THE EVOLVING INTERPLAY BETWEEN ISLAM AND POLITICS: FROM ISLAMIST TO ISLAMIC DEMOCRAT

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Abstract: Islam is unique in its relationship with politics. It plays a vital role in politics and governance, initially under the *Rashidun* and subsequently in many Muslim empires. The collapse of the Ottoman caliphate in 1924 and the process of decolonisation which started in the mid-twentieth-century led to the start of many Islamic political movements in newly independent Muslim countries. These movements now sit at a critical juncture, with Muslims around the world being polarised around two political extremes. On the one hand, we have Islamic radical groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda, while on the other hand we have secular parties which do not see any role for Islam in politics and governance in Muslim countries. In response, many traditional Islamist parties are now evolving into Muslim democratic parties. Unlike Islamists, Muslim democrats take a more inclusive approach, preferring to integrate Islamic religious values into political platforms designed to win regular democratic elections. The Ennahda Party of Tunisia is one Muslim party that reflects this evolution. R. Ghannouchi, who outlined Ennahda's transition, has argued that Tunisians today are less concerned about Islamisation or secularisation than with building a democratic government that is inclusive and meets their aspirations for a better life. This paper is an attempt to investigate this shift and its consequences for Islamism across the Muslim world.

Keywords: Political Islam, Religion, Democracy, Muslim countries, Tunisia.

Introduction

Throughout history, religion has played an important role in politics. In fact, religion is known to be one of the factors that led to the formation of early states by creating a shared identity beyond kinship and tribal identity. The rise of religions also contributed towards establishing the rule of law and slowly constrained the power of kings and monarchs. Constraints on executive powers gave rise to necessary levels of accountability and the rule of law. The rules and regulations specified by religion also facilitated interaction among its followers, which then enabled trade and commerce. The relationship between religion and state is not the same across different religions. In polytheistic religions like

Hinduism, the government is considered “unfortunately necessary” since its focus is the social sphere, which is above that of the political.¹ In some monotheist religions, like Christianity and Judaism, politics and state functioning is not of primary concern. Early Christians, for instance, refused military service and would not accept positions in a government office or city council.² However, this attitude did not hold for long. Subsequently, different political groups from right to left, and even libertarians, have argued that Christianity endorses their particular political views and ideas of statehood based on their reading of Christian religious texts.

In the case of Islam, the relationship between religion and politics is quite different from that in other religious traditions. Hamid, for instance, explained this unique Islamic experience in his book *Islamic Exceptionalism*.³ Right from the beginning, Islam had a close relationship with politics and state governance. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), unlike Jesus and Moses, was not only the Messenger of God, but also a ruler and a statesman. He not only developed an Islamic state in Medina, but managed its affairs for years. This historical fact has shaped Islam and Muslims across the world for the past fourteen centuries. While the nature of the relationship between Islam and state has changed over time, the connection between them remains intact. Islam by nature is political and contains detailed instructions on politics and governance.

Islam and Politics

When the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) established a state in Medina, many Quranic instructions were revealed offering clear instructions on politics and state affairs. Plenty of hadiths from this period also deal with the interaction of religion and politics. The foundation of Islamic political philosophy is clear that there is no distinction between the spiritual and temporal, between the religious and the secular, unlike in the Western tradition, where God and Caesar can be clearly separated. Throughout Muslim history, the relationship between Islam and politics has manifested itself in diverse forms of political framework and ideology. Nonetheless, these variations remain under the broad pattern of unity between religion and state.

This conception of unity, however, was drastically challenged in the nineteenth century, when half the Islamic world came under European colonial rule. The weakening of the Muslim world culminated in 1924, when the Ottoman Caliphate collapsed, effectively putting an end to the symbolic unity of state and religion in Islam. The vast Muslim territories were divided and remained under the control of relatively smaller European empires. The onslaught of modern

and Western ideas, such as democracy, secularism and the nation state, posed a number of pertinent questions for Muslims.

The Rise of Political Islam

The Muslim reaction to colonialism and its overwhelming influence gave rise to many anti-colonial movements rooted in Islamic ideals. The institutional form of resistance named political Islam came into play during the second half of the twentieth century. Political Islam in its multiple variants is therefore a twentieth-century phenomenon, although some researchers try to trace it to nineteenth-century anti-colonial movements. The first movement in this regard is Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, which was established by Hasan al-Bana (1906-1949). It is important to note that political Islam is not monolithic but broadly refers to the interpretation of Islam as a political ideology with a system of comprehensive ideas for political and social action.⁴ This ideological bent provides tools for organising society and the state.

