Islamists and the "Arab Spring"

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ISLAMISTS AND DEMOCRACY: CAUTIONS FROM PAKISTAN

Husain Haqqani

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Success in free elections held after the "Arab Spring" protests in Tunisia and Egypt has brought Islamists to power through democratic means, and Islamist influence is on the rise throughout the Arab world. Much of the debate about liberal democracy's future in Arab countries focuses on the extent to which the Islamists might be moderated by their inclusion in the democratic process. There is no doubt that the prospect of gaining a share of power through elections is a strong incentive that favors the tempering of extremist positions. But until the major Islamist movements give up their core ideology, their pursuit of an Islamic state is likely to impede their ability to be full and permanent participants in democratization. The real test of the Islamists' commitment to democracy will come not while they are in power for the first time, but when they lose subsequent elections.

Islamists have been a constant feature of the Muslim world's political landscape for almost a century. They have proven themselves to be resilient under even the most repressive political orders because of their ability to organize through mosques. Secular-nationalist leaders in countries such as Egypt and Jordan have alternately used and crushed Islamists to avoid losing power. Secular autocrats and their apologists have often cited the threat of Islamists taking power as a reason why democracy might be hard to practice in Muslim societies. Such societies, it has been argued, may have either secularism or democracy but not both, as the latter could lead to the erosion of the former under the influence of Islamist ideology.

The opposing argument was that the absence of democracy and freedom strengthened the Islamists since they were the only dissenting force

that could covertly organize—by dint of their access to places of worship—at times when political opposition was banned. According to this argument, the absence of democracy made it difficult for Muslim societies to embrace secular pluralism and thus handed the Islamists a political advantage. Islamists have cashed in that advantage during most of the elections held after the overthrow of authoritarian secular regimes. The question now is whether the Islamists will accept pluralism and give up power in the event of an electoral defeat or will insist on pursuing their notion of an Islamic utopia at all costs, thereby preventing the emergence of secular democratic alternatives.

Even if Islamists play by democratic rules while in power, there is reason to doubt that they—or at least their more fervent followers—will give up their power if they lose an election. The world still has not seen any examples of governing Islamists being voted out of power, but Pakistan does present an example of what can happen when an Islamist (or at least partially Islamist) government is succeeded by a non-Islamist democratic party. Pakistan has never elected an Islamist party. In fact, Islamist parties have never won more than 5 percent of the vote in Pakistan in any year except 2002, when a coalition of Islamist parties won 11 percent.

Yet the country did have a partly Islamist regime under the military rule of General Muhammad Zia ul-Haq. Zia amended Pakistan's constitution and decreed that some provisions of *shari'a* would be included in Pakistan's penal code. He also made blasphemy punishable by death and made it possible for police to arrest individuals accused of blasphemy immediately upon the filing of a complaint. After Zia's death in a mysterious 1988 plane crash, new elections brought to power the secular Pakistan People's Party (PPP), but a quarter-century later the country continues to be plagued by the extreme Islamist policies introduced under Zia—policies that have proven very difficult to reverse. The Pakistani experience, to which we shall return later in this essay, suggests that there is reason to fear that legislation passed under Islamist influence may be similarly hard to undo in the Arab countries where Islamists have been elected to power. For now, the Islamists are not averse to acquiring power through the democratic method of free elections even if they remain hostile to Western ideas of individual liberty and pluralism.

The Islamists' idea of democracy usually consists of majority rule, which is easy for them to accept when they are in the majority. Elected Islamist leaders in Egypt and Tunisia have said that they are willing to embrace what Alfred Stepan terms "the twin tolerations,"[1] including the notion that elected officials can legislate freely without having to cede to claims that all human laws can be trumped by laws that God has directly revealed. Full acceptance of the twin-tolerations concept would allow future elected governments to change laws rooted in Islamic theology that might be introduced by Islamist-controlled legislatures dur-

ing their current tenure. If the experience of countries such as Pakistan is any guide, however, Islamists who lose elections nonetheless tend to resist the secularization of laws, with this resistance often taking the form of violence or threats of violence.

The current willingness of Arab Islamists to moderate their stance while taking part in the democratic process appears to be directly tied to the sheer tentativeness of the Arab democratic experiment. The emergence of democratic governance in the Middle East is undoubtedly a positive development, as is the inclusion of Islamists in the process. It would be unrealistic to suppress the Islamists forever, as the fossilized Arab dictatorships had sought to do, and still hope for secular democratic values to evolve. But it is equally important to guard against the prospect of Islamist dictatorships replacing the secular ones, even if Islamists have initially come to power through free and fair elections.

