

Religionization of Politics and State-Religion Relationship in the Middle East

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Abstract: *In the recent past, especially since the formation of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, one can see the regionalization of politics to a greater extent in the Middle Extent. Many political parties and pressure groups have appeared that appeal to people's religious sentiments and contests election on the basis of religious slogans. Over the years, such political parties have grown in number and strength. This article will research the role of such religious political parties in the formation and evolution of the state and its institutions. It would explore how the regionalization of politics happens and how the state-religion relationship evolves in the course of the regionalization of politics by taking the Middle East as my case study.*

Key Words: Religionization, Politics, State-Religion Relationship, Middle East, Egypt

Introduction

Among academicians and scholars of political science, there has been increased interest in understanding the connection between Islamism and democracy in the region as a result of certain significant political happenings in the ME in both the 20th and 21st centuries. The fall of the Ottoman Empire, the colonization era, demonstrating modernity, the emergence of new authoritarian regimes, the arrival of the third wave of democratization in the area, the emergence of Islamic insurgent movements, and the Arab Uprisings were the main events that brought about significant social and political changes in the Middle East (Tibi, 2009). Due to their significance and uniqueness in the region, political Islam and democracy are currently hot subjects in academia. Both have influenced political and security trends.

Conceptual Definitions

Islamism

It is crucial to understand that Political Islam, often known as Islamism, has been defined in a variety of ways by numerous academic writers. Despite their differences and differences in historical moments of creation, they share some parallels. Writers identify political Islam as both a movement and a component of society and politics. Ayubi rejects the idea that Islamic doctrine shapes political governments and has the exact opposite view. Ayubi contends that such governments do not support Islam and that they appropriate elements of the faith for their own political ends and legitimacy (Ayubi, 2005).

Many Muslim and non-Muslim academics have established this method of approaching political Islam. They consider political Islam as a tool for achieving their political goals. It's very important to write here that a great majority of scholars and scientists from the Muslim world contend that nothing like political Islam exists in reality in any part of the world and that Islam is only a true religion. According to other researchers, political Islam is an ideology that includes notions of politics and government. Others describe it as a political movement and an ideology. Most academics who view political Islam as a political movement do so because of the Islamic resurgence movements that first appeared in the 1970s. "The 1970s

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saw a renaissance and reemergence of political Islam in the MENA region, and the religion became a driving force in politics for the majority of the country over there," claims Syed Hussein Soherwordi. In truth, political Islam was said to have existed after the prophet Mohamed moved from Mecca to Medina city as well as throughout the movements of the 1970s renaissance (Voll, 2007).

It was necessary for this purpose to have some sort of political structure, which eventually took the form of the city-state of Medina. The initial notion of political Islam was first introduced here. As a result, political Islam can be viewed broadly as a political movement that offers a set of guidelines and solutions for handling governmental and political issues. In this thesis, the author will examine political Islam as a political movement that has its own set of laws and political ideology.

Democracy

Due to the various elements that make up this phrase, democracy is one of the most hotly debated notions. Political scientists have offered several notions with various definitions. According to scholar Robert Dahl, "I should prefer to reserve the name 'democracy' for a political system whose quality is being entirely or virtually completely responsive to all its citizens. We need not worry right now about whether such a system actually exists, has been, or can exist". Dahl's description alludes to consolidated democracy, or, to put it another way, a developed system of government that has the quality of being almost responsive to all of its constituents (Braizat, 2002). To embrace such a form of democracy, a well-prepared society may already exist or be necessary. Democracy is the "institutional mechanism to reach decisions mostly political in nature by empowering and authorizing individuals to make decisions who are elected to the legislative bodies through free and fair elections" according to Joseph Schumpeter. According to Schumpeterian democracy, the two most fundamental democratic practices are voting and the establishment of democratic institutions. Additionally, Alain Touraine, in his definition of democracy, says that democracy "is more about modernity in which individual as rational being works for and develops certain universal rules, principles, and rights aimed at recognizing and protecting individual's liberty and equality" (Esposito & Shahin, 2013).

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The legislature must not erect laws that would favor any particular religion or stop the followers of any particular religion from their free practice of religious teachings. These were words clearly stated by US President Thomas Jefferson on the separation of Church from state on 1st January 1802 (Ibrahim, 1996). He wrote in clear terms that he never approved of the idea of the establishment of a national church nor did he want any religious role for the head of the state. Importantly, this guiding principle, the separation of church from state still dominates the American polity and constitution where there is strict demarcation by not allowing politics to mix up with religion.