After the abolition of the caliphate, there was a trend of pushing Islam to the private sphere, exemplified by Kemalist Turkey.⁵ This, according to Banna, represented a deterioration of Islam; the only solution was a gradual establishment of Shari'ah in order to restore the true Islam. Lia argued that this marks an important milestone in modern Muslim political discourse.⁶ This 'Shari'ah-centred' political goal is rooted in the conviction that Islam is a complete code of life and the solution to all problems. Hasan al-Banna died at a relatively young age (43) and was thus unable to articulate his ideas on Islam as a system in a persuasive way. This task was later accomplished by Syed Qutb from Egypt and Mawlana Sayyid Abu al-'A'la Mawdudi from Pakistan. Mawdudi was the foremost Muslim ideologue of the twentieth century and is considered a pioneer of political Islam. Mawdudi was born in 1903 in Aurangabad, India. His father, Ahmad Hasan, was one of the first students of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's Anglo-Oriental College,⁷ where he studied law. In 1900, however, Hasan took *bay'ah* and joined a Chisti-Sufi order, abandoning everything connected with Western modernity. This change had a profound effect on the young Mawdudi; as a result, he was raised to become an *alim* (religious scholar) and given a classical Islamic education at home, conducted in Arabic and Persian. Mawdudi's worldview was therefore based on his extensive self-study of Islamic and Western traditions. Mawdudi's ideology is deeply influenced by Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) life and the establishment of an Islamic state in Medina. Nevertheless, Mawdudi's thought is influenced by historical context. A case in point is his views on increasing the power of the state, which pushed him to re-interpret Islam in a

unique way. In 1938, he wrote on the increasing power of the state:

Gone are the days when if the state presented its economic, educational, industrial, or social scheme, people made fun of it by calling it grandmotherly legislation. The situation has completely changed. Now the state's arena has almost become as all-encompassing as that of religion. Now it also decides what you are to wear or what not to wear; whom you are to marry and at what age; what you are to teach your kids and what mode of life you are to choose;...what language and script you are to adopt. So, the state has not left even the most peripheral issues of life independent of its ultimate right to intervene.⁸

The rising power of the state indicated to Mawdudi that, in order to protect the rights of Muslims (who were a minority in India), there was a need to re-interpret Islam. The religion of Islam thus turned into an ideology based on the reading of Islamic history in a new way, focused on the early formation of the Medinan state by the Prophet (PBUH) and subsequent running of that state by the Rightly Guided Caliphs (*Rashidun*). Based on this "golden-age narrative," it became a religious duty for Muslims to establish an Islamic state. Mawdudi gave lectures and wrote pamphlets on this topic, which were later published in 1941 under the title *Islamic Law and Constitutions*, where he presented his theory of Islam as a political system. He declared that Islam is not merely a religion with religious function and rituals, but rather a *deen*, a complete way of life to guide us in every sphere of life. He considered Islam a revolutionary ideology that will change the social order of the entire world and rebuild it based on its teachings.⁹ He saw no boundaries between religion and politics, but rather saw religion as the moral educator of politics:

the separation of politics from morality and religion has created more problems than it has solved. The result is that there is scepticism in thought, confusion in values, expediency in standards, vulgarity in behaviour and opportunism in diplomacy. Politics has become out and out Machiavellian and this state of affairs has greatly impaired the poise and tranquillity of life.¹⁰

In order to tear down this Machiavellian form of politics, Mawdudi argued that we need to infuse politics with religion. Although he agreed with the notion of democracy, he did not completely accept Western-style democracy. He made a clear distinction between Western-style democracy and his version

of democracy, called “theo-democracy”. According to Mawdudi, in Islam sovereignty only belongs to God; humanity only has restricted sovereignty, under the guidance of Islam.¹¹

In 1931, Mawdudi founded a monthly magazine named *Tarjum nul Quran* to propagate his ideas. Ten years later, in 1941, he founded the political party *Jamaat-e-Islami*. *Jamaat*’s track record in electoral politics is unimpressive but it is nevertheless a well-organised democratic party that has been able to spread its ideas across Pakistan and beyond. Mawdudi has therefore been instrumental in the creation of multiple Islamist political parties across the Muslim world.