Suspicion of Democracy and Secularism

Most Islamist movements, including the Arab Muslim Brotherhood and its South Asian analog the Jamaat-e-Islami (Islamic Assembly), have a history of questioning Western democracy as well as the basic principles of secularism. Radical groups such as the pan-Islamist Hizbut Tahrir and the British group al-Muhajiroun have gone so far as to describe Western democracy as sinful and against the will of God. Several jihadist movements have taken a similarly extreme position. Other Islamist groups, however, have offered their own versions of democracy that allow for the election of officials but limit the authority of legislators. Disagreements also exist over whether non-Muslims and women are entitled to exercise the franchise or to hold public office on the same terms as practicing Muslim men.

The views of various Islamist factions are important because they provide the context for anticipating the path of Islamist politicians. Many Western observers want to project the future trajectory of Islamist political parties solely on the basis of recent pronouncements by Islamist political leaders. This approach is flawed because Islamists have a strong sense of history; their political behavior cannot be easily comprehended or predicted without taking history into account. The group most relevant to the contemporary Arab political scene is the Muslim Brotherhood. Most Islamist groups in the Middle East, ranging from political parties hastily assembled after the Arab Spring to the terrorists of al-Qaeda, trace their roots to the Brotherhood and its ideology.

At its founding in Egypt in 1928, the Muslim Brotherhood described itself as an organization dedicated to Islamic revival. Two years later, it registered under Egyptian law as a welfare organization, a legal status that (formally at least) precluded its direct involvement in politics. Its

founder Hassan al-Banna (1906–49) gradually unveiled a strategy of political participation and even mounted an abortive run as a parliamentary candidate in 1942. To this day, however, the Brotherhood sees itself as an ideological movement dedicated to the cause of Islamic revival rather than as a political party.

Banna declared that the Brotherhood's aim was the "Islamization" of Egyptian society through an Islamic revolution that would begin with the individual and extend throughout the community. He identified four stages of this process: first, to make every individual a true Muslim; second, to develop Muslim families; third, to Islamize the community; and finally, to establish an Islamic state in Egypt. In some ways, Banna's view of this historical progression is reminiscent of Marx's stages of history. It is based on the belief that events will move in one direction and that Islamization will eventually be attained. But implicit in this revolutionary expectation is the notion that different historical stages require different kinds of strategies. Once a critical mass of Islamized individuals is present, a more directly political strategy—including but not limited to contesting and winning elections—can be adopted.

Unlike Marx, Banna did not lay out the details of the historic progression called for by his theory of inevitable Islamization. This has led Islamists into incessant internal debates regarding the stage that their organization (or society at large) has reached, and which strategy is best suited to it. For this reason, the Brotherhood's position on democracy and party politics has not been consistent. At one time, Banna opposed the very idea of political parties and advocated a political system that would eschew them. But since Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak opened parliamentary elections to multiple parties in 1984, the Brotherhood has taken part in polls save for two occasions on which it chose to boycott the voting. Although it was not allowed to form a party, it participated as one in all but the most formal sense (its candidates would run as nominal independents, with everyone knowing their real affiliation). After Mubarak fell in early 2011, the Brotherhood formed the Freedom and Justice Party, which dominates Egypt's parliament and whose chairman Mohamed Morsi won election to the presidency in June 2012.

Like other ideological movements that seek to change the entire sociopolitical order, the Brotherhood has often debated and shifted its strategies. Its objectives of Islamizing society and establishing an Islamic state, however, have remained constant. The question for those trying to gauge the prospects of democracy in the Arab world is whether the Muslim Brotherhood's acceptance of democratic norms is permanent or is just another strategic shift meant to serve the higher ideological goal of establishing an Islamic state. In this connection, it is worth noting that the Brotherhood's decision to contest elections by setting up a party—avowedly separate and distinct from the main

movement—allows the Brotherhood to maintain a stance of ideological purity while placing some of its members in a position to undertake political compromises.

Banna's speeches and writings about Islamic revival were exhortatory rather than descriptive. For example, he declared that the Muslim Brotherhood wanted "the foundations of modern Eastern resurgence" to be built "on the basic principles of Islam, in every aspect of life." The task of describing "the precepts of Islam" on which this revival was to be built would fall to others.[2]

Mawdudi, Qutb, and the Islamic State

One of the most detailed accounts of an Islamic political theory was offered by Sayyid Abu'l-A'la Mawdudi (1903–79), the founder of the Jamaat-e-Islami in the Indian subcontinent, who is considered the seminal ideologist of global Islamism. Mawdudi elaborated the idea that in an Islamic state sovereignty belongs explicitly to Allah (God), and thus that the principal function of an Islamic polity must be to enforce the rules laid down in the Koran and early Islamic traditions.

