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Islamists in Politics:
The Dynamics of Participation

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Contents

Summary

Islamist parties and movements in Arab countries that have strategically chosen to participate in the legal political process, acknowledging the legitimacy of the existing constitutional framework, have gained great political importance. Their participation raises two major questions: are they truly committed to democracy? And will participation have a positive, moderating influence on their positions, pushing them to focus on public policy platforms rather than ideological debates?

The experience of participating Islamist parties and movements in Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Bahrain, and Yemen as well as the armed parties in Lebanon and Palestine, reveals a complex picture. Each movement's commitment to democracy is ultimately determined by the balance of power between reformers and hard-liners in the leadership and the pressures from constituents. In turn, such balance of power is affected by the political conditions in the country, above all whether Islamist parties and movements are allowed to participate in pluralist politics in a sustained way.

Introduction

Islamist political parties and movements that have made the strategic choice to participate in the legal political process of their countries are, together with the ruling establishments, the most important political actors in Arab countries. These parties and movements, to which we will refer in the rest of the paper as participating Islamists, are also extremely complex. This is because they are undergoing constant transformation in response to internal power struggles and to shifts in the manner in which they are allowed to participate.

The conclusions of this paper are based mainly on an examination of participating Islamist parties in Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Yemen. The paper also discusses briefly political participation by armed Islamist parties in Lebanon and Palestine. With the notable exception of al-Wefaq Society in Bahrain, all participating parties or movements derive their ideas from and are loosely affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. This is not accidental. It is the parties that are rooted in the thinking of the Muslim Brotherhood that over the years have undergone the ideological transformation that justifies their participation in the legal politics of their respective countries. First, they have accepted the legitimacy of the individual modern Arab states; thus they are implicitly renouncing, or at least pushing back to an undetermined future, the goal of creating an Islamic state representing the entire Muslim community, the *umma*. Second, they have accepted the idea that participation in the political space available in their countries is an acceptable means of fighting for their goals. And third, they have accepted, albeit with hesitation and resistance by many, that in order to participate they have to accept the right to participation of parties and movements with different ideological commitments and goals. Sunni organizations that do not derive from the Muslim Brotherhood have not undergone a similar transformation. Except in Kuwait and Bahrain, Salafi groups remain aloof from political participation; they focus instead primarily on *da`wa* (proselytizing) activities and to a lesser degree on social service provision.

The political participation of Islamist parties and movements has given rise to two major concerns both in the Arab world and in the West. The first is whether these participating Islamists are truly democratic. The second is whether participation itself would consolidate their commitment to democratic norms

and procedures. The questions of course could and should be asked of any other Arab political party: beginning with the ruling parties or, more generally, with any political party that enters the political fray in countries where democracy is not a consolidated political system. It could even be asked about some parties in consolidated democracies. Nevertheless, it is an important question to ask of Islamists, for whom acceptance of democracy entails ideological conundrums, not just strategic decisions.

Questions about the participating Islamists' commitment to democracy and about the impact that participation will have on them are also particularly important because these parties and movements are major political players in Arab politics now and will remain so for the foreseeable future. They carry weight because their message resonates well with populations that are both deeply religious and socially conservative, but also because for decades they have made a systematic investment in organization and constituency-building that greatly surpasses that of liberal and leftist opposition movements. Furthermore, the political structures of Islamists are underpinned by religious and charitable organizations as well as social service providing agencies that have been instrumental in creating and sustaining networks of Islamist activists and sympathizers.

Questions about the democratic credentials of participating Islamists have been heightened by the assumption, largely unfounded, that Islamist parties and movements would be likely to sweep elections if they were allowed to participate freely. According to this view, the likelihood of electoral victories makes these parties truly dangerous, because once in power they could abrogate the democratic system and impose a theocracy. The idea has a lot of currency in the Arab world, and it is deliberately promoted by governments that want to contain Islamist parties and movements and to rally the secular opposition to their side against them. In reality, election returns suggest that participating Islamists, far from winning sweeping victories, are struggling at present to maintain even the modest gains they made earlier. Recent elections in Morocco, Jordan, and Kuwait have seen Islamists lose ground in legislative councils and among their electoral constituencies; thus these are triggering internal debates about the costs and benefits of participation in legal politics. It is true that some of the elections we refer to here were far from free and that Islamists might have done somewhat better in a more open contestation. Nevertheless the downward trend revealed by recent elections does not support the assumption that Islamists could easily sweep to landslide victories.

