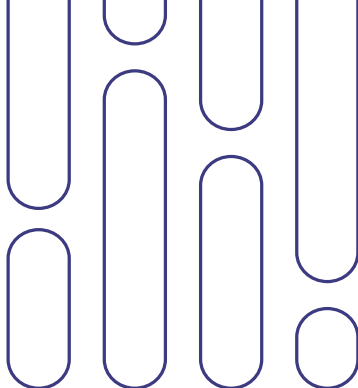REPOET

Ideologized Projects in the Middle East Under the Threat of Demise

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The recent developments in the Middle East reflect a watershed moment for the conflict-ridden region at the political level. In July 2021, Tunisian President Kais Saied sacked the prime minister and suspended the Parliament. The latter move was taken against Tunisia's leading Islamist party (Ennahada). In September, Morocco's ruling Justice and Development Party suffered a crushing defeat in the parliamentary elections. This loss reflected the feelings of the Moroccan people. Moreover, in September, over 100 Ennahada party members resigned, citing reasons such as internal despotism and decision-making centralized in the hands of an exclusive group of stakeholders.

In October, divisions emerged from among Egyptian leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). Ibrahim Munir, the acting general leader, clashed with Mahmood Hussein, the secretary general of the MB. The two leaders are still at odds, competing to impose their control over the MB, its financial resources and administrative positions. In mid-October, the Sadrist bloc along with some Arabist and civilian parties won the parliamentary elections in Iraq. They outcompeted pro-Iran political parties and armed groups. The results contributed to igniting disputes among Shiites forces

and were rejected by all Iran-allied Shiite Islamist parties that threatened to resort to violence if the votes were not recounted.

In the context of the aforesaid, Afghanistan under the Taliban is no exception. The group has embraced a more tolerant approach to win international legitimacy in light of its past hardline approach to governance failing. This is clear from its discourse, its promises to respect international law and fight against ISIS. This new approach proves that the Taliban's leadership realize that its governance style from 1996 to 2001 was politically inept. Undoubtably, it is too early to evaluate how credible the Taliban's new approach will be and whether it is motivated by ideology or pragmatism to boost the group's legitimacy inside and beyond the country. In any case, what is apparent is that the Taliban's new generation is not likely to be shaped by the group's militant legacy and heritage

What Is the Future After Political Islam?

The aforementioned developments happened in the span of a few months and raise a critical question: are we heading towards a post-Islamist (Sunnis and Shiites alike) era? In fact, Islamist parties have experienced numerous political defeats, losing key posts since their rise in 2011. Are these defeats because of the media campaigns against them or stem from their failure to administer public affairs? These defeats, regardless of their causes, are reflective of the fact that Islamist parties are no longer the dominant force in the Middle East, as repeatedly suggested by past research. One clear reason for these defeats is that Islamist parties attracted widespread public anger after they came to power and practiced politics.

The people in the region quickly realized that the discourse embraced by Islamist parties was largely theoretical and advanced their narrow interests. Their discourse never materialized on the ground. As leaders, the Islamists were autocratic, exclusivist, and failed to introduce social or economic reforms. The Islamist parties failed to deliver on their utopian promises. During their rule there was no improvement in health and education indicators and poverty and unemployment rates did not change. In addition, civil and political freedom remained limited.

The administration of public affairs by Islamist parties was a key factor in exposing their empty promises through which they developed public support. They highlighted the flaws of the nation state model and referred to the illustrious legacy of early Islamic personalities to play on the heart strings of the people. The Islamist parties believed that religious politics

would contribute to extending their time in political office and help in strengthening their public support base. Ironically, this intermixing of religion and politics was a primary cause of their downfall, as it led to public disillusionment with their rule.

It is also important to mention here that contemporary Islamists, regardless of their religious alignments, do not believe in the constitutional democratic state. Shiite Islamists, for instance, are supportive of the theory of Wilayat al-Faqih (guardianship of the jurist) and believe it is not limited to a certain geographical area. As a result, they devalue democracy and the nation state model. Clearly revealing their loyalties, the spokesman for the Iraqi Hezbollah Brigades along with other Iraqi militia and party leaders, questioned the integrity of Iraq's recent parliamentary elections and threatened to instigate violence if the final results did not change after the recount. This position taken by the supporters of Wilayat al-Faqih is no surprise, as they believe that governance or rule is a divine designation, not the outcome of elections or referendums. This position is in line with the Imamate theory according to which the twelfth Infallible Imam is ordained to rule by God.

In Iran, the clerical ruling elite only sanctions elections for pragmatic reasons such as adding another layer of legitimacy to the political system. In principle, the electoral cycle is merely symbolic.