Ataturk of Turkey in the early years of 1920 after the fall of Khilafat also embarked on the same path and chose secularism as their preferred political course. However, it is wrong to assume that Turkey's secular path has drawn a wall between the state and the mosque. There is no doubt that Turkey's population has been predominantly of Islamic origin and it was for this reason that when in 1923 Ataturk declared Turkey to be a Republic, it was religion, instead of language, that was the driving principle for those who would either prefer to settle in Turkey or in Greece (Minkenberg, 2007). One could see that many Christians who spoke Turkish migrated to and settled in Greece while there were Muslims who spoke the Greek language who chose to settle in Turkey. More importantly, Ataturk didn't try to undermine the religion Islam as the preferred religion of the Turks. Instead, he wanted to Turkify it as well as try to regulate it. By the 1940s, there was already a backlash against conservatism, and one of the reasons for the emergence of the Democratic Party, once the Second World War came to an end, was its intention to appeal to the rural voters' conservative social views, who were crucial to their electoral victory in 1950. Importantly, the Republican People's Party (Kemalists), who had previously opposed religious instruction in public schools, found themselves on the defensive and reinstated it in 1949.

Islamist politics, albeit of a very weak sort, had gained ground in Turkey by the late 1990s. Necmettin Erbakan, the NSP's leader, temporarily took office as prime minister. One could see a dramatic development in Turkish politics when a younger leadership with a religious orientation, of whom Tayyip



Erdogan is most remarkable, established a new part in the name of Justice and Development (AKP), which won the elections held in the year 2002 (Tibi, 2009). Kemalists were worried about the AKP for their religious thoughts and ideals, but Erdogan never challenged to uphold the state's founder's largely secular norms. Although it is very hard to determine what Atatürk would have thought of or imagined the modern Turkey, I believe he would still acknowledge the state's continued dominance of the conflict between religious and secular tendencies.

Monarchies and how Religiosity was Introduced into Politics for Legitimacy

More power-wielding monarchs reside in the MENA region than in any other place in the world. This does not imply that monarchies have always fared well in terms of survival in the area. In Egypt (1952), Iraq (1958), Libya (1969), and Iran (1979), coups or revolutions overthrew the monarchies. At one point, many people believed that monarchies would eventually succumb to the forces of modernization and secularism. However, a number of minor Gulf sheikhdoms, including Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Morocco, still have functioning monarchies (Hamid, 2014).

In this regard, Saudi Arabia presents an interesting case because the Saud family does not specifically lay claim to any particular religious qualifications. However, it joined forces with a Muhammad Abd al-Wahhab-led reformist movement with Islamist tendencies in the Arabian Peninsula in the eighteenth century. This partnership combined Wahhabi fervor with Saud tribal might. In 1932, the foundation for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was laid. Abd al Aziz, the newly appointed King depended heavily on religious sentiments and forces to assist and support the spread of the religion and the newly founded Saudi monarchy in the early stages of the country's rise to power (Zakaria, 2004). With regard to laws, social mores, and dress rules, Saudi Arabia continues to present itself as the most religious state. The Monarch is also sometimes referred to as the protector and guardian of the holy mosques located in Saudi Arabia. However, there have been significant challenges to the regime from individuals who assert that the Saud family is dishonest, that its level of religiosity is insufficient, and that its closer relations with the US betray what is dubbed its actual non-Islamic policies. The big mosque in Mecca was captured by Islamists in 1979, and the Saudis only managed to put an end to the uprising with much difficulty (and some assistance from the French). Bin Ladin, another Islamic militant, attacked the Saud hegemony and questioned its partnership with Mr. Sam decades later, in the 1990s (Tibi, 2009).

In contrast to Saudi Arabia, religion is not used to support monarchical power in Jordan or Morocco. Both Sharifians in Morocco and Hashemites in Jordan claim to be descended from the Prophet Muhammad. The monarchs most frequently remind their citizens of their sacred lineage to the Prophet (PBUH) both in Jordan and Morocco. In Morocco, his claim as Commander of the Faithful. During times of political disturbance and conflicts, such as during a coup attempt in the early years of the 1970s (Esposito & Shahin, 2013). This has not stopped the Islamist inclination from posing problems in both nations. In reality, if the monarchs and kings open up the political space for other forces in both countries, the Islamists are likely to perform well in elections as they are thought to be most popular among common people.

In Iran, It is pointless to attempt to downplay the significant role that Islam played in toppling the Shah's government. However, the revolution involved much more than just a rise in religiosity. Those close to the Shah were corrupt, and inefficient and contributed in many ways to his downfall. As a result, he stood all alone; his health was going down; economic meltdown had begun, though earlier it had experienced a rapid boom; the workers didn't feel justly rewarded and so were ready to go for a strike in the oil fields; and there may have been additional uncertainty due to conflicting signals from the United States. Khomeini was a remarkable politician, which was another factor. He had developed ties with people while living in exile from the early 1960s. His own polarization in the 1970s, culminated in writing the book on Islamic Governance that had appealed to a variety of downtrodden sections of Iranian society. The fall of the Shah's government was largely the result of factors other than religion. For a religious movement to triumph, there are other factors too that need to be taken care of. The fact that a top religious official would serve as the supreme leader served as confirmation of the clerics' power (Minkenberg, 2007).

