

Week 2 Essay:
Democracy in the Middle East

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Political Islam and the Paradox of Democratization in the Middle East

Introduction

The biggest problem with democratization is that for democracy to truly work in a country, that country has to believe in or have the premise that freedom is paramount and must apply to everyone. The founding fathers of the United States struggled with this, and that is why the current constitution was not written for about thirteen years after independence (U.S. Senate n.d.). That is one of the reasons why democratization has been such a problem in the Middle East. Their society and norms are entirely different from those of Western societies. Their culture is built on their religion, the religion of Islam. In the Arab world, religion is not simply a belief system but the foundation of the state, the society, and the self. Islam is not confined to the mosque; it governs civil law, criminal law, dress codes, family relations, and even government structure. Islam, as interpreted by many political movements, is not merely a religion but a political ideology, and it is used as the blueprint for governance. This fusion of religion and politics forms the basis of what is now called “political Islam.” It all stems from the book written by their prophet Muhammed, titled the Qur'an.

Over the years since the birth of Islam, many societies have sought to modernize or westernize Islam. This has been met with much friction and strife. Some have sought to fight against the modernization of Islam and to restore it to its roots. It is this belief, this restoration that has led to the creation of many groups that have been designated as terrorist organizations. Many of these groups, if not all of them, seek to establish Islam not just as the religion of the world but also as the ruling government. Thus, solidifying the idea behind the notion of political Islam. This notion is inherently problematic when it comes to democratization, for the simple fact that under the notion of democracy, all men are created equal and have equal rights.

However, the Qur'an and Sunnah hold no such conviction. They establish the Muslims as the superior people and allow for the subjugation of non-Muslims and other religions. They allow for the forced conversion of non-Muslims to Islam or to impose extremely harsh taxation called the "jizya tax" to retain one's current faith, if one is protected under the title of "People of the Book" (Gabriel 2002).

Additionally, while some Islamist movements have adopted democratic processes, such as elections, they often do so with the intent not to share power but to monopolize it and force their interpretation of the Qur'an over the entire nation (Iviarquardt and Heffelfinger nd.). For example, the Qur'an, when interpreted through an exclusivist lens, does not guarantee equal rights to non-Muslims, or even to Muslims who deviate from the dominant interpretation of Islam that governs that region, but allows for their subjugation and even condones them being sold into slavery (Gabriel 2002). The idea that all people are created equal, so central to democratic theory, is challenged by Islamist ideologies that see Muslims as superior and non-Muslims as either second-class citizens or enemies of the faith (Iviarquardt and Heffelfinger nd.). Therefore, as long as political Islam continues to enjoy significant support, its ambiguous relationship with liberal democratic norms will continue to complicate the trajectory of democratization in the Middle East.

Islamist Movements as Democratic Participants

Many Islamist groups have emerged within democratic frameworks and have succeeded in electoral politics (Beinin and Stork 1997). The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt is one such example. After the Arab Spring and the fall of Mubarak (Wickham 2015), the Brotherhood quickly mobilized under the banner of democracy, forming the Freedom and Justice Party and winning Egypt's first democratic election (Gabriel 2002); (Iviarquardt and Heffelfinger nd.).

However, their brief rule was fraught with challenges, including accusations of consolidating power and suppressing dissent.

Nathan Brown has observed that many Islamist movements adopt democratic procedures for strategic, not ideological, reasons (Brown 2012). That is, while they might have participated in elections, they did not necessarily support the broader liberal-democratic framework like pluralism, civil liberties, and checks on power. The Muslim Brotherhood's short-lived governance in Egypt demonstrated this tension between democracy and Islam better than any other example in history. For as many secular Egyptians perceived the Muslim Brotherhood as attempting to impose their Islamic vision of statehood rather than governing through consensus, many more saw them as attempting to westernize Islam (Brown 2012).

Adding to Brown's work, Carrie Wickham notes that while many members of the Brotherhood sincerely believe in political participation, others within the movement regard democracy as a temporary means to an Islamic end (Wickham 2015). This duality between democratic procedure and Islamist ideology creates a paradox: political Islam can thrive under democracy, but it may not support the democratic system once in power.

Ideological Tensions Between Islamism and Liberal Democracy

The second major challenge to democratization is the ideological conflict between political Islam and the liberal tenets of democracy. At its core, political Islam seeks to implement sharia as the source of legislation, thereby subordinating artificial laws to divine command. However, this aspiration is fundamentally incompatible with the principle of popular sovereignty that defines modern democracy.