As for Sunni Islamists, most also do not also believe in the constitutional democratic state. In a prominent statement, Mohammed al-Ghazali criticized the MB after their rejection of the 1923 Egyptian Constitution. Several senior Islamist figures and scholars, including Hassan al-Banna, Hassan al-Hudaybi and Sayyid Qutb, criticized democracy and constitutional governments, classifying them as Western imports and even prohibited any reference to this form of government. Al-Banna even literally labelled anyone who disagreed with the MB as Kharijites (rebels).

The Pursuit of Legitimacy

Many Sunni and Shiite Islamists have sought to find religious justifications for their ideology in religious tradition. They have claimed that their ideology is consistent with some religious schools or philosophical ideas in order to boost their legitimacy. Thus, contemporary Sunni and Shiite Islamist scholars have almost nothing in common when it comes to ideology. For example, when we draw a comparison between the foundations for reform set out by Sunni ideologists such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad

Abduh, Rashid Rida and Mirza Shirazi, and those presented by Naini and other Shiite scholars who supported the Constitutional Movement, we find major differences between the two groups.

The ideas of Afghani and his school were compatible with modernity and combined Islam with democracy, while keeping intact Islamic principles and criteria which cannot be compromised. Afghani's core approach was for Islam to be in line with modernist thought but without losing its core fundamentals. Contemporary Islamists, on the other hand, either oppose modernity by unleashing violence or through Islamizing politics. Their participation in electoral cycles is for the sake of implementing their ideological projects, and rejecting modernity, democracy, and the nation state model.

Furthermore, through promoting sectarianism and ideology, Islamists have contributed to creating polarization in societies, which has hindered serious steps towards political and constitutional reform, as argued by the late pro-constitutional judge and scholar Tarek el-Bishry. While some Shiite Islamists today oppose elections and constitutional governments, Grand Ayatollah Mohammad-Kazem Khorasani and other supporters of the Constitutional Movement did not do so. Their political activities were for the sake of promoting democracy and achieving a democratic constitutional state. Whilst it is true that some Shiite Islamists believe in the absolute guardianship of the jurist, other Shiite scholars, namely autocrats and those who believe in a constitutional government, do not share the same belief. In fact, the argument that the guardianship of the jurist is an absolute authority has no basis in the Islamic heritage either in theory or in practice.

Many thinkers believe that successive elections may fundamentally change the thought and approach of contemporary Islamists. Yet, the participation of Islamist parties in elections has not resulted in real democratic changes. Instead, resignations and rifts have characterized the internal dynamics of Islamist parties. These issues are mainly due to an internal autocratic atmosphere, with shura and democracy sidelined.

In light of the recent developments, we are faced with two scenarios: either Islamist parties undergo liberal reform spearheaded by the younger generation or they continue with their existing failed trajectories. If the second scenario plays out, it is likely to lead to the decay of the existing Islamist parties and the emergence of new Islamist parties with orientations more closely aligned with public aspirations.

In any case, in the era of technology and social media, the public and younger generation have become much more critical, and less willing to blindly follow Islamist parties. In fact, this call for unconditional obedience is even rejected by members of Islamist parties. Therefore, the social pressures and political crises facing Islamists today in Rabat, Baghdad, Kabul, Tunisia, Algeria, Tripoli, Khartoum, and Cairo, are completely different from what they experienced in the past.

Nevertheless, there is a serious will from influential Arab countries, such as the Gulf states, most prominently Saudi Arabia, to strengthen the modern nation state, enhance its sovereignty and empower central governments. These efforts aim to uphold law and justice, raise living standards, bring about real economic changes and counter the extremist ideas promoted by non-state actors. A strong nation-state model will help to counter Iran and marginalize Islamist parties unless they drastically change their trajectories.

Conclusion

Political Islam has been facing a steep decline in public support at the political level since January 2011 until today. Islamists have autocratic internal structures that impede the introduction of ideological and intellectual reforms. These reforms can possibly bring them closer to the people and other political systems and reduce religious and political strife by discouraging clashes, preventing the dissemination of propaganda that encourages takfir and disobedience of political systems or turning on governments.

The decline of political Islam is not only a significant phase in the history of Islamist parties but also in the history of the region. Currents and groups dissipate; however, one cannot be sure that the new era will be free of political Islam, but we can say with surety that Islamist parties will not be as vigorous as in the past. This failure of Islamist parties is closely related to their internal structures, their outlooks and principles, not only because of the policies and approaches of their opponents as they have always claimed.