There has been only one country where Islamists were poised to win an election, if the process had been allowed to continue, that of Algeria in 1991; and there has been one case of an Islamist electoral victory, that of Hamas in Palestine in 2006. Both elections took place under exceptional circumstances. Algeria had been dominated by Front of National Liberation (FLN) since independence in 1962. That party was widely seen as corrupt and incapable of delivering, and other opposition forces were in disarray. Voters determined to

be rid of the FLN had little choice but to vote for the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS). And in the 2006 elections in Palestine, Hamas won, but just barely, also against a ruling party perceived as corrupt and incapable of reforming itself and in the absence of other serious contenders. There is no evidence at this point that in more normal situations, for example in Morocco and Kuwait where an array of active political parties with different orientations exists, Islamist parties can command strategic majorities or win landslide victories.

Are Islamic Parties Committed to Democracy?

Reams have been written on the issue of whether Islam is compatible with democracy. This is a futile question because the answer depends on how the fundamental principles of Islam are interpreted, and by whom. The real question is whether political parties and movements that call themselves Islamist—and in some cases campaign with slogans such as "Islam is the solution" or "The Koran is our constitution"—can accept democracy completely, either ideologically or strategically.

The Ideological Conundrum

On the ideological level, there is a fundamental tension in Islamist parties and movements between the notion that law must be based on God's word, thus conform to Islamic law or Sharia, and the idea that in a democratic political system laws are made on the basis of majority rule by parliaments freely elected by people. A party cannot call itself Islamist and cannot retain the support of devoutly Muslim followers if it renounces Sharia as the basis of legislation. Most Arab constitutions tip-toe around the issue by stating at least that Sharia is a source, rather than the source, of legislation. At the same time a party cannot call itself democratic, struggle to elect its candidates to parliament, and push together with other members of the opposition for a more open political system without accepting the logic of pluralism and recognizing majority rule as binding. The tension between the Islamist and the democratic view has not been resolved completely by any one party or movement. The result is that the political thought of participating Islamists contains a number of gray zones; and a constant ideological and political struggle continues within all parties and movements between hard-liners, who are constantly trying to expand the space assigned to the Sharia in the legal and judicial systems of their respective countries, and moderates, who favor a more liberal interpretation of what a state based on Sharia means.

The struggle between tendencies and interpretations is real, and this is what creates the difficulty in answering the question whether any Islamist party or movement is committed to democracy. There is no doubt that there are individuals among all participating Islamists, including in high leadership positions, whose acceptance of democracy is genuine and who believe that it does

not need to clash with religious ideas and ideals. There is no doubt, either, that this is not true of all leaders and members of Islamist parties and movements. Whether any Islamist actor is and above all will remain committed to democracy depends on the outcome of internal power struggles—each one deeply influenced by the political environment in which Islamists operate.

However, evidence does not support the idea that the choice of political participation by Islamist parties and movements is simply a ruse: a plan to exploit the potential of the democratic process to reach positions of power and then immediately abolish the democratic process altogether and impose a theocratic state. It is true that this was in part the thinking within the FIS in Algeria, which was dominated by a Salafi leadership that considered the modern Algerian state—not just its government—as illegitimate, and did not hide its intention to set up a religious state instead. But this does not appear to have been the case with Hamas, which participated in the elections without any expectation of winning. Nor is it the case for the Party of Justice and Development (PJD) in Morocco that competes under an election law guaranteeing that no party can win a majority of seats, and thus it knows full-well that its participation cannot lead to a change in the nature of the state. In fact the PJD alongside most participating Islamists either have never opted to establish a religious state or dropped it as an objective in the context of participation in legal politics. Not only do most Islamist parties and movements participate without assuming they can win, but many even deliberately refrain from fielding a large number of candidates in national and local elections, so governments will not feel threatened.

Ideologically, participating Islamists do not have problems accepting the mechanics of democracy: the election of leaders, the limits imposed on the executive by the parliament and the judiciary, and even the idea that leaders can be replaced in new elections. And participating Islamist parties and movements, it is worth repeating, have de facto accepted the legitimacy of the modern nation-state. This is an issue that does not receive as much attention in the West as it deserves. Acceptance of the modern nation-state draws a sharp line between participating Islamists and radical groups. The latter still focus on the Islamic community as a whole; they consider modern states, not just their governments, as illegitimate; and they want, at least in theory, to revive the caliphate. Paradoxically, while radicals' statements about reviving the caliphate receive much attention and create much alarm—although the chances that it will happen are about as good as those of the revival of the Holy Roman Empire—the large scale embrace of the nation-state by participating Islamists tends to go unnoticed.

But even participating Islamist parties and movements that do not question the political mechanics of democratic systems and the legitimacy of the nation-state have problems accepting fully all values that are associated with democracy in the West. Furthermore, even when they do not contest basic concepts such as those of human rights and women's rights, their interpretations are more in line

with what was common in the West in the first half of the twentieth century than with contemporary views.