Olivier Roy has argued that Islamists often confuse the Islamization of society with the Islamization of the state. Civil society can achieve the former, while the latter requires political

domination (Roy 1996). Ennahda in Tunisia attempted to resolve this by separating its religious and political agendas, but even this strategy led to internal fractures. Secularists feared a hidden theocratic agenda, while conservative supporters felt betrayed by Ennahda's compromises.

Nikola Gjorshoski and Goran Ilik write that "liberal democracy... cannot be fully compatible with the original Muslim notion of society and government" because Islam, particularly in its political form, does not distinguish between religion and state authority (Gjorshoski and Ilik 2020). This ideological divergence manifests most clearly in issues such as women's rights, freedom of religion, and minority protections, all of which are subordinated under many Islamist interpretations of sharia.

One of the most intractable points of contention between political Islam and liberal democracy is the issue of secularism. Secularism, which forms a foundational pillar of liberal democratic states, is abhorrence to most formulations of political Islam. The division between religion and politics, a hallmark of secular governance, is rejected both axiomatically and praxeologically within Islamist ideology. As Gjorshoski and Ilik explain, political Islam does not merely disagree with secularism on policy grounds; it views secularism as a foreign imposition that fundamentally undermines the Islamic worldview and the divine sovereignty of Sharia (Gjorshoski and Ilik 2020).

This fundamental rejection stems from the belief that legislation belongs to God alone, not to man. Those who follow the Islamic faith believe that the Qur'an is not merely a moral guide but a legislative document. Therefore, to separate religion from politics is to reject divine authority and replace it with fallible human will. From a praxeological perspective, Islamist movements have frequently faced marginalization, repression, and even eradication under secular nationalist regimes. The dissolution of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in Algeria, the

persecution of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt under Nasser, Sadat, and later Sisi, and the brutal suppression of Islamist parties in Syria under the Assads illustrate the real-world consequences of this ideological cleavage.

As Paul Cliteur argues, Islamism's rejection of secularism is not simply rhetorical, it is built into its very structure as a “comprehensive doctrine” that seeks to reorder society based on a unitary vision of religion, law, and governance (Cliteur 2021). Unlike liberal democracy, which views religion as a private matter and law as a public product of social consensus, political Islam holds that religion is both the source and the substance of public law.

This conceptual collision is not merely theoretical; it plays out in constitutional design, legal codes, and electoral legitimacy. When Islamist parties do participate in democratic systems, the core tension becomes evident. This begs the question, can a movement that rejects secularism and prioritizes divine law coexist within a framework built on pluralism and secular neutrality?

Repression, External Actors, and the Islamist Threat Narrative

A third factor complicating democratization is the internal and external reaction to Islamist political participation. When Islamists win elections, they are often perceived as an existential threat, not just by secular elites but by international powers. Many democratic nations, including the United States, backed the 2013 coup in Egypt. This tragically drives this point home. Unfortunately, the Brotherhood's democratic victory was overturned in the name of stability, revealing the deep discomfort with political Islam's rise and thrusting Egypt into another tyrannical governing regime.

This response is not new. Algeria's 1991 election, in which the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) was poised to win, was canceled by the military, plunging the country into civil war. As Glenn E. Robinson notes, jihadism partly evolved as a reaction to the political marginalization of

Islamist voices by authoritarian regimes and their Western backers (Robinson 2017). When democratic openings are closed off, Islamists may abandon ballots for bullets, fueling cycles of violence that further hinder democratic development.

Abdullah Azzam's writings exemplify this shift from political to militant Islamism. As Schnelle's analysis shows, Azzam sought to legitimize violence as a form of political resistance against secular regimes and foreign occupiers, thus laying the groundwork for the transformation of political Islam into global jihadism (Schnelle 2012). In these cases, the failure to accommodate Islamists within the democratic framework led to radicalization rather than reform (Gabriel 2002).

Conclusion

The paradox of political Islam is that it can operate within a democratic framework but often undermines the very principles upon which democracy is built. Islamist movements like the Muslim Brotherhood claim to support democratic participation, but their long-term vision frequently prioritizes Islamic law over pluralism. Furthermore, the ideological tension between liberal democracy and sharia, as well as the fear of Islamist rule among both domestic elites and international actors, has led to cycles of repression, violence, and instability. As long as political Islam remains a dominant force in Middle Eastern politics, democratization will be subject to this enduring and deeply embedded contradiction.

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