The Role of Political Islam

Arab scholarly circles have become much more interested in the future of political Islam and the role it plays in current events since the Arab Spring began. That is evident from the growing number of forums and meetings and the heated arguments in the blogger space.

Recently, 22 representatives of the Islamist movement and 30 experts and political analysts from many Arab countries came together in Doha for the symposium “Islamists and Democratic Governance: Experiments and Trends.”

Its agenda dealt with the attitude of Islamists towards democracy and their governing experience, particularly in coalition with other forces in a number of countries. Discussions addressed political Islamist movements — the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafists, etc. — and how they are evolving.

Rashid Ghannouchi, leader of the Tunisian Ennahda Movement stressed that the Islamist movement is a collection of schools and ideas. The voices of some Islamists who call democracy “godless” and others who consider it a “heresy” are still being heard in it. Ghannouchi, however, believes that a wide range of Islamists are comfortable with democracy. Once in power, they can employ some of its procedural tools without relying on the philosophy of secularism.

Addressing the relationship between religion and democratic principles, Azmi Bishara, director of the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (the event’s organizer), said that the former is largely a matter of spirituality and faith, and the latter concerns politics and the system of rule. He urged Islamists, like others involved in the events, to join the democratic transformation of Arab countries and combine their spiritual and practical actions with the ideas and tenets of democracy.

The speakers paid particular attention to the growing dynamism of the Islamist camp, Salafis in particular. They noted that as life under political Islam becomes more liberalized, Salafist movements adapt in an effort to adjust to changing realities. In defending their interests, they sometimes clash with their rivals for political reasons, not ideological.

Hamas Politburo chief Khalid Meshaal warned against polarization of societies along Sunni-Shiite lines.

Several scholars urged the Islamist movement to rise to a new level of spiritual development and practice. They said
that Islamists to some extent are still provoking fear in some circles and among the general public, especially among
the cultural elite of the Arab world.

Therefore, Islamist movements need to show greater openness towards other movements. They need to open their
doors wider for dialogue with those they differ from, those they term the forces of secularism or laicism in the Arab
world.

Attendees at the Doha symposium supported the need to build bridges and hold a dialogue between the academic
community and practicing politicians working in political Islam. That is important because there is a variety of
opinions and assessments concerning the future of various political Islamic movements in the Arab world.

That was particularly evident at the symposium “Challenges and Threats posed by the Muslim Brotherhood to UAE
and Countries of the Region,” hosted by the Dubai-based Al Mezmaah Studies and Research Center. Its attendees
addressed the organization’s stages of development and working methods, and its declared and real objectives.

They believe it has demonstrated that it is striving to take over governments. According to Dr. Ali bin Tamim, chief
director of the Emirati 24 online news portal, the Muslim Brotherhood has surrounded itself with “a halo of sacredness
and exclusivity,” and it presents itself as the movement most worthy of leading others. They are particularly
resourceful at concealing their religious convictions in order to penetrate Arab societies.

The symposium’s attendees stressed that the Muslim Brotherhood remain a “constant danger” to various countries
and peoples in the region.

Discussing the history of actions taken by members of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Gulf, Qanan Al Ghamdi, former
chief editor of the Saudi daily Asharq Al Awasat, said that in the past they have fled their own countries with
authoritarian regimes and found refuge in the Kingdom and in neighboring countries. Some of them have come to
occupy important positions in the ministry of education and in the education system, and they have been involved in
drafting various educational programs. They established cells that subsequently became incubators for a variety of
extremist organizations, including al-Sahwa and al-Qaeda, among others.

Al-Ghamdi urged the countries of the Gulf to exercise vigilance regarding the actions and propaganda of the Muslim
Brotherhood, especially among young people. He said it is necessary to involve mosques, the media and other
channels. In supporting reforms, the Gulf states were urged to move forward in support of freedom and justice
consistent with the demands of the 21st century and modern progress.2

Attendees at the symposium “Arab Revolutions: Truth or Fantasy,” which was held in Algeria, concluded that the
Arab Spring is turning into the “Islamic Winter.”3 They believe that the revolutions in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya
turned out to be the opposite of what was expected. Its results were negative, as exemplified by the situation with
human rights and, especially, women’s rights, which suffered a setback.

The overthrow of Muammar Gadhafi gave impetus to the emergence and dispersion of members of radical groups
like Ansar al-Sharia and dozens of other Islamist extremist groups, and it resulted in the spread of abandoned
weapons from Libya into neighboring countries. The central government in Mali lost control of part of the country
due to actions by Islamist extremists who were inspired by what happened in Libya.

Scholars and political analysts of the region who participated in the symposia noted that although the Islamists in
Algeria were defeated in the 2012 parliamentary elections, the country is not immune to Islamic extremism.

Academic circles are gaining a better understanding of the part played by Islamists in the Arab Spring against the
backdrop of media liberalization and the lifting of existing bans in several Middle Eastern countries.

A watershed is occurring in the debate at scientific symposia and meetings and in the blogger space between non-
Islamist Arab scholars and those who share the ideas of political Islam, and also within the Islamist camp itself,
among its various movements and trends.

The prominent Egyptian publicist and political analyst Kemal Gabriel believes that the people who took to the streets
during the Arab Spring knew what they were rejecting and wanted change. But they had no clear idea of how to
achieve what they wanted. It is hard for people to recognize disease viruses lurking in their own culture, customs
and traditions that are responsible for making them a captive of the generation against which they rebelled.

Therefore, the region’s scientific and cultural elite still has many questions to answer.4
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1 http://www.dohainstitute.org/release/16a2062b-ec03-437a-8158-0e7c83105983
2 http://www.middle-east-online.com/?id=149969
3 http://magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/ar/features/awi/reportage/2013/01/11/reportage-0
4 http://www.elaph.com/Web/opinion/2012/11/774551.html