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PROFILE

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The rise of Islamist parties is one of the main features of the political landscape in the new Middle East. After decades of brutal repression and exclusion, the Arab Spring opened the doors of power for Islamists. From Morocco to Egypt, Islamist parties have fared well in elections held since the eruption of revolts in early 2011. More importantly, the Arab Spring has ended the old image of Islamists as 'victims' of autocratic regimes. As new stakeholders in formal political processes, Islamists will try to preclude the reproduction of the old authoritarian regimes.

However, the Arab Spring is not without its impact on Islamist parties. The involvement of Islamist actors in the electoral process is bound to have a significant impact on their ideology and agenda. To take advantage of the new political space, Islamists are pushed to adapt and alter their ideology, structure and tactics. Furthermore, the Arab Spring poses many challenges and threats to Islamists as rulers. Operating in freer and more open environments requires different tactics and mechanisms. Therefore, instead of acting in the back seat of politics as opposition, Islamists have moved to the forefront of Arab politics as power holders. The heavy legacy of the deposed regimes constitutes a challenge to Islamists' political and economic policies. The enduring problems of unemployment, poverty, corruption, etc. will hinder their ability to rule smoothly.

The Arab Spring has reshaped Islamist politics drastically and many changes are underway. Scholars of Middle Eastern studies are perplexed by these new changes and dynamics. Whereas some of them contend that the Arab Spring has done nothing but empower Islamists at the expense of building new and genuinely democratic regimes, others believe that the latter cannot thrive without including and integrating Islamists. Notwithstanding the importance of such a debate, the fact is that the Arab Spring has triggered a long process of change and transition that will put Islamists' theories and practices to the test.

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The End of Old Narratives

Over the course of the last century, Islamism experienced three major turning points. First was the establishment of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) by Egyptian school teacher Hassan al-Banna in 1928. The MB was the first mass movement in the Arab world seeking social and moral reform. Al-Banna aptly transformed the 'elitist' Islamic reform rhetoric, adopted by Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Mohammad Abduh during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, into a populist social movement. Ever since, Islamist ideology has become more visible for many in the Arab world and beyond.

The second turning point in the modern history of Islamism was the Iranian Revolution of 1979. It was the first time since the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire in 1924 that Islamists could accede to power and establish an 'Islamic state'. For many Islamists, the Iranian Revolution allowed, finally, the articulation of Islamist ideology in a political order.

The third and perhaps the most important development in the evolution of Islamism is the Arab Spring. This is not only because it allowed Islamists to take power through the ballot box but most importantly because of the consequences of such development on Islamists' ideology and tactics. Moving from opposition to government, Islamists will face enormous risks and challenges. From now on, they will not be able to invoke the 'ordeal' narrative to legitimize and justify their political stance and practices. Rather they will be held accountable for their actions and decisions. In other words, to maintain appeal and power, Islamists will have to compromise, bargain and negotiate, which will make them more prone to change and transformation.

Simultaneously, the old narratives on how to study and grasp Islamist politics are becoming significantly obsolete. Trapped between essentialism and contextualism, Islamist politics has always been misapprehended and sometimes mistreated. The old debate over whether Islam and democracy are compatible now seems irrelevant. The Arab Spring has proved that Islamists, not to mention Muslims, are eager to build democratic and accountable institutions. Young Arabs who took to the streets in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and elsewhere did not advocate an Islamic state. Nor did they protest against religion. They called passionately for freedom, justice and dignity, which have become later the core values of the so-called Arab Spring.

New Dynamics and New Actors

The Arab Spring has drastically reshaped Islamist politics in the Middle East. New Islamist actors are emerging while the old ones are having to alter their tactics and ideological views. In this regard, four significant changes and dynamics can be highlighted. The first concerns the end of the old 'Islamist architecture'. The new Islamist scene in the Arab world is far from monolithic. Rather it is fluid, dynamic and most notably divisive. In addition to established Islamists, such as the Muslim Brothers in Egypt and Libya, El-Nahdda in Tunisia, the Party of Justice and Development (PJD) in Morocco, new Islamist actors are emerging. They come from different ideological and political backgrounds, ranging from ultra-conservative to

reformist and from moderate to extremist, e.g. political Salafis, ex-jihadists, independent Islamists, Sufis, etc.

