

# The paradox of political Islam

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Political Islam is a modern phenomenon that seeks to use religion to shape the political system. Its origins lie in the perceived failure of the secular ideologies of nationalism and socialism to deliver on their promises of anti-imperialist prosperity. The great thinkers of political Islam (Sayyid Qutb, Maulana Maududi, followed by Ayatollah Khomeini) were rebelling against the political system that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century, one that copied the Western-inspired system of nation-states governed by the rational decision-making of the people. In reality, the political establishment in the Muslim world was neither rational nor in the service of the public. Instead it was monopolised by a self-serving political elite. Political Islam provided a conceptual alternative that was purportedly based on the teachings of the faith. Sayyid Qutb's concept of Islam as a revolutionary ideology inspired his followers to see Islam as a recipe for change (Musallam 2005). The cry 'Islam is the solution' captures this mood. Political Islam is focused on remoulding public life in accordance with a specific interpretation of Islamic text and traditions. Accordingly, all state affairs are subject to the yardstick of political Islam, used by its self-declared devotees, dubbed Islamists.

Islamism is best understood as a modern-day ideology. Much like other *-isms*, Islamism imposes a normative framework on society in a blatant attempt to make society fit into its mould. This makes Islamists active agents of change, pursuing the goal of a perfect world, one that is run in accordance with divine will and in line with a specific reading of Islamic history. As Mohammed Ayoob has argued, Islamism is a reinvention of history and a re-imagination of the future, borrowing selectively from Islamic history and reinterpreting meanings to justify the ultimate objective: an Islamic state (Ayoob 2005: 952). This capacity to reinterpret and re-evaluate history makes Islamism an adaptive and flexible force, capable of responding to changed circumstances while retaining its relevance. Unlike the classical Islamic body of knowledge which tends to be rigid and fixed, Islamism has proven flexible, offering its adherents the opportunity to reinterpret history and religious text. This flexibility is an important asset that allows Islamism to be regenerated and respond to new challenges with relative ease.

A key point to bear in mind in the study of Islamism is that it has been a voice of dissent. Islamists have defined themselves in contrast to the status quo, whether responding to socialism, nationalism or the cultural and political hegemony of the United States. Islamism has defined itself as a reaction to a set of perceived failures. These range from the failure of the Muslim

world to stand up for its own interests, to protect its religious and cultural values against the encroachment of Western culture, to defend Muslim land from non-Muslim occupation, and to provide the socioeconomic prosperity and justice that is believed to be integral to Islam. As Henry Munson points out, to understand the appeal of Islamism one must look at both nationalistic resentment of foreign domination and the 'dire economic situation in much of the Islamic world' (Munson 2003: 51). In a nutshell, Islamism has been a reaction to everything that is 'wrong' in the Muslim world.

Islamists have targeted two distinct bodies for their political agitation. At the local level, national governments have borne the brunt of the Islamist backlash. Khomeini, Qutb and Maududi were all responding to their governments of the day, in their respective countries. Mohammad Ayoob contends that political Islam gained increasing support as 'governing elites failed to deliver on their promises of economic progress, political participation, and personal dignity to expectant populations emerging from colonial bondage' (Ayoob 2004: 3). The rise of political Islam was first and foremost a direct challenge to the national ruling elite.

This challenge has manifested itself in similar forms. In Iran, Islamists managed to ride the tide of popular discontent in 1978 and 1979 to topple the monarchy. This led to the rise of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In Egypt, the groundswell of Islamist agitation against the ruling regime facilitated the rapid growth of the Muslim Brotherhood which has now managed to anchor itself deeply in the Egyptian political scene. A violent offshoot of the Brotherhood took the message of challenging the political regime to an extreme and carried out the assassination of President Anwar Sadat (1981). This pattern of internal dissent against incumbent national regimes has been played out throughout the Muslim world, making Islamists the number one political and security challenge.

The West has been the second target of Islamists. The close relationship between the United States and contested political regimes as well as its military alliance with Israel has made it the target of Islamist wrath. The spread of anti-Americanism throughout the Middle East is rooted in the belief that the United States acts as the international bastion of political power for unpopular regimes. For that reason national grievances that are firmly grounded in the domestic setting have taken on an international dimension. The challenge posed by Islamism is not confined to national boundaries – it has clear international implications. It must be noted that these implications go beyond threatening US interests by undermining US-friendly states. The Islamist challenge has a potent conceptual component that has proven seductive to its followers, and that involves a fundamental critique of the state system.