Political Islam, like any other movement, contains a lot of diversity, both in terms of ideology and practical vision. However, the interconnection of politics and religion is an over-reaching theme. Bokhari classifies Islamists based on their view of the nation state and democracy as follows:

- a) *Acceptors*: Most Islamist groups are acceptors; they recognise the importance of the rule of law and democracy. They work within the system for the establishment of an Islamic state. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and *Jamaat-e-Islami* in India and Pakistan are leading examples of acceptors.
- b) *Propagandist*: The Islamist groups that come under this category reject the state and target the society directly. They believe in influencing public opinion and getting support from powerful elements in the government apparatus. Examples include groups like *Hizb-ut-Tehrir*.
- c) *Insurrectionists*: These groups reject both the nation state and democracy, relying on armed struggle to achieve their goals. Their approach is top-down violent political change. Al-Qaeda and ISIS are prominent examples of insurrectionists.¹²

These categories can help us in analysing different Islamist groups more efficiently. Reductionist scholars sometimes bundle up different groups in a single category, as if there is no diversity in these groups.

There are multiple challenges faced by Islamists across the Muslim world and which have made it difficult for them to gain acceptance from the general population. The economically neo-liberal Islamists led by a rising middle class have therefore changed their way of thinking and strategies, entering a post-Islamism era. There is a visible shift in this direction in many Muslim countries, but before looking at that, we need to define post-Islamism.

Amin outlines the main features of post-Islamism, quoting Bayat and others (like Tibbi, Yilmiz, and Lacroix) as follows:

- a) The exclusive, monopolist, puritan, static and revolutionary nature of political Islam has been changing in favour of a more inclusive and society-centric form of Islam, concerned with the rights of individuals, women, the youth and non-Muslims. A movement away from fixed scripture towards historicity has accompanied this movement.
- b) Post-Islamism is not distinct from Islamism but a variant of it.
- c) Post-Islamism cannot be equated with anti-Islamic or secular trends, but is the secularisation of state/society amidst the prevalence of religious ethics in society.
- d) Post-Islamism can be a persuasive argument only if an Islamist organisation retreats from establishing an ideal Islamic state.
- e) Post-Islamism may refer to multiple discursive and physical spaces through which reformers/Post-Islamists may influence Islamist thought and strategy.
- f) Post-Islamism proffers a framework where political reform is linked to religious reform.¹³

The broad characteristics outlined above can be observed in the work of many Islamist parties across the Muslim world. In a recent edited work, Bayat explains the changing face of political Islam across the Muslim world as:

These diverse narratives suggest that there is not one but many different trajectories of change that Islamist movements may experience. Iran's post-Islamism developed on the perceived failure of the ruling Islamist politics to address fundamental citizen needs. Turkish Islamism "adapted" itself to meet the political realities of the country as well as its position vis Europe. While in Morocco and Indonesia (as in Iran and Turkey) the Islamist parties self-consciously departed from an Islamist past to act as players in the nations' politics, the Egyptian Muslim Brothers and Lebanese Hizbullah pursued somewhat ambivalent courses of change.¹⁴

From Islamist to Islamic Democrats

In post-Arab-Spring Egypt, the ousting of the Muslim Brotherhood after just one year in power, despite the movement being democratically elected, has had policy implications for other Islamist groups. A particular case in point is the

drastic change of strategy by the Tunisian Islamist party, Ennahda. The collapse of the Ben Ali government in 2011 made space for Ennahda to enter the political sphere. It won the first free election in Tunisian history, taking 37 percent of the popular vote. Despite winning the election, however, Ennahda decided to step down from power due to public agitation. The experience of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt pushed them to resign power because the leadership realised that the alternative could be a complete military takeover, possibly resulting in their elimination from the political sphere.

Islamist groups, like other ideological groups, are often divided into moderates and radicals. The distinction is based on the role of these group in the mainstream political process. The moderate groups are interpreted as those who participate in the democratic process and believe in a gradual progression. The radical groups, on the other hand, are seen as wanting to dismantle the existing system and build a utopia. These broad classifications, although common, have their own problems as analytical tools. A better way is to adopt distinctions specific to particular issues. For example, the distinction between a legalist and contextualist position can be seen in terms of a group's understanding of a religious text. Another way is to look at the behaviour of different Islamist groups through the lens of moderation. Moderation can be considered as a movement from radical to moderate. The liberal notions of human rights, democracy, pluralism and tolerance are connected with moderation. Ghobashy has presented the case for inclusion within Islamist groups by looking at the evolution of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood in recent years. She found that, like any other social or political movement, the Brotherhood has faced an internal conflict concerning social and political transformation. Participation in the election reduced the influence of radical members in the party's decision-making process.