"A more apt name for the Islamic polity would be the 'kingdom of God' which is described in English as a 'theocracy,'" Mawdudi said in a 1948 lecture. But he clarified that Islamic theocracy is "something altogether different from the theocracy of which Europe had a bitter experience." The theocracy that Islam would build, said Mawdudi,

> [Is] not ruled by any particular religious class but by the whole community of Muslims including the rank and file. The entire Muslim population runs the state in accordance with the Book of God and the practice of His Prophet. If I were permitted to coin a new term, I would describe this system of government as 'theo-democracy,' that is to say a divine democratic government, because under it the Muslims have been given a limited popular sovereignty under the suzerainty of God. The executive under this system of government is constituted by the general will of the Muslims who have also the right to depose it.[3]

According to Mawdudi's theory, "every Muslim who is capable and qualified to give a sound opinion on matters of Islamic law, is entitled to interpret the law of God when such interpretation becomes necessary. In this sense the Islamic polity is a democracy."[4] But it is a limited democracy, as not even the entire Muslim community has the authority to change an explicit command of God. Sayyid Qutb (1906–66), the Egyptian writer and radical Brotherhood ideologist, claimed that *jahiliya* (the state of human ignorance that preceded the Koran) continues to exist in all times. Qutb further asserted that all those who resist the notion of the Islamic state, or who seek to dilute it with contemporary ideologies, are in a state of *jahiliya*. The Qutbists would be willing to denounce as

unbelievers (*takfir*) any who refuse to acknowledge the sovereignty of God as embodied in a state ruled by Islam.[5]

These ideological roots of the Muslim Brotherhood and its allied movements have not disappeared and could resurge if their dominance within fledgling Arab democracies falters. Even now, Islamists serving in the governments of various countries are divided over the extent to which they should push what they consider to be Islamic laws. Some Western commentators have expressed the hope that Islamists might be content with dispensing patronage to their supporters and providing relatively just and decent governance. But this optimism is misplaced. It is unlikely that Islamists can avoid pressure from their ideological core to push for a greater role for Islam in the public sphere.

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The brunt of Islamization in contemporary times has been borne by women and religious minorities, and debates over what Islam does and does not allow have been endemic in all countries that have attempted even partial Islamization. Cultural issues such as bans on alcohol, changes to school curricula, requirements for women to wear head coverings, and restrictions on certain images or even on music have always been major Islamist rallying points. There is no way that Islamists in government can completely ignore their movement's promises regarding all these matters, even though the implementation of Islamist measures is sure to divide society and create a backlash. The problem would become especially acute when Islamists, after partially legislating *shari'a* while in office, lose their majority.

If "the law of God" is reversed after being implemented for a few years, violent opposition is inevitable. Such a situation began in Pakistan after General Zia, who came to power in a 1977 military coup and remained as president till his death eleven years later, partially enforced *shari'a*. The winner of the first election following Zia's death was the secular PPP. The Islamists had only a few seats in the new parliament. Yet by using Islamist "street power," issuing fatwas, and pronouncing condemnations from the pulpits of mosques, they refused to allow any new legislation that they viewed as contravening *shari'a*, which they said can never be reversed once it has been written into the legal code. To this day, secular legislators trying to amend Pakistan's blasphemy laws, for example, do so at the risk of death threats and assassination.

Upon gaining independence from the British Raj in 1947, Pakistan's secular founders had spoken vaguely of creating a state inspired by Islamic principles. But Islamist agitation forced Pakistan's early leaders to expand the relationship between religion and the country's legal

structure. Unlike neighboring India, which was able to agree on a consti-
tution less than thirty months after independence, Pakistan's Constituent
Assembly remained bogged down with working out the details of its
country's fundamental law for nine long years. In an effort to placate
Islamists, the Assembly in 1949 adopted an Objectives Resolution that
outlined the underlying principles of the constitution. This resolution
declared that "sovereignty over the entire universe belongs to Allah
Almighty" and that "principles of democracy, freedom, equality, toler-
ance and social justice as enunciated by Islam shall be fully observed."
Moreover, it pledged the Pakistani state to ensuring that "Muslims shall
be enabled to order their lives in the individual and collective spheres
in accordance with the teachings and requirements of Islam as set out in
the Holy Quran and the Sunnah."