The system of nation-states that has become the foundation bloc of the international community was imposed on the Muslim world through the experience of colonisation and neo-colonisation. National boundaries that demarcate the Middle East today were the result of negotiation and back-door dealings between the Great Powers of the twentieth century. Once drawn on the map, the boundaries were expected to represent real national communities, but the history of the Arab world does not support such a compartmentalised approach. Arab unity may be a myth as Arabs have lived under competing dynasties and have had their fair share of internal strife, but this division into manageable 'national' entities was a top-down experiment which continues to alienate segments of the population and provide the intellectual framework for the Islamist challenge. The fundamental message by Sayyid Qutb and other Islamist thinkers is that the imposed system of nation-states is 'man-made' and contravenes the divine mandate of Muslim unity. The Islamist challenge to the nation-state and its institutions is far-reaching and encompasses not only the legitimacy of national borders – which are believed to divide the Muslim *umma* (the translational community of faith) – but the legal and political framework that governs the state. The battle cry 'Islam is the solution' is believed to present a

clear alternative to the failures of ruling regimes to provide justice, prosperity and welfare for their population. The incumbent regimes are believed to have failed because they deviated from the path of Islam – instead they allowed themselves to become tools of Western domination. The Islamist solution is presented as a return to Islam because only Islam is believed to provide dignity and justice to Muslims (Munson 2003: 44). Although the language of this return is designed to support the revival of a tradition that is supposed to have existed in the past, in reality the Islamist project is modern and centres around the capture of the state machinery.

Islamism is focused on the capture and the remoulding of the state in accordance with what is believed to be Islamic law. This is a major point of contention, as Islamic law is seen to supersede man-made laws, challenging the legitimacy of the political and legal frameworks that have maintained incumbent regimes in the Muslim world. The critical point in this contestation for power is the question of sovereignty. Where does sovereignty reside? For the Islamist, the answer is straightforward: moral, political and legal authority emanate from God. According to Islamists, sovereignty resides with God, making illegitimate any other political system that removes Him from the centre of the equation. This approach is a direct challenge to human rationality on the pillar of sovereignty – one that is grounded in popular will, not divine wisdom. The Islamist approach is a break with the long-established history of reasoning and pursuit of knowledge through human faculties and advocates the view that human beings should not be allowed to tinker with God's will. Any human being meddling in the divine order that is to govern the ideal Islamic state would inevitably corrupt and distort God's design. The Islamist vision of a perfect society is diametrically opposed to the model of democracy, as the latter rests on the sovereignty of the people as the source of legitimacy (Esposito and Voll 2001: 22–23). This is a fundamental point and explains the extent of antipathy felt by Islamists towards the West. The anti-Western position, which has a familiar anti-colonial starting point, is reinforced by the belief that the West is imposing an alien and corrupting mode of government on Muslim lands.

The obvious irony of the Islamist position is that in their attempt to build this ideal Islamic state, they engage in an unavoidable process of interpretation and intervention. Islamic law is open to interpretation, and making it relevant to the modern state requires human reasoning. Consequently, Islamists are engaged in an elaborate process of reinterpretation of religious knowledge to cleanse it of what they see as misunderstandings and corruptions that have accumulated over time.

Islamists claim to have found or uncovered the ultimate truth, a pure and unadulterated interpretation of Islam. Their understanding of Islam is presented as the only authentic version, dismissing alternative views as inauthentic and illegitimate. This is an exclusive claim to God and divine wisdom: only Islamists can read God's mind. As a result, all criticism directed at them is dismissed as illegitimate and unworthy of attention. Criticism of Islamism is seen as criticism of God. This self-righteous perspective is intellectually debilitating and politically dangerous, especially when Islamism is transformed from a socio-political force into a position of authority.

The second irony that chips at the foundation of political Islam is in its implementation. As noted earlier, Islamism dismisses the existing states as man-made products of imperial design. In principle, state boundaries are rejected as dividing the Muslim community – the *umma*. The ultimate goal of Islamists is to create (or recreate in their view) the glorious transnational entity of Islam to uphold the *umma* politically and militarily. In reality, however, Islamists have confined their activities to state boundaries. All major Islamist movements (for example, the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas and the Iranian Revolution) have operated as national projects. The rhetorical commitment to the transnational *umma* has not been forgotten but the immediate challenge that has consumed the Islamists has been the capture of political process within the existing boundaries of the state and building an 'Islamic state'.