In Egypt, for instance, some 15 Islamist parties, official and unofficial, have been founded since the ousting of Mubarak. They were spawned from different Islamic ideologies. Most strikingly, Salafis, who had persistently shunned politics as religiously prohibited (*haram*), are now key players in Egyptian politics. They rushed into electoral politics and won almost 25 per cent of seats in the new Egyptian parliament.

The second remarkable change in the Islamist landscape is the advent of 'informal' Islamists. For decades, Islamist parties, movements and organizations were the only representatives of Islamism. However, since the Arab Spring a new strand of Islamist actors is emerging and can be dubbed 'informal' Islamists. They are not officially affiliated with any of the Islamist movements or associations. Nor are they keen to establish their own parties or organizations. Ironically, they eschewed joining the new Islamist parties that have been founded since the Arab Spring. Thus, they are free from organizational and hierarchical burdens.

'Informal' Islamists rely heavily on social networks, kinship, friendship links and new technology to disseminate their ideology and widen their influence. They have followers from different social strata; urban and rural, poor and rich, schools and universities, etc. For them, street vendors are as important as university professors. In Egypt, for example, many 'informal' Islamists have emerged since the revolution. Three of the four Islamist candidates who ran in the presidential election come from among the 'informal' Islamists: Hazem Salah Abu Ismail, who was a front-runner in the elections before he was disqualified for legal reasons pertinent to his mother's dual citizenship, Abdelmoniem Abul Fotouh, who was eliminated in the first round, and Mohamed Selim al-Awa, the second Islamist candidate who lost the election. All are outspoken, charismatic and influential preachers with numerous followers and supporters. In addition, many 'informal' Islamist networks have emerged since the Egyptian revolution, including the Salafi Front, Hazemoon network and the Jurisprudence Commission for Rights and Reform.

The third change in Islamist politics concerns Islamist discourse, ideology and tactics. The involvement of Islamists in electoral politics has affected their ideological and political views. For instance, many Islamists now stay away from religious 'absolutism', *halal* and *haram* dichotomy, and adopt 'relativism' and pragmatism. They have shifted their discourse from the ideological fringes to the political centre. Thus, the language of politics is overshadowing their religious rhetoric. Before the Arab Spring, terminologies like democracy, elections and citizenship were alien and profane to Islamists, particularly the Salafis. However, now they use these terms in everyday discourse, suggesting that the 'secularization' of Islamists has started, albeit subtly. During the election campaigns in Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco, Islamist parties abandoned religious and dogmatic propaganda. They did not promise paradise as a reward for those who would vote for them but rather pledged to improve the economy, fight corruption and attract foreign direct investment (FDI). Islamists increasingly realize that their legitimacy does not stem from the 'mosque' but rather from their performance in public office.

Finally, the fourth new dynamic in Islamist politics is inter-Islamist conflicts. The Arab Spring has rebuilt the relationship between (and within) Islamist movements to become more complex, fluid and sometimes confrontational. In addition to theological and ideological differences, Islamists' divisions are now drawn over various lines and fronts. For instance, the El-Nahdda Party in Tunisia is struggling with conservative Salafis over issues of public freedoms and the role of religion in the public sphere. Likewise in Egypt, the relationship between Salafis and the MB is tense and unstable. Both are attempting to expand their influence and presence beyond their traditional constituencies, which creates tension between them. Even within each Islamist camp, conflicts and competition are inescapable. The organizational cohesiveness and discipline that seemed to characterize Islamist movements are now fading away.

An Islamist Agenda?

Before the Arab Spring, Islamists stood accused of having a 'hidden agenda'. Their opponents persistently questioned Islamists' intentions and actions. However, since the Arab Spring such scepticism seems irrelevant. This is not only because the old regimes which used such accusations as a fear factor and pretext to legitimize and prolong their rule are now gone, but also because Islamist agendas are now being put to the test and judged fairly. So far, Islamists in Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt have shown genuine pragmatism. They have responded responsibly to the domestic and external changes facing their countries.

