

# The Role of Political Islam in Arab Transitions: Year II of the Arab Spring, between Islamism, Democratic Transition and New Power Relations

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The year 2011 certainly made a lasting impression, constituting a turning point in the Arab-Muslim world, victim of many decades of immobility in governance. Deprived of political participation and economic well-being, the “Arab streets,” from Tunis to Sana’a, as well as Tripoli, Damascus and Cairo, have let their anger explode, causing a surge of protest – a major tsunami – sweeping away the hereditary, clannish dictatorships that were considered rock-solid one by one. However, the enthusiasm and hopes associated with this wave of revolt called the Arab Spring soon gave way to numerous questions and even a certain disillusionment largely linked to the progress of Islamists at the polls, placing 2012 under the sign of uncertainty.

The “green landslide” of the first free legislative elections, which consolidated the rise to power of Islamist circles springing from the rubble of the fallen authoritarian regimes, has left a number of observers sceptical about the real outcome of this nearly unprecedented wave of protest. Whereas the majority of arenas of protest have just inaugurated Year II of the Arab Spring, some now refer to an “Islamist Autumn” to describe the electoral success by Ennahda in Tunisia, the Justice and Development Party in Morocco and the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists in Egypt, not to mention the prominent position that will most certainly go to Islamist parties in Libya – where legislative elections are due to be held in mid-2013 – as well as in Syria, where the crisis and the fierce repression by the Bashar al-Assad regime are only contributing to radicalising protest.

How can it be that Islamist movements or parties, whose place in the groundswell of protest had been

secondary, have nevertheless succeeded in taking the upper hand at elections? Are we to dread such an outcome of the Arab revolts, which in any case, does not seem to surprise the most discerning observers? For it is clear that the emergence of the new Islamist powers seems to have distressed certain commentators who had been convinced that the Arab-Muslim world would undeniably move towards a mode of democratic governance directly patterned on the Western model, or other commentators who follow a culturalist approach according to which Islam is supposedly incompatible with democracy.

## **From the Twitter Generation to the Resurgence of Islamist Movements: “A Premium for the Oppressed”**

Yet it is Arab youth – comprising nearly two thirds of the population in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) area – who are responsible for the first fruits of the winds of revolt that swept the entire region over the course of 2011. The “baby-boomers,” those young unemployed university graduates, let their anger explode, flooding the streets to immortalise the famous slogan “*Erhal!*” (“Get out!”), addressed at immutable dictatorships, thus breaking with the years of immobility and submission that had prevailed among older generations. Mastering information and communication technology, including social networks such as Facebook, YouTube or Twitter, those “weapons of mass subversion” that make each protester a real photojournalist capable of bypassing censorship and denouncing repression, the urbanised elite youth open to globalisation have undoubtedly been the main vehicle for the Arab revolutions. Thus, early on in the uprisings, there was no indication of a rise of Islamist movements, which were relegated to the background in the protests. The slo-

gans chanted by the demonstrators focussed on both democratic and socio-economic demands. The usual Islamist themes based on hostility to the “Great Satan,” and more broadly on a rejection of the West – a discourse fostered by autocrats with the aim of deflecting the population’s discontent towards the outside – were completely overshadowed by the protesters, prompting many observers to describe the Arab Spring as “post-Islamist revolutions.” Torn since the early 20th century between religious power and autocratic regimes, the Arab world was finally breaking this “vicious circle” and moving towards a third alternative symbolised by young people’s aspirations to liberty.

But it was too hasty and demonstrated a certain naïveté to declare the death of political Islam in the wake of the Arab Spring. Spontaneous and devoid of any ideological basis, the wave of protest that struck the dictators of the region warrants the name of an “Arab Tsunami,” insofar as the revolutions we have witnessed are far from being a completed process with a single purpose. In other words, once the authoritarian regimes were overthrown, the process of democratic transition, which will take much longer, quickly revealed the lack of organisation among the main actors of the revolutions, for the political sphere had been completely blocked by decades of dictatorships. Evidence of this was the plethora of political parties constituted before the first legislative elections in both Tunisia and Egypt, all claiming more or less the same secular, liberal ideology and whose forces would eventually be dispersed in the face of the much more structured Islamist parties.

For though the former dictatorships had managed to silence any dissenting voices within civil society by establishing a police state, they had, however, been unable to destroy the decades-long passive resistance of religious movements. Fiercely opposed by Ben Ali in Tunisia, forced into servitude under the Mubarak regime in Egypt, subject to bloody repression during the reign of Gaddafi in Libya or Assad – father and son – in Syria, Islamist movements have long been prime targets of authoritarian republics that had imposed a form of secularism by force. Indeed, let us recall that the powers that had emerged in the post-colonial era of the 1950s and 60s, marked by the advent of Arab nationalism – the “*Ummah Arabiya*” (Arab Community) as opposed to the “*Ummah Islamiya*” (Islamic Community) –, had built all their legitimacy, both in the eyes of the West and among their own populations, by presenting

themselves as ramparts against the rise of radical Islamism.