As noted above, the combination of the exclusive claim on divine truth and the capture of political power presents a dangerous mix. This establishment of the Islamic state in this model lends to popular disenfranchisement because political authority and legitimacy are seen to flow from God. Sovereignty resides with God – and with those who have exclusive access to God. Consequently, opposition to this model of government, to policies pursued by the Islamic state, is not simply a matter of divergence of opinions, it is a matter of rejecting God. The exclusive claim to the truth empowers Islamists to reject all opposing views as blasphemy and take all measures to keep God's system supreme.

In the Islamic Republic of Iran, where the Islamist interpretation of Ayatollah Khomeini managed to gain the upper hand against alternative models, this exclusive claim to the divine knowledge opened the way for the brutal elimination of political opposition. The system of the *velayate faqih* paved the way for suppression of dissent and alternative viewpoints. This system raised the stakes to an extent that any point of difference was interpreted as a challenge to God's authority. Dissidents were condemned as warring against God and his messenger, and spreading corruption on earth (Mayer 2003: 124).

The obvious danger in this exclusive view is political intolerance, which can easily manifest as acts of violence. Although political Islam is not necessarily a violent movement, and many Islamists do not engage in acts of violence, the exclusive claim to the truth and the Manichean views of the world divided between the abode of Islam and the abode of disbelief lends itself to extremist tendencies. For the Islamists, there is no middle ground. One is either committed to the implementation of the word of God, or is working against it. There are no innocent bystanders. There is no room for indifference. There is no distinction between civilians and soldiers. This blinkered view of Islam and society has allowed some Islamists to justify terror and brutality in the name of God. Al Qaeda's 11 September 2001 attacks are the most infamous example of such terror.

However, terror is not confined to attacks on Western soil or against Christians and Jews, although such attacks tend to receive more attention in the Western media than others. Islamist terror also targets Muslims, as noted in the assassination of the Egyptian president and the daily violence meted out to anti-Islamist Muslim citizens and intellectuals such as the Pakistani Governor Salman Taseer in Islamabad, who advocated the abolition of blasphemy laws (Dawn 2011).

The extension of this ideology of intolerance and extremism to the West has led to new challenges. Population movements and the settlement of Muslim communities in the West have made redundant traditional divisions between the Muslim world and the world of Judeo-Christianity. The West may be conceived as a geographical entity but it is no longer the exclusive land of Judeo-Christianity. Muslims now account for 0.7 per cent of the total population of the United States, which equates to well over 2 million people (Central Intelligence Agency 2011). The process of enlightenment and the division of Church and State, followed by Muslim migration, the growth of second- and third-generation Muslims in Europe, Australia and the Americas, coupled with the legal, social and political frameworks that protect civil rights, have facilitated the indigenisation of Islam in the West. Despite challenges that persist due to racist hangovers, Islam is now part of the Western landscape. The binary divide between the abode of Islam and the abode of disbelief is incompatible with the reality of the Muslim experience in the West. The incompatibility of such divisions is made even more obvious in Western societies that actively protect the rights of Muslim communities to practise their faith and regenerate their religious and ethnic bonds. The policy of multiculturalism (when applied to Muslims) and provisions for the construction of mosques are two vivid examples of Western incorporation of Islam.



The above experience of inclusion is dismissed by Islamists as an experience of subordination and cultural alienation whereby Muslims are corrupted in their belief and weakened in their bond with God. Represented by such groups as Hizb ut-Tahrir and Al-Muhajiroun, Islamists reject multiculturalism, democracy and parliamentarianism as man-made systems and institutions that contravene God's divine authority and give the Muslims an illusion of being incorporated in the West. Participation in such Western processes, they argue, does nothing for the supremacy of God's will – instead it pushes God to the periphery and acknowledges the reign of secularism (Ahmed and Stuart 2009; Taji-Farouki 1996). This is simply not acceptable to Islamists. According to the constitution of Hizb ut-Tahrir:

The Islamic '*Aqeeda* [doctrine] constitutes the foundation of the State. Therefore, nothing is permitted to exist in the State's structure, system, accountability, or any other aspect connected with the State that does not take the Islamic '*Aqeeda* as its source. The Islamic '*Aqeeda* is also the source of the State's constitution and laws. Consequently, nothing related to them is permitted to exist unless it emanates from the Islamic '*Aqeeda*.