The Case of Ennahda

The case of Ennahda is a vital example of the process of transition from political Islamist to Muslim democrat. The Arab Spring was ignited in Tunisia, from where it spread to other countries. Ennahda was founded in 1981 as an Islamist party, inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt. The government of Tunisia, which had only two presidents since independence in 1956, was repressive; they banned Ennahda, causing many of its member to go into exile. The government also banned all newspapers associated with it. Nevertheless, economic imbalance, corruption and lack of political activism eventually led to the Tunisian regime's downfall, with the Jasmine Revolution resulting in the ousting of Zin al-Abidine Ben Ali as president. Subsequently, Ennahda won the

first free election in Tunisia, becoming the biggest political party in the country. Ennahda then joined forces with two secular political parties to form Troika for a constitutional assembly. The military takeover of Egypt, which saw the toppling of the democratically elected government of Morsi, pushed Ennahda to share more power with other parties and independent candidates. The leadership of Ennahda realised that they might lose the democratic opportunity provided by the Arab Spring in Tunisia should they do otherwise.

From Political Islam to Muslim Democracy

The leader of Ennahda, R. Ghannouchi, put forward the case for Ennahda's transition from political Islamist to Muslim democracy.¹⁵ He argued that after the collapse of the Ben Ali regime in Tunisia, all political parties should be able to participate freely in the political process. With the repressive regime now over, citizens should be able to practice their religion without coercion. In this context, Ennahda, in its tenth party congress, held May 2016, made far-reaching changes in its structure and strategy. These series of changes included the decision to focus exclusively on politics and leave its other social, religious and educational activities aside. The result has been a separation of the political and religious spheres. Ghannouchi argues that:

We believe that no political party can or should claim to represent religion and that the religious sphere should be managed by independent and neutral institutions. Put simply, religion should be nonpartisan. We want the mosque to be a space for people to come together, not a site of division. Imams should not hold positions in any political party and should be trained as specialists in their field in order to gain the skills and credibility required of religious leaders.

The focus of the party has since become the creating of solutions to different socio-economic problems faced by Tunisians. Although the principles of Islam can guide the party, religion cannot be used for political gains. The Ennahda party therefore looks more towards the AKP of Turkey than the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt for inspiration.¹⁶

Implications for Islamist Across the Muslim World

Public opinion surveys have indicated a strong desire amongst Muslims in the Islamic world for Islam to play a significant role in public life. In a survey in

2012, citizens in Muslim-majority countries such as Pakistan, Egypt, Turkey and Jordan generally believed that the Qur'an should be strictly followed in the legislative process. In Tunisia, a significant portion of the population argued that the values and principles of Islam should be followed in that country. The recent Pew report on state and religion reports that Islam is the state religion of 27 out of 43 countries with an official state religion. However, this constitutional and public support for religion is not usually translated into electoral success for Islamists across the Muslim world. Muslim voters, despite their devotion to Islam, are not willing to support Islamic parties in the electoral process. Kurzman looked at 89 parliamentary elections over the last 40 years in 21 countries with one or more Islamist parties. The empirical analysis shows that these parties have received only a small fraction of the vote. The numbers show that in all of 89 elections, median performance is just 7.3 percent of the vote and 6 percent of seats in parliament. If we add up the votes of all the Islamist parties in a given election, the median vote is still a meagre 15.5 percent to 15 percent of the vote.¹⁷ Islamists are responding in different ways to this decreasing political relevance. The political failure of these parties has resulted in the disillusionment of some members, who have drifted towards radical parties.

In light of these developments, I can make the following recommendations:

- If mainstream Islamist parties want to become relevant in Muslim countries and influence national policies, they need to make fundamental changes to their ideological orientations and strategies.
- The best model in this case are the experiences of two Islamist parties: Ennahda in Tunisia and the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey. In the case of Ennahda, Islamists across the Muslim world can learn from their transformation from a political Islamist to a Muslim democrat party.
- Islamist parties need to create a distinction between movement (*haraka*) and party (*hizb*). When the distinction is blurred, as with the Muslim Brotherhood, it will lead to the blaming of the movement for influencing the party, and vice versa. The arguments put forward by Ghannouchi in this regard are quite persuasive. In Muslim majority countries, there is no restriction on practising Islam. Islamists could therefore perform better if, like Ennahda, they transform themselves into Muslim democratic parties and thereby create a separation between religion and state. This separation would not be in the Western sense of complete secularisation. Instead, Islam could be used to guide the policies of the party through its value system. In the case of the AKP of Turkey, this guidance applies

to the economic front. The AKP is consistently popular among Turkish people despite its recent authoritarian bent. Gidengil has studied the factors behind the electoral success of the AKP in Turkey, finding that in addition to religiosity, the party's performance in improving the economy was a crucial factor in its electoral success.¹⁸

- The combination of these Tunisian and Turkish models can help Islamists influence public life.

Notes

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