Yet the successive defeats of the Arab regimes in conflicts with Israel (1948, 1967 and 1973) led Egypt and Jordan in particular to cease all forms of direct military confrontation with the Hebrew State by endorsing peace agreements that have greatly weakened their legitimacy in the eyes of the “Arab streets,” remaining sensitive to the Palestinian cause. This unifying, emotionally-charged trump card was recovered by the Islamist movement, contributing to further discredit dictators in the region, accused of giving up the struggle against Israel and of complicity with “American imperialism.”

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This new climate emerging in the late 1970s allowed Islamist parties, and primarily the Muslim Brotherhood, to increase their popularity among the population, presenting themselves once again as the only alternative to regimes designated in radical Islamist doctrine as “the near enemy,” in parallel to “the distant enemy,” a term reserved for America and its allies. Note also that at the regional level, this ideological shift within the Arab world coincided with the Islamic revolution in Iran. The irresistible rise of the Shiite ayatollah regime established by Khomeini succeeded in reappropriating itself of the mobilising theme of the struggle against Israel, thus promoting the export of its theocratic model. The rise of the Islamist Palestinian Hamas – thenceforth supported by the Tehran regime to the detriment of the Palestinian Authority, embodied by Yasser Arafat, who was the expression of Arab nationalism that was losing ground in the Israeli-Arab conflict – is certainly one of the most iconic illustrations of this paradigm shift in the Arab world, which would gradually pave the way for Islamist movements.

Thus, for decades of brutal repression, the Islamists managed to maintain a capacity for mobilising the population as well as a perfectly structured hierarchy

using mosques and “Friday sermons” which allowed them to sustain real networks, in particular through charitable organisations, and thus perpetuate their existence as political-religious movements. It is also this same organisational ability that led Islamist parties to victory at legislative elections following the Arab Spring. For the millions of Muslims who turned out to vote in Tunis, Cairo and Rabat, these movements – which are far from being uniform, as we will see below, but whose common point is the religious factor as a main unifying force – have embodied the only immediate alternative in the Arab world since then, which will undoubtedly need to build a third track in the longer term. In addition, the extremely high illiteracy rate in certain countries of the region, particularly Egypt, undoubtedly contributed to the overwhelming vote in favour of Islamists and its more radical branches embodied by Salafism.

The “green landslide” consecrating the rise to power of the Islamists was apparently only the confirmation of a long-term predominance that authoritarian regimes had disguised through censorship of the political arena. Evidence of this is a survey taken in early 2010, that is, several months before the onset of the protests, by the NGO *Pew Research Center*, which indicated that an overwhelming majority of people in the MENA region declared themselves favourable to a preponderant position for Islam in the public political sphere. This electoral victory is a sort of “premium for the oppressed” of the former regimes, in benefit of those who probably suffered the most during the many years of bloody repression. More prevalent in rural areas than the secular parties emerging from the urbanised elite, the anchorage of Islamists among the working class has proven a determining factor that was underestimated by observers.

### **Radical Islamism versus “Realislamism”: the Apology of the Turkish Model**

To speak of a single political Islam emerging from the “Arab tsunami,” whose aftershocks are still being felt in the arenas of the transition that is underway, would consist of denying the specificities of each of the societies in the Arab-Muslim region, from the Maghreb to the Arabian-Persian Gulf, not to mention the Near or Middle East. Although they share a certain moral conservatism, Islamist parties can be divided into two major trends today: the more moderate Muslim Brotherhood, and to their right, the

Salafists, who advocate a rigorous Sunni Islam doctrine. While it seems perfectly legitimate to draw a distinction between these two trends, one must however emphasise that their political border remains porous at times. Like the parties – both left and right-wing – in European politics, who may have to flirt with more extreme factions for electoral reasons, the Muslim Brotherhood is sometimes forced to endorse certain Salafist discourse due to their high popularity among the lower classes, as is particularly the case in Egypt.

Emerging from the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), the pan-Islamist organisation established in Egypt at the beginning of the 20th century before spreading to the rest of the Arab world, the category of moderate Islamist party presently constitutes the main, dominant force on the new political stage emerging from the Arab Spring uprisings. These movements, represented by Ennahda in Tunisia, the Justice and Development Party (PJD) in Morocco and the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) in Egypt, have all chosen the Turkish AKP model, borrowing terms referring to the notions of “development”, “justice” and “freedom” for their names. Moreover, everything would lead to believe that these same movements will rise to power in Libya, and even in Syria, should the uprising against Bashar al-Assad’s Alawi regime be successful.

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The ensemble of these moderate Islamist parties have chosen to follow the democratic model and the principle of plurality in the political sphere. Such an orientation is also related to the fact that in many cases, they won recent legislative elections only by a small margin, requiring them to coexist with other liberal, secular and/or progressive parties. Moreover, they are in favour of economic liberalism, demon-

strating a certain capacity to compromise insofar as respect for religious dogma with a view to the requirements of good economic governance, which takes the form of “Realislamism” at a time when these countries need to recover from several months of protests that have paralysed and ruined their economy.