(*An-Nabhani* 1998: 240)

It is important to note that despite its uncompromising rhetoric, Hizb ut-Tahrir does not condone violence. The position of Hizb ut-Tahrir in relation to 11 September and Al-Qaeda may be ambiguous, but it has deliberately stayed away from promoting violent actions and terror. This may be partly due to the pragmatic consideration that crossing that threshold would make it subject to anti-terror laws in the United Kingdom (where it is currently operating with a degree of freedom) and the inevitable backlash from the Muslim community. However, there is a larger issue at stake here. Despite the violent tendencies of some Islamists and acts of terror carried out by groups like Hamas, which justify their actions in terms of the ultimate battle between good and evil, terrorism is not a necessary outcome of Islamism. Forces aligned with the ideology of political Islam have demonstrated a long track record of working in the social, cultural and political arena without resorting to violence. This process has helped establish them as important players in the socio-political landscape. The majority of Islamic movements have established modern political movements and social organisations, embracing modern means of technology and functioning 'within civil society as social and political activists' (Esposito 1997: 10). The Muslim Brotherhood is a prime example of such Islamist actors. Primarily an Egyptian organisation, as explored in Chapter 5 by Barbara Zollner, the Muslim Brotherhood was initially focused on raising awareness and education on Islam. Over the years, it has expanded its activities to the welfare and political spheres, running hospitals and fielding candidates for parliamentary elections. The Muslim Brotherhood has rejected terror as a political tool and distanced itself from its splinter group Gama'a Islamiyya. The Muslim Brotherhood has coupled its rejection of violence with participation in the system it vows to dismantle.

The Islamist participation in the established system and institutions of power presents a conceptual challenge. On the one hand, actors affiliated with political Islam seek to establish the sovereignty of God. On the other, they take part in the 'man-made' state apparatus they ultimately wish to depose. This contradictory behaviour is often justified in terms of the need to remain relevant to the needs of society and pushing the boundaries from within. Groups like the Brotherhood claim to harbour no illusions about the capacity of the existing regimes to reform and pave the way for God's will to reign supreme, but by operating within the system they also hope to expand their reach, remain relevant and avoid state repression. In other words, such Islamist actors adopt a pragmatic response to the conceptual challenge. This response does not address the inherent contradiction of engaging with an illegitimate system and

potentially lending it a degree of legitimacy. Instead the pragmatic response sidetracks the principled rejection of the man-made system by insisting that a complete withdrawal would ultimately limit the scope of Islamism to advance its agenda. This attitude has led many observers to be suspicious of a 'hidden agenda' that governs the behaviour of Islamists. The claim by veteran US diplomat Edward Djerejian that Islamists will uphold the principle of 'one-man, one-vote' only for 'one-time' reflects this cynicism (Djerejian 1992: 37).

The participation of Islamist forces in the established political system may be grounded in strong pragmatic justifications, but there is every reason to believe that the prolonged process of engagement could potentially make a qualitative impression on Islamists. This may fall way short of a complete reappraisal of the Islamist worldview and epistemology, but the process gives Islamists a stake in the system and builds a degree of dependence on how it works. This process is not guaranteed or universal, but once the ruling regimes demonstrate a degree of flexibility and refrain from pursuing the complete eradication of political Islam, political actors of Islamist hue tend to take advantage of the openings in the public domain and grow roots (Esposito and Voll 2000: 613). In turn, this visibility, however restricted it may be, offers Islamists an incentive to refrain from extremism or a full-frontal confrontation with the system. Instead the political platform of Islamism can shift towards reform, not revolution, making Islamism a status quo actor. This is a rather ironic twist as Islamism completes a 180-degree turn, starting from the complete rejection of the state and ending with an accommodation of the state.

