

zealous democrats

ISLAMISM AND DEMOCRACY IN EGYPT, INDONESIA AND TURKEY

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Executive summary

The fear of Islamists coming to power through elections has long been an obstacle to democratisation in authoritarian states of the Muslim world. Islamists have been, and continue to be, the best organised and most credible opposition movements in many of these countries. They are also commonly, if not always correctly, assumed to be in the best position to capitalise on any democratic opening of their political systems. At the same time, the commitment of Islamists to democracy is often questioned. Indeed, when it comes to democracy, Islamism's intellectual heritage and historical record (in terms of the few examples of Islamist-led states, such as Sudan and Iran) have not been reassuring.

The apparent strength of Islamist movements, combined with suspicions about Islamism's democratic compatibility, has been used by authoritarian governments as an argument to deflect both domestic and international calls for political reform and democratisation. Domestically, secular liberals have preferred to settle for nominally secular dictatorships over potentially religious ones. Internationally, Western governments have preferred friendly autocrats to democratically elected, but potentially hostile, Islamist-led governments.

The goal of this paper is to re-examine some of the assumptions about the risks of democratisation in authoritarian countries of the Muslim world (and not just in the Middle East) where strong Islamist movements or parties exist. While the risks of democratisation in these contexts should not be underestimated and the democratic commitment of Islamists should not be taken at face value, the costs and pitfalls of the status quo in many of these countries are also increasing.

The Faustian pact that secular liberals have made with authoritarian rulers in many of these states has not prevented the repression these regimes use against

Islamists being used against others as well; nor, indeed, has it stopped these regimes from adopting the types of social and religious restrictions favoured by Islamists in an effort to co-opt popular religious sentiment. For the West, partnership with friendly despots in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan has not prevented nationals from these countries carrying out terrorist attacks against Western targets; in fact, quite the reverse is often true.

This is not to say that democratisation holds all the solutions to these problems. Democracy will undoubtedly complicate efforts by the countries in question to deal with the often deep social, economic and political problems they face, even if it would undoubtedly strengthen the legitimacy of those having to make the difficult decisions necessary to confront these challenges. Likewise, terrorist movements like al-Qaeda and its partisans are unlikely to suddenly abandon bullets and bombs for ballot boxes. But democratisation in parts of the Muslim world would suck some of the oxygen out of the extremists' incendiary rhetoric — not least the charge that Western governments preach democracy and human rights but in practice ally themselves with governments committed to neither. Moreover, while Islamist militancy is not solely a product of authoritarian states, repression has played an unmistakable part in the process of radicalisation in many cases.

Our goal in this paper, however, is not to advocate or justify muscular interventions for the sake of 'exporting democracy'. We recognise that democratisation is most likely to succeed when it results from endogenous drivers and processes. Yet it is also true that the international community shapes and affects these processes in myriad ways, from the human rights representations made by individual countries, to the provision or withholding of aid and financial assistance, to the recognition afforded new governments. In short, even if it is not

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actually promoting it, the international community will continue to influence and respond to democratisation and political change in the Muslim world.

Against this background, Islamism's relationship with democracy has received considerable attention from scholars, researchers and commentators. What this paper does, however, is to turn the traditional question about Islamism's relationship with democracy, on its head. Instead of asking 'What will Islamists do to democracy?' it asks, 'What does democracy do to Islamists?'

To that end this paper compares three cases of Islamist movements in three progressively more democratic contexts. The paper begins with a discussion of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, a movement that avows a commitment to democracy and democratic reform, but operates in a non-democratic political context. It then considers the *Partai Keadilan Sejahtera* (the Prosperous Justice Party or the PKS), that has adapted a Muslim Brotherhood model of activism to Indonesia's relatively new, but maturing, democracy. Finally, it examines the case of the *Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi* (the Justice and Development Party or the AKP) a 'post-Islamist' party operating in Turkey's older, if still incomplete, democratic political system.

Each case study provides a self-contained discussion of how one particular Islamist movement or party has adapted, or attempted to adapt, to democratic participation. But our goal is also to compare the three case studies in order to identify any consistent shifts in ideas and activism that seem to occur across these cases and indeed manifest more strongly in the more democratic contexts. In other words, our aim is to understand the ways in which political context shapes the Islamist response. The goal in this regard is not so much to establish whether democracy 'moderates'

Islamists as it is to understand the ways and conditions under which participation in democratic politics may normalise them. By normalisation we refer to a process whereby Islamists become integrated members of the political system, operating by the rules and norms of democracy, developing more transparent leadership and party structures and expanding the bases of their membership.