Thus, in the face of economic realities, the different Muslim Brotherhoods cannot switch to a form of radicalism that would devastate tourism (establishment of a “morality police,” prohibition of the sale of alcohol, etc.) or a great many other service sectors requiring the full integration of women into the labour market (banking, finance, retail and so on). At present, political Islam is well aware that it will have to make many concessions to meet the demands of good economic governance.

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On the geostrategic level, the evolution of the “post-Arab Spring” Islamist movement is accompanied by a strategic reversal effected by the United States in the wake of the major geopolitical changes arising from this regional “tsunami.” Indeed, though the Europeans remain sceptical with regard to the preponderance of Islamist parties, the latter are becoming Washington’s new partners in the region. For decades on end, American diplomacy, backed by Western governments, had endorsed secular authoritarian regimes in the Arab world, considering them an invaluable defence against the “Islamic threat.” But in the face of the increasingly challenged legitimacy of these autocrats who eventually monopolised all of the wealth of their countries, the United States has now chosen to change partners in moving towards Islamist parties, whose pragmatism has led the US Administration to “demonise” political Islam.

Qatar’s role is thus a key element in the relationship between the Islamic powers emerging from the Arab Spring and the Western camp in general. The

tiny yet wealthy oil emirate has largely financed the electoral campaigns of these Muslim Brotherhood-related movements, undoubtedly contributing to their success. Responsible for “taming” them and orienting them towards an Islamism open to economic liberalism and devoid of any anti-Western ideology, Qatar seeks to establish itself as a new centre of 21st-century Islamism at the expense of Saudi Arabia. Yet in this terrain, the Emirate comes into direct competition with the powerful Wahhabi kingdom, which in turn favours financing the more radical Salafist movements emerging from the lower classes.

For, to the right of the Muslim Brotherhood movements, the Salafist parties, although a minority force, still wish to assert their presence and steal “market shares” from these new Islamist powers accused of “complacency” vis-à-vis the West. This is evinced by the Salafists’ surprising electoral results in Egypt, where they had made the unprecedented choice of joining the game of the polls, an attitude that contrasts with years of boycotting the formal political arena whose legitimacy they had never acknowledged. Advocating the introduction of Sharia – i.e. Islamic law as the sole mode of governance – the Salafists differ from other parties in their more belligerent discourse against the West and by violent action, as was the case in Tunisia when they stormed a television station last October to protest against the broadcasting of the film “Persepolis.”

For moderate Islamist parties, anxious to reassure their international partners, their ability to neutralise Salafist ideology will primarily depend on their temptation to flirt with these extremes in order to recover the part of their constituency that has been “led astray.” For only economic development and social progress can free Arab-Muslim societies of the most radical ideologies.

### Islamist Movements Will Not Govern Alone

Though the Arab Springs have led to the emergence of a transnational Islamist dynamic comprised by parties sharing a common ideology and the experience of repression in the era of the dictatorships, our analytical framework in this phase of democratic transition must certainly take into account the particularities and local issues, which differ from one country to another. The re-

sult of varying national experiences, Islamist movements have evolved in distinct political circumstances and particular contexts. In other words, the Islamist rise to power after the wave of protests is far from homogeneous, since these parties must currently interact with other players, election results not always resulting in a clear-cut majority.

Hence, after the Tunisian legislative elections of October 2011, the Ennahda party was compelled to make an alliance and share power with the two main left-wing parties, Congress for the Republic (CPR), led by Moncef Marzouki – elected President of the Republic – and the Ettakatol party headed by Mustapha Ben Jaafar, appointed leader of Parliament. Moreover, pressure from its partners and the continuation of the street demonstrations in Tunisia have forced Ennahda to abandon its plans for an Islamic Constitution.

In Morocco, despite the clear victory of the PJD led by Benkirane, the Islamists must govern within a monarchic system in which the major decisions are not made in Parliament but at the Royal Palace. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood must coexist with the military institution that continues to hold the country's reins. And finally, in Libya's National Transitional Council (NTC), there is tension between Islamists and secularists, foreshadowing a future coexistence of these two main camps.

The same is true on the economic level. For in contrast to the Turkish AKP, with which it claims similarities and which has its roots in the provincial merchant middle class, the Muslim Brotherhood parties have very little anchorage in the capitalist classes, who most often have ties to the former regimes. In order to ensure good economic governance, an element crucial for the continuity of their power, Islam-

ists must make allies among business stakeholders, though the latter are far from subscribing to their ideas.

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Finally, today, in an Arab world still fully undergoing change, it seems difficult to judge parties that are continually evolving at high speed. The latter were elected by a majority of voters, not only for religious reasons, but also for their promises to break with the modes of governance of the ousted dictatorships. Hence, if they drifted into radicalism, compromising individual liberties, women's emancipation or political and religious pluralism, the Islamists would run the risk of being considered a dictatorial power themselves, which would again be sanctioned by demonstrators or at the polls. Meanwhile, after several decades of deadlock in the political arena, secular parties will certainly need to become more structured, thus serving as a more efficient alternative in issues of a socio-economic order, which remain a priority for the entire population of the Arab world. Some already consider that the failure of the Islamists in bringing about economic recovery in Egypt and Tunisia signals their political defeat. Though it has long experience in the ranks of the opposition, political Islam remains a novice in the exercise of power.