Over the past three decades, Islamists' rhetoric and mindset was preoccupied by Islamizing the practices of state, society and everyday life. Whereas violent and jihadi Islamists adopted violence as the only political means to achieve these goals, moderate ones embraced peaceful means. For both, applying the Islamic law *Sharia* is a fundamental source for legitimacy. However, following the Arab Spring, Islamists' agenda is shifting significantly. The 'new' Islamists are preoccupied with three different goals; good governance, improving the economy and achieving stability. The old political regimes in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya have left a legacy of endemic corruption, poverty and unemployment. Indeed, these problems were at the heart of the Arab Spring revolts. Now, Islamists in government are faced with these problems and have to address them sensibly and provide viable solutions.

Furthermore, the electoral programmes of Islamists in Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco reveal the shift in their priorities. In Egypt, for example, the MB's candidates in the last parliamentary election did not use the movement's slogan 'Islam is the solution'. Rather, they focused on how to overcome poverty, fight corruption and bring social justice. Ironically, their platform endorses the free market economy and advocates privatization policies. Likewise, the PJD in Morocco pledged to eradicate corruption from state institutions and to re-build them on transparent and accountable bases. In Tunis, Rached Ghannouchi, leader of Ennahda, consistently emphasized that his party will fight corruption and eliminate poverty.

Nevertheless, improving the economy and achieving social development remain the most visible issues on Islamists' agenda. They all adopt what is dubbed the

'renaissance' or *nahda* project. Despite the vague and populist character of this project, it reflects Islamists' awareness of the pervasive problems affecting Arab societies. Hence they adopt realistic economic policies. For instance, Islamists agree on the integral role of local and foreign investments in implementing their economic agenda. Khairat al-Shater, a business tycoon in the MB and former presidential candidate, points out that *nahda* cannot be achieved without FDI. He advocates free trade, private sector and big businesses. Likewise, the PJD's leaders stressed the importance of maintaining and boosting the economic and commercial partnership with the EU and Ennahda sought to reassure foreign investors by making ideological concessions at the expense of applying *Sharia*. The Egyptian Salafis promote a free market economy and call for increasing FDI. A key figure in the Salafi Nour Party pointed out that the party endorses the Egyptian stock exchange despite the fact that it does not have an Islamic base.

Clearly, the Arab Spring has no external cause. Over the past three decades, it was rare that Islamists, leftists and nationalists took to the streets for an internal cause, such as regime change, revolution, etc. Since the second Palestinian *intifada* in 2000, the 'million-man march' was the norm around the Arab world to endorse Palestine and then Iraq in 2003. However, the Arab Spring has reversed the course and reshaped the internal and external priorities of Arab people. Islamists alongside liberals, leftists and ordinary public took to the streets in major cities not to liberate Palestine or Iraq but to free themselves from tyranny.

After the dust of the Arab Spring has settled, Islamists as well as many Arabs will strive to maintain stability. Islamists realize the fundamental link between stability and development and the need to ease the social and economic unrest. Hence they focus on how to create political and legal incentives that could attract FDI and promote businesses. For Islamists, Palestine is not the top priority on the agenda but rather development and stability. For instance, the MB, the mother of the Palestinian resistance movement Hamas, pledged to honour the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel. More interestingly, it pushed Hamas to be more realistic in dealing with Israel.

The Democratic Deficit

The most contentious issue on Islamists' agenda is their commitment to democratic values, particularly minorities' rights and personal freedoms. Many liberals and secularists have loudly expressed their fear and doubts about Islamists' stance on key issues such as women's rights, minorities' representation and individual freedom. They contend that Islamists' religious and conservative agenda will curb individuals' rights and freedoms. However, Islamists' stance on these issues is not monolithic. Progressive Islamists in Tunisia and Morocco are inclined to respect individuals' freedoms and to internalize it within their agenda and structure. For example, the Ennahda Party's leaders have repeatedly stressed that they respect women's rights and rejected any changes that might affect their personal status. Ghannouchi affirmed that his party promotes gender equality between men and women in education, jobs and holding public office. It is worth mentioning that 42 out of the 49 women in the Tunisian constituent assembly are members of Ennahda.