These principles were incorporated into the Pakistani constitu-
tions of 1956, 1962, and 1973, but secular Pakistanis expected them to
amount to nothing more than lip service to the religious sentiments of
the country's vast majority. The Islamists, however, had other ideas.
They invoked what they termed the nation's foundational principles to
seek changes in laws based on their beliefs—and they did this *without*
winning elections. In 1974, for instance, Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali
Bhutto's elected secular government (1973–77) found itself forced by
violent street protests to amend the constitution to declare members of
the Ahmadiyya sect non-Muslims. Three years later, more protests—
this time under the pretext of disputed elections—resulted in legal
bans on alcohol and nightclubs, plus the shift of the weekly holiday
from Sunday to Friday. These Islamic measures did not suffice to keep
Bhutto in office. Zia's coup, which made him Pakistan's third military
ruler, had the support of Islamists and may have been planned as the
culmination of the anti-Bhutto protests.

Zia was personally religious and deeply influenced by Mawdudi's
writings. He spoke publicly of the need to implement fully what had
hitherto been a vague promise of government based on Islamic prin-
ciples. This led to the deepening of Islamist influence in education, aca-
demia, the bureaucracy, the media, the military, and the law. The state
became an instrument for trying to achieve the Muslim Brotherhood's
version of good Muslim individuals and families within a fully Muslim
society. In a 2 December 1978 speech, Zia spoke of the need to create a
Nizam-i-Islam or Islamic system, which he described as "a code of life
revealed by Allah to his last Prophet (Peace be upon him) 1400 years
ago, and the record of which is with us in the form of the Holy Quran
and the Sunnah."[6]

This announcement was followed by the establishment of *shariʿa*
courts and the passage of several drastic laws. Among these was the
Hudood Ordinance of 1979, which banned alcohol, forbade theft with
punishments that could include the amputation of a hand, and forbade all

sexual contact outside marriage with penalties that could include death by stoning. Also controversial were the blasphemy laws of 1980, 1982, and 1986. The state took it upon itself as well to mandate the timing of prayers, the observance of the Ramadan fast, and the collection directly from citizens of *zakat,* the annual charitable contribution that all Muslims who have the means to do so are required to make as one of the "five pillars" of Islam.

With respect to the blasphemy laws, Pakistan's Penal Code and Criminal Procedure Code were amended so that various religious offenses would be punishable at a minimum with imprisonment and at a maximum with death. The "use of derogatory remarks in respect of holy personages" is an offense punishable by three years' imprisonment and a fine. Defiling a Koran is an offense that results in life imprisonment, and the "use of derogatory remarks against the Prophet" is punishable by death. Between 1986 and 2010, more than 1,200 people—over half of them non-Muslims—were charged under the blasphemy laws. In 2010, the case of Asia Bibi, a Christian woman sentenced to death for blasphemy, gained international attention (she remains in prison as of this writing in March 2013).

In early 2011, at the height of the controversy over the Bibi case, Governor Salmaan Taseer of Punjab (Pakistan's largest province) and Federal Minister for Minority Affairs Shahbaz Bhatti were assassinated (Taseer by one of his own bodyguards) for requesting leniency for Bibi and publicly supporting a review of these harsh laws. The murder of secular reformers democratically trying to reverse previously decreed Islamization measures in Pakistan makes one wonder whether something similar might happen in Arab countries if Islamists lose an election after having been in power.[7]

Until recently, fears that radicals and jihadist groups would gain influence were cited as a reason for excluding Islamists from the political process, especially in the Arab world. Now that the Islamists are dominant participants in fledgling democracies, it remains to be seen whether they will seek to marginalize the radicals or to maintain them as insurance against future attempts to reverse Islamist ideological gains.

Hard Secularism and Soft Islamism?

Optimists often cite the example of Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP), which has Islamist roots yet has ruled Turkey since 2002 without imposing a theocracy. But the AKP emerged in the context of Kemal Atatürk's hard secularism, which since 1924 had imposed upon Turkey *laïcité* in the French Jacobin tradition. The Turkish Republic was not just secular in the U.S. sense, according to which the state must not impose a religion; rather, the Kemalist state actively opposed any public manifestations of religiosity, which it saw as preventing

Muslims from attaining full modernity. The AKP presented itself as a conservative party, Islamic only in the sense that the Christian Democratic parties of Europe are Christian.[8] Even its Turkish forerunners, the National Salvation Party and the Welfare Party, which were disbanded by the Kemalist army and judiciary, were hardly comparable to ideological movements like the Muslim Brotherhood or the Jamaat-e-Islami.