A review of the three case studies suggests six fairly consistent shifts in Islamist ideology and activism that appear to become more manifest as one moves from non-democratic to democratic contexts:

From *shari'a* state to *shari'a* values: In the cases considered here democratic normalisation sees a shift from a pursuit of *shari'a* (the *sine qua non* of Islamist activism) that requires new institutions (an Islamic state or system), to a focus on *shari'a* as a set of values or principles that the movement seeks to enact through existing political processes. It is the logical conclusion of a tactical decision to pursue goals through political participation rather than revolution; but it can also have far-reaching consequences as it potentially changes Islamism's ideological and practical relationship with its historical goal of an Islamic state. Specifically, the Islamic state becomes less important to Islamists as a factor in the Islamisation of society.

From Islamic governance to 'good governance': All three case studies illustrate a gradual secularisation of Islamist policy agendas. This is not to say that Islamists abandon their religious agendas or adopt policies demonstrably incompatible with their Islamic principles. Consistency with their interpretation of Islam remains important. But Islamists in these contexts also become engaged in, and are forced to respond to, a much wider

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range of issues upon which ‘Islam’ says very little. And it is sometimes difficult to demonstrate to supporters what is specifically Islamic about the solutions proposed by these movements. This is reflected, for example, in the way approaches to economic policy have shifted from Islamism’s historical focus on social equality to a more neo-liberal approach. This shift serves a substantive purpose in terms of an effort by Islamists to find rational policy responses to real problems but it serves a political purpose as well, in terms of attracting new supporters.

From moral message to the morality of the messengers: Accompanying the preceding shifts is a further shift in the way these movements or parties are perceived in electoral or more fully democratic contexts. Specifically, the point of differentiation becomes less their ideological and moral message, and more the perceived morality or appeal of the movement or party’s representatives. This is consistent with the historical aims of Islamist activism insofar as Islamism has sought to provide both an ideology for social, economic and political reform, but also exemplars of Islamically inspired probity, effectiveness and selflessness. Yet in the contexts considered here, the balance tips in favour of the latter. And because these movements or parties are now winning support more because of the attractiveness of their candidates, they gain greater flexibility with respect to reconsidering aspects of their ideology or policy agendas.

Greater membership diversity: Such shifts in the ideas and activism of Islamist movements both facilitate and reflect changes in the membership of these movements and parties. As socio-religious movements, Islamists usually restrict their membership to people fitting particular criteria — often, one must be male,

a Muslim or indeed a ‘special Muslim’ in the sense of holding a particular interpretation of Islam and its role in public life. As political parties in democratic contexts the imperative is to broaden the base of membership, in particular to attract political talent from all quarters. The result, however, is a tension and even a change in the identity of the movement as its membership changes, although this is likely to be very gradual.

Regeneration: The democratic pretences of mainstream Islamist movements are often undermined by their lack of internal democracy. Against this, however, political activism has often provided a chance for new generations within these movements to come to the fore, in some respects bypassing the internal hierarchy. This has certainly been the case with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, although ultimately the imperatives of operating as a semi-secret movement under varying degrees of pressure from the state have reinforced the importance of internal discipline at the cost of debate and dynamism. The cases of the PKS and the AKP, by contrast, demonstrate how the availability of more democratic political space allows greater opportunity for the emergence of younger, more open-minded, worldly and technically adept activists.

Oscillation rather than moderation: Superficially, a review of our three case studies supports the idea that greater democracy moderates Islamist movements. Yet it is probably more judicious to talk of oscillation rather than moderation. That is, in more open political contexts there seems a much greater chance of ideological dynamism or *oscillation* in two respects: first, a tension between more purist and more pragmatic wings over the overall ideological direction of the movement becomes stronger; and second, within the framework of this

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tension, each side of the movement will score ‘victories’ on particular issues or policy questions, such that on some issues the party will appear closer to its principles, and on others it will appear more pragmatic. In other words, Islamist parties, like most, if not all, parties in democratic contexts, would not so much moderate (or become more extreme, for that matter) as become susceptible to greater internal tensions over ideology and policy that are not readily resolved, but constantly *oscillate* as different factions of the party seek to influence positions and outcomes.

This paper does *not*, however, argue that the foregoing shifts are the inevitable consequence of democratic participation by any Islamist movement in any political context. The paper concludes by identifying some of

the variables and factors that seem to have been critical in our case studies. In particular: the *a priori* adoption of participatory, non-violent and non-confrontational strategies by the Islamist movements in question (at least domestically), that distinguishes them from the extremists like al-Qaeda, but also militant organisations such as Hizballah and Hamas that practise both participatory politics and violence; the existence of strong competition from other parties or movements, Islamist and non-Islamist; the role of countervailing forces and institutions; the legitimacy of these forces and institutions; and finally the existence of real opportunities for Islamists to practise democratic politics and to give real significance to their internal debates, and hence to evolve in a democratic direction.

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