Ennahda leaders also expressed the freedom of women to choose to wear the veil or not. More significantly, Ennahda rebuked Salafis for their attempt to impose the veil in Tunisian universities. On minorities' rights, Ennahda committed publicly to respect the rights of Jews and Christian minorities. The PJD also has shown full respect and commitment to individual rights and freedoms. Abdelilah Benkirane, leader of the PJD and Morocco's first Islamist prime minster, stressed women's freedom of dress and expression. Despite the underrepresentation of women in the Moroccan government – only one female minister – the PJD endorsed women in the parliamentary elections and 16 women won under its banner. Moreover, in 2005, the party advocated for the new family code (Mudawana) that gave women more rights in legal and personal issues – marriage, divorce, etc.

However, the Egyptian MB and Salafis exhibit conservative and sometimes illiberal tendencies towards women and minorities' rights. Although the MB's platform and statements stress citizenship and equality of gender in terms of education, jobs, healthcare, etc., they reject the right of women and Christians to run for president. The MB's leaders always justify this position by the traditional and conservative character of the Egyptian society. However, many independent Islamists, such as Mohamed Selim Al-Awa and Abdul Moneim Abul Fotouh, hold a different view on the matter. On the issue of women, the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), the political arm of the MB, nominated a number of women in the parliamentary elections and four out of nine women MPs are members of the FJP. However, the ultra-conservative Salafis hold a rigid and very conservative view of women's and minorities' rights. Most Salafis believe that the ideal role for women is in the family, as wives and mothers. Many of them object to the idea of women in leadership roles, and some claim that women should minimize their activities in the public sphere. The 2011–12 parliamentary elections mandated that all political parties include at least one woman on their party-list ticket. The Nour Party's female candidates always appeared at the bottom of the ticket. Generally speaking, Salafis advocate rigid application of the Islamic laws, which they believe entails gender segregation, a strict Islamic dress code for women and social restrictions such as outlawing alcohol. On the Christians' rights, several Salafi leaders have said that they oppose full political rights for non-Muslims. Nevertheless, the Nour Party as well as Salafi sheikhs stress that *Sharia* ensures Christians the right to practise their beliefs, including the right to handle personal status and family affairs according to Christian traditions. Clearly, the political immaturity and inexperience of Salafis affect their position regarding women and minorities and more political inclusion and integration might alter their political views.

Islamists' Foreign Policy

Pragmatism is the key word in understanding Islamists' foreign policy. Islamists are aware of the strategic and political changes brought to the Middle East by the Arab Spring. Thus, they have shown preparedness to abandon their dogmatic and ideological stances and embrace realism in formulating their foreign policy agenda. For example, for decades Islamists have espoused a hostile position towards the

West. However, in the wake of the Arab Spring, many Islamist parties are inclined to re-build their relationship with western countries on the basis of mutual respect and shared interests. Ennahda, for instance, is keen to maintain the strategic partnership Tunisia has with the EU. Its leaders have stressed repeatedly the vital role the EU can play in helping Tunisia's emerging democracy. Likewise the PJD seems realistic in forging Morocco's relations with the West. It its programme, the PJD vows to endorse the free-trade agreements with the EU and the US, cooperating in fighting terrorism and backing the king's vision and policy towards the issue of Palestine.

The MB has also shown that it is ready to depart from its ideological and dogmatic rhetoric towards the West. Since its foundation in June 2011, the FJP's leaders have been heavily involved in dialogue and discussion with foreign ambassadors and governments. They stress the need to re-build the relationship between the MB and western countries after decades of misunderstanding.

With regard to Salafis, they have so far not shown a clear orientation in terms of foreign policy. Many of them maintain that western civilization is materialistic and immoral. However, the Nour Party seems to be more realistic. The party's platform calls for good relations with the West based on peaceful coexistence and mutual interests. On Israel, the party adopts a significantly realistic and pragmatic approach. Its leaders have expressed their respect for the peace treaty with Israel. In a rare and peculiar move, Yusri Hamad, the spokesperson of the Nour Party, gave a statement to Israeli Army Radio stressing the importance of peace between Egypt and Israel.

In sum, following the Arab Spring Islamist parties are on the brink of a historical shift in their ideology, priorities and strategies. And the question is no longer who speaks for Islam but rather who speaks in the name of Islamists.