Turkey's Islamists were circumscribed in their ability to demand Islamization by the strong secular foundations of Atatürk's republic. The AKP has never described itself as a movement to establish an Islamic state. It has focused instead on rolling back the restrictions on public manifestations of Islam that Atatürk and his successors imposed. There are many Turkish citizens, however, who remain worried that after the rollback of some of the harshest aspects of *laïcité,* an Islamist movement resembling the Muslim Brotherhood might yet emerge in their country.[9] The constraints of living under hard secularism in the past may also help to explain why the Ennahda (Renaissance) party in Tunisia stands out among the post–Arab Spring Islamist groups in being able to claim closer kinship with Turkey's AKP than with Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood. The Tunisian party's ideologist, Rachid Ghannouchi, has made what can be understood as an argument against the concept of rule by a vanguard Islamist movement claiming to exercise God's sovereignty. As Ghannouchi said in a widely publicized speech:

> Throughout Islamic history, the state has always been influenced by Islam in one way or another in its practices, and its laws were legislated for in light of the Islamic values as understood at that particular time and place. Despite this, states remained Islamic not in the sense that their laws and procedures were divinely revealed, but that they were human endeavors open to challenge and criticism. . . . The primary orbit for religion is not the state's apparatuses, but rather personal/individual convictions.[10]

According to Ghannouchi, the state's duty above all is to provide services to people—to create job opportunities, provide education, and promote good health—and not to control the hearts and minds of its citizens.

But the mainstream of the Islamist movement—including the Muslim Brotherhood and the Jamaat-e-Islami—has yet to revise its ideology as drastically as Ghannouchi appears to have revised that of Ennahda. And it remains to be seen what Ghannouchi and his "soft" Islamists will actually do in practice. Most Islamists continue to view the authoritarian experiments undertaken to Islamize Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, and Sudan as legitimate. Mawdudi's concept of "theo-democracy" and the Islamic Republic of Iran's doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* (guardianship by the supreme Islamic jurisprudent) are examples of the truncated view of democracy held by Islamists. Just as communists advocated a "dictator-

ship of the proletariat" that in practice meant domination by communist parties in the name of the proletariat, there are legitimate grounds to suspect that what mainstream Islamists actually seek is a dictatorship of the pious.

NOTES

1. Alfred Stepan, "Tunisia's Transition and the Twin Tolerations," *Journal of Democracy* 23 (April 2012): 89–103.

2. The quoted words are from Banna's essay "To What Do We Invite Humanity," available at *www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=804.*

3. Sayyid Abul A'la Maududi, *The Islamic Law and Constitution,* 7th ed., trans. and ed. Khurshid Ahmad (Lahore: Islamic Publications Ltd., 1980): 139–40.

4. Maududi, *Islamic Law and Constitution,* 140.

5. On Banna, Mawdudi, and Qutb, see Ladan Boroumand and Roya Boroumand, "Terror, Islam, and Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 13 (April 2002): 5–20.

6. The English text of Zia's speech may be found in *Pakistan Horizon* 32, 1–2 (First and Second Quarters 1979): 277–280. On the Nizam-i-Islam, see John L. Esposito, *Islam and Politics,* 4th ed. (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1998), 175–76.

7. The problem of "blasphemy" in Pakistan is much more than just a juridical matter of excessive prosecutions or even a matter of lethal attacks on a few high-profile ministers. Mere informal allegations of insults against Islam can trigger mass violence, as occurred when numerous homes in a Christian quarter of Lahore were burned in March 2013 after two local men, one a Muslim and one from Pakistan's Christian minority (which forms about 1.6 percent of the population), fell into a personal quarrel and the former accused the latter of saying something—reports did not specify precisely what—that was disrespectful of Islam. See Andrew Buncombe, "Muslim Mob Burns 150 Homes over Christian 'Blasphemy,'" *Independent,* 10 March 2013, available at *www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/muslim-mob-burns-150-homes-over-christian-blasphemy-8528231.html.*

8. Vali Nasr, "The Rise of 'Muslim Democracy,'" *Journal of Democracy* 16 (April 2005): 20.

9. On the AKP's behavior so far, see Berna Turam, "Turkey Under the AKP: Are Rights and Liberties Safe?" *Journal of Democracy* 23 (January 2012): 109–18.

10. Rachid Ghannouchi, "Secularism and Relation between Religion and the State from the Perspective of the Nahdha Party," trans. Brahim Rouabah, Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy–Tunisia, 2 March 2012, available at *http://archive.constantcontact.com/fs093/1102084408196/archive/1109480512119.html.*