The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood offers a pertinent example of this evolution. Although the Muslim Brotherhood has never denounced its ultimate goal of establishing an Islamic state, its record under 30 years of Hosni Mubarak's rule demonstrates a remarkable degree of accommodation. The irony of the Muslim Brotherhood's behaviour, not as a force for revolution but as a piece of the jigsaw that made the status quo, was most vividly demonstrated during the 2011 uprising in Egypt that led to the departure of President Mubarak from office. Caught by surprise at the ground swell of public anger at the regime and the ferocity of the desire for justice, the Brotherhood hesitated to take the lead and fell behind the spontaneous surge. The Brotherhood's leadership was slow to grasp the enormity of the Arab revolt and failed to act like a force for revolution seeking the complete overhaul of the system. While the slogan of 'Islam is the solution' had become the staple response to any and all ills, in 2011 the Muslim Brotherhood failed to revive its answer to the Arab revolt.

While the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood may present a case of evolution of Islamism from a force for change to a component of the 'man-made' status quo, the Turkish case offers a fascinating example of Islamism as the pillar of that status quo. The Justice and Development Party (AKP), which gained parliamentary majority in 2002 and has maintained its lead in Turkish politics, has managed to run the government seamlessly. Despite its roots in the Islamist Virtue Party, the AKP is comfortable with running a 'man-made' state machinery that safeguards popular sovereignty and maintains a distinct separation between Islam and politics. The AKP has been very careful to avoid any reference to Islam in politics, except as a national heritage and a moral compass. For example, the AKP has overseen a reform to allow hijab in the public domain and universities, but has repeatedly stated its commitment to maintaining the legal system as secular and shari'a-free. Some AKP critics, generally affiliated with the Ataturk political camp now in opposition, reject the Turkish government as a wolf in sheep's clothing. They view AKP's moves to reinstate Islam in the public domain as paving the way for an Islamist revolution by stealth. Yet there is no evidence to suggest that AKP seeks to Islamise society. In fact, the AKP record raises a fundamental question about the nature of Islamism. Is there a point beyond which an Islamist actor ceases to be Islamist? Indeed, if Islamist actors are susceptible to

external stimuli and are capable of evolution, it is perfectly possible for them to cease being Islamists. However, does the departure of actors from the fold mean the evolution of ideas? Can Islamism as an ideology evolve to accommodate the separation of Islam from politics and the supremacy of popular will?

In the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRP) the above tension between the sovereignty of God and the sovereignty of people continues to cripple the state. Nonetheless, the IRP has been hailed by its supporters within and without as a successful experiment to resolve this tension. This position rests on the assumption that as God's creation, human beings will utilise their sovereignty to uphold God's will. As a result, they argue, popular sovereignty paves the way for the establishment of divine order. Needless to say this perspective has not been borne out by the IRP experience, as the ruling Islamist regime has resorted to violence and intimidation to suppress dissent. While the constitution includes specific references to the people as the foundation of political power which allows for an electoral parliamentary system, it also places all authority with God, represented by the Supreme Leader occupying the office of the *velayate faqih*. This places God above people. The IRP does not resolve the inherent tension of Islamism; at best it camouflages the tension.

Defining political Islam presents researchers with a challenge. While the kernel of the definition is about the commitment of establishing Islam as the governing principle of the state, there are some important deviations within the fold. First, the Islamist vision aspires to the transnational unity of Muslims, yet it is very common for forces of political Islam to resign themselves to the established boundaries of states and trim their political objectives to fit state demarcations. Second, Islamism rejects 'man-made laws' as emasculating Muslims and depriving them of their source of authority and pride. This is a rejection of existing political orders as illegitimate and unworthy of Muslim allegiance. Yet so many Islamists seek to take part in the system and influence it from within. Third, while the principle of divine sovereignty comes into direct conflict with popular sovereignty and most Islamists have rejected democracy as a means of subjugating Islam, a discernible trend in Islamism has looked to utilising democracy. This has been dismissed as a cynical abuse of democracy by forces that have no desire to uphold its principles once they gain power. Yet there are significant cases that give reason for pause. Fourth, the Manichean world view and the exclusive claim to the truth that has allowed some Islamist actors to dismiss all opponents as warring against God and therefore cross the threshold to violence and terror is not an inevitable process. Many Islamists present their ideological position in terms of an existential conflict between 'good and evil', but shy away from actions to physically annihilate what they had termed 'evil'.

Political Islam is best understood as a dynamic social phenomenon – not a static ideology. Its origins are uncontested among observers, but the evolution of political Islam over the last decades along divergent paths suggests that scholarship on Islamism needs to retain conceptual agility and intellectual rigour. This agility is necessary in making sense of the various manifestations of political Islam in the twenty-first century. The present volume aims to contribute to this objective.

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