religion and politics, and therefore an authentic Islamist cannot renounce his ideological agenda in favor of a more pragmatic or democratic approach.

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In recent years, however, mainstream Islamists have frequently done just that. They did so in the wake of victory, as in Tunisia, and defeat, as in Egypt. In both cases, political constraints overrode ideological commitments. Egyptian and Tunisian Islamists realized that their constituents cared far less about, say, the role of Islam in the constitution than jobs, food, and housing. In Egypt, they learned this lesson the hard way. At first, the government headed by Mohamed Morsi, who had previously served as a senior leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, appeared willing to work within the confines of existing institutions—indeed, that willingness is part of what got the Islamists elected. But when Morsi increased his own authority and failed to deliver economic growth and security, public support for his government plummeted, and most Egyptians welcomed the return of military rule after Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, the defense minister, took power in a coup in 2013. In Tunisia, the mainstream Islamists of the Ennahda Party adapted

more deftly, as the scholar Monica Marks discusses in her contribution to the book, dissolving their ruling coalition in 2013 in the wake of public anger over security lapses and economic instability—a step that prevented a confrontation with secularists who might have threatened the party's long-term survival.

In many places, Islamist parties also realized that they do not enjoy a monopoly on religious politics: in Egypt in 2012, the hitherto quietist Salafists formed their own party and won a slice of the devout electorate. Meanwhile, clerical institutions, such as Cairo's Al-Azhar University, did not endorse the Islamists. And even secularist parties, such as Tunisia's Nidaa Tounes, often promoted some Islamic norms to reinforce their cultural authenticity. In Southeast Asia, as the political scientist Joseph Chinyong Liow shows in his chapter, almost all political parties and figures have incorporated re-Islamization into their platforms, undermining the Islamist brand.

The aftermath of the Arab revolts of 2010–11 have not supplied a clear verdict in the debate between the contextualist and essentialist camps. But as Rethinking Political Islam demonstrates, a preponderance of the evidence supports the contextualist side. "Democracy," Hamid and McCants write, "empowers and encourages all parties, Islamist or otherwise, to seek the center, wherever that may be." Tunisia's Ennahda offers the most convincing proof for that argument. After winning a parliamentary plurality in 2011, the party spent years debating—with itself and its opponents—the text of a new constitution. The result was perhaps the most secular foundational document of any Arab state, one that even protects "freedom of conscience"— that is, the right to hold or not hold any religious beliefs and the freedom to change religions. That is a more expansive right than "freedom of religion," which would allow non-Muslims to practice their faith but not allow them to convert Muslims to it and would ignore atheists and other secular-minded people. As the international relations scholar Peter Mandaville notes in his chapter, Ennahda's voluntary abandonment of governing power showed that old fears of "one man, one vote, one time" are often unfounded. Meanwhile, in Egypt in 2013, it was not the Islamists who put an end to democratic rule but a strange alliance of military leaders, secularists, and Salafists. In any case, Morsi did not have the means to resist Sisi's coup, as demonstrated by the overwhelmingly peaceful and completely futile reaction of Morsi's supporters, nearly one thousand of whom were massacred by the army after occupying a public square in Cairo.

MOSQUE AND STATE

Ultimately, the contributors to Rethinking Political Islam are interested in going beyond the long-running, familiar debates about the sincerity of Islamists. These scholars seek to understand what it will mean for religious parties to transform from fringe actors confined to the opposition into genuine political players. The question is no longer, What does Islam say about politics? but, How will Islamists practice politics?

Ennahda's answer to that question was a dramatic change in its structure and identity: in 2016, the group officially ceased to define itself as an Islamist party. Ennahda "no longer accepts the label of 'Islamism'—a concept that has been disfigured in recent years by radical extremists—as a description of its approach," Ghannouchi wrote in this magazine. He continued: "Tunisia is finally a democracy rather than a dictatorship; that means that Ennahda can finally be a political party focusing on its practical agenda and economic vision rather than a social movement fighting against repression and dictatorship."

But if a party such as Ennahda stops trying to shape civil law along sharia lines, in what sense is it Islamic at all? The answer—still controversial for many members—is that although the

movement (harakat) and the party (hizb) are now formally separate, the goal of the party's participation in politics is to protect the movement from politics. By becoming a normal political actor in a normal political system, the Ennahda Party will help the Ennahda movement carry out its mission of fostering a society in which religion, although not enshrined in state institutions, nonetheless lies at the core of daily life. The approach is akin to the Western liberal concept of the separation of church and state—although closer to the American conception of shielding religion from state interference than to the French idea of protecting the state from religion. And in the Islamic context, the separation must be enforced not only by state institutions and the constitution but also at the grass-roots level, by Islamist parties themselves.

That represents a profound change, no less than the redefining of religion to refer more narrowly to a set of beliefs and practices that exist in the framework of a secular society. Ennahda has recognized that although Tunisian society may be culturally Muslim, it is not destined to become ideologically Islamic. Ghannouchi glossed this move by declaring that Ennahda had become "a party of Muslim democrats," intentionally inviting comparisons to the Christian democratic parties of Europe.

But the comparison only goes so far. From the mid-1940s until the mid-1970s, Christian democratic parties found ways to secularize what had been primarily religious values in order to better reach out to an ever more secular electorate. In predominantly Protestant and Catholic countries alike, such parties promoted values drawn from the social doctrine of the church on issues related to the family, cooperation between workers and businesses, and social security. But even though these parties still survive (and even thrive in Germany), there is no Christian democratic social movement equivalent to the ones that Ennahda and other Islamist groups see as crucial to their missions. In countries such as Germany, Christian democrats have a hizb but no harakat. And although Catholic social movements operate in European countries such as Italy, they do not identify with political parties. In Europe, secularism triumphed not only in the political realm but also in the social one: after World War II, Western countries drifted further and further away from traditional Christian views, especially on matters relating to sexuality, gender, and the family. In this sense, it's striking that Ghannouchi and other mainstream Islamists would encourage comparisons to Christian democrats, who hardly seem to present a model of success by Islamist standards.

It seems unlikely that the secularization of Islamic politics will be accompanied by a drift away from traditional values in Muslim countries, at least in the foreseeable future. (Tunisia is not likely to legalize gay marriage anytime soon.) But separating mosque and state poses a more acute short-term risk for Islamist parties such as Ennahda: it could provide an opening for jihadist extremists, who often refer to themselves as "foreigners in this world." That phrase comes from a well-known chant, or nashid, popularized during the trials of members of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in the 1960s. It is an expression of the idea that, in their ideological purity and refusal to accommodate secular norms and institutions, jihadists represent the only true Islamists—and, perhaps, the only true Muslims. The danger is that if mainstream Islamists purchase inclusion in the secular state at the price of separating their political goals from their religious and social ones (as in Tunisia), or suffer exclusion from the state owing to their own overreach and a repressive backlash against it (as in Egypt), young Muslims seeking "authentic" religious and political identities might look elsewhere. And the jihadists will be waiting for them.