Soon after the revolution, one can observe the influence of religious injunctions over governmental affairs during Khomeini's ten years in power. Early on in the revolution, even those who had battled against the Shah's authority, even the more secular in their political thoughts and nationalist in their approach

were exterminated and executed. Key institutions, legal systems, the media, and economic underpinnings came under the influence of clerics. However, this did not imply that the nation's top jurists were immediately promoted to positions of authority. The pragmatic side of Khomeini himself was also evident when he addressed the question of who should succeed him. He argued that it was crucial for everyone in a position of authority to be knowledgeable about the world, society, and the economy. He suggested that these credentials were equally significant to religious text knowledge. He finally chose Ali Khamenei, the nation's first president and a man with minimal religious credentials, as his choice for his successor. Khamenei was given the Ayatollah title to deal with this seeming oddity. In other words, Khamenei's political position, not the other way around, was what earned him the honorific title of Ayatollah (Esposito & Shahin, [2013](#)).

A Case of Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas and Hezbollah

The Muslim Brethren (MB) of Egypt were established somewhat in 1928. To begin with, MB was more determined to counter colonial tendencies and forces and had raised hidden sub-organizations that used terror to achieve its objectives. It was fiercely anti-colonial and once gave rise to a radical "hidden apparatus" that used terror to further its objectives. The Muslim Brethren were persecuted by Nasser in the 1950s, and the movement remained on the periphery of politics and mostly disavowed violence (Ayubi, [2005](#)). The Brethren spoke of progressively introducing Islamic ideals through community work, education, the establishment of health clinics, disaster relief, and other means, as opposed to the radicals who called for capturing state power in order to Islamize society from the top down. This had the benefit of creating a grassroots constituency and avoiding the wrath of the state. Muslim activists were frequently detained in large numbers, as was the case during the final year of Sadat's tenure. However, the movement persisted, and at times the ruling government appeared eager to use it to counterbalance the influence of more secular adversaries. The Brethren decided to run independent candidates for Parliament in 2005 when President Husni Mubarak was finally persuaded to open up some of the limitations on political activity. They were successful in their efforts. It wasn't necessary because public opinion was overwhelmingly on their side; rather, it was because they were adept at organizing people in the constituencies where they had candidates, carefully selected local candidates, and kept the number of them to a minimum. As a result, Brethren candidates occasionally won with barely 10,000 votes (Rowley & Smith, [2009](#)).

After all, politics is about organization, and the Brethren were more adept at it than the ruling National Democratic Party. The Brethren's anti-corruption platform and the fact that their candidates were permitted to use the phrase "Islam in the Solution" on their campaign posters undoubtedly helped as well. However, despite their victory, they only hold 88 of the 454 seats in Parliament.

In many aspects, the Egyptian MB movement and the Palestinian Hamas movement are identical. It gained fame during the initial Palestinian revolt in the late 1980s and was able to demonstrate its popularity, especially in Gaza, by urging strikes and boycotts. However, it declined to run in either of the first two presidential contests, and surveys of public opinion conducted in the 1980s and 1990s consistently indicated that it was receiving just 15 to 20 percent of the popular vote. There was a noticeable hardening of Palestinian attitude following the passing of Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat in late 2004 and the failure of any sort of peace process with Israel. Support for Hamas increased to a point where it was almost equal to that of the dominant Fatah movement. Hamas decided to run candidates in these circumstances for the parliamentary elections in the year 2006 (Hamid, [2014](#)).

Once more, organization, rather than just popularity, was the deciding factor. Hamas' ability to appoint the prime minister with a majority in the legislature appeared to surprise them. Instead of a religious figure, Ismail Haniyah, a former dean of the Islamic University of Gaza, was chosen. Due to opposition from Israel and the United States, the suspension of aid, animosity from the Fatah faction, and the Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas, his first year in office was exceptionally challenging.

And finally, Hizbollah has been more significant in Lebanon since the early 1980s. It gained fame for upholding the rights of Lebanon's largest, albeit minority, Shia community and opposing Israeli occupation in the south. Hizbollah was the only group to maintain its military militia following the Taif Accords, which put an end to the Lebanese civil war. This gave them the opportunity to establish something



akin to a state within a state in south Lebanon with the support of Iran and Syria. Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hizbollah, rose to the status of a legendary, charismatic figure who could inspire hundreds of thousands of his supporters. By encouraging widespread protests to demand the resignation of the administration as of late 2006, he was putting his strength to the test. Given Lebanon's socioeconomic structure, he claimed he was against an Islamic state there, but he appeared intent on strengthening the position of the Shia minority. They share the same strong belief that they have been treated unfairly by the system for too long and that it is time to restore the balance, just as Shii political figures in Iraq. Islam offers a strong motivating force, a vocabulary for expressing complaints, and a foundation for group action (Voll, [2007](#)).

Conclusion

Politics has overwhelmingly been religionized in the Middle Eastern context for the reason of poor governance and democratic failure since the emergence of the Muslim Brotherhood. This has given way to the emergence of religious political parties that have most actively participated in the elections and have even made their way to the parliament. However, once in government, one can see a change in their stance by adopting a more moderate approach on many issues and being willing to compromise and cooperate with the world at large. However, the West still has chosen the ruling autocrats in the Middle East as their partners for certain politico-economic reasons. This is perhaps the reason that Islamists have found it hard to form government in many countries despite their popular mandate.

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