The more important problems are those emanating from a clash of Islamist and democratic principles rather than from the social conservatism of most participating Islamists. In particular, Islamist parties and movements in the Arab world still struggle with the separation of religion and politics, thus with the place of Sharia in the legal system. They accept the idea of political pluralism, but are fighting over its limits; they do not dispute that the principle of universal citizenship is crucial to democracy, but in practice are divided about equality between Muslim and non-Muslim citizens and between men and women.

In addition, participating Islamists show some ambiguities that do not stem from their dual character as religious/political movements but from their views on the politics of the region. For example, they reject the use of violence in the political process, but have trouble rejecting in principle the use of violence when it comes to the Palestinian cause. This is true even for Islamists that are not armed and could not use violence even if they decided to.

At the center of the ambiguities that remain in the ideas and values embraced by participating Islamists is their dual nature as both religious and political actors. As religious actors, they must accept the primacy of Sharia over that of laws enacted by parliaments and have to base their electoral programs and public policy prescriptions on religious views. As political actors, they need flexibility. Some parties and movements are addressing the problem by replacing the idea of strict adherence to Sharia with the requirement that laws and policies be compatible with an Islamic frame of reference (*marji`ya*). Thus, the PJD in Morocco argues that it must accept laws that fall within an Islamic frame of reference and have been approved democratically, even if they do not conform strictly to Sharia. On that basis, the PJD accepted in 2004 a reform of the personal status code. This flexibility, crucial to the PJD's ability to function as a normal party in parliament, is not accepted readily by all its followers.

Political as well as ideological considerations influence the way in which participating Islamists deal with the inherent conflict of their identity as both political and religious actors. Most parties and movements try to overcome the problem by setting up a political party separate from the religious movement, so the religious movement can continue to deal with absolute values while the party plunges into the pragmatic world of political compromise. In Morocco, Algeria, Jordan, Yemen, Bahrain, and Kuwait there are now Islamic parties (or political societies in the latter two) separate from the religious movements. In the case of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, setting up a political party has never been a realistic alternative due to the Egyptian government's constant refusal to legalize the Brotherhood, which remains a banned organization.

Separating the religious and political components helps Islamist parties and movements to some extent, but it is not enough because the party can lose the support of members of the religious movement if it strays too far. Worse,

members' allegiance can be transferred to other religious movements that do not dirty their hands with political participation. This is a serious problem for the PJD in Morocco. The PJD is affiliated with a religious movement called al-Tahwid wal Islah (unity and reform). As a religious movement, al-Tawhid competes with another religious movement, al-Adl wal Ihsan (justice and charity), estimated to have a much larger popular base. Politically, the PJD has no competition; the rival religious movement al-Adl wal Ihsan does not recognize the legitimacy of the Moroccan state and monarchy and stays aloof from politics; other participating Islamist parties (such as the Party for the Civilizational Alternative) are marginal at best. The dilemma of the PJD is that if it remains close to its religious roots, it can keep the support of al-Tawhid members and even receive votes from members of al Adl, although the leadership of the group encourages them not to participate. But if the PJD strays too far from doctrine to gain political respectability with a broader public and makes the political compromises any party with parliamentary representation must accept, it will not get support from al-Adl members. In fact, it may even see some of its own turn to the more principled religious movements that boycott politics.

Acceptance of political pluralism is another issue with which even participating Islamist parties and movements continue to struggle. As late as the 1980s, Islamists upheld a model of politics and society different from the Western one. They rejected the notion of individual rights and emphasized the primacy of communal rights. Like all movements that put the community ahead of the individual, they thus rejected pluralism and put forward a notion of politics and society aimed at making their interpretation of Islam binding for everyone. Many among the participating Islamists rejected the legitimacy of secular forces and were rather intolerant of opposing views. During the 1990s, participating parties and movements re-evaluated their position. They gradually reached out to the secular opposition, and some of them even tried their hand at building cross-ideological alliances against repressive regimes. This meant that Islamists had to recognize the legitimacy of secular actors and to fashion a more tolerant rhetoric on secular views of politics and society. As part of the new stance, Islamists embraced the terminology of democratic politics, including the language of pluralism.

The issue remains fraught with complexities, however. It is difficult for a religion-based party or movement to recognize the legitimacy of all points of view. Throughout the last two decades, participating Islamists have gone a long way in accepting the diversity of views in the political arena. But with regard to moral, social, and cultural issues, they still lag behind. The difficulty is one familiar to all situations where actors operating with a clear ideological or religious outlook—Christian Democratic parties, socialist and communist parties—have entered pluralistic political systems. The pluralism issue is usually not resolved once and for all in theory. Rather, it is resolved in practice by the balance of political forces: ideological parties accept pluralism when they are

not strong enough to impose their beliefs but are likely to become more intolerant when they can impose their way.

The question asked at the beginning of this section—whether participating Islamists are truly committed to democracy—cannot be answered with a clear yes. There is no doubt that the political parties and movements that have chosen to participate in the legal political process have come a long way from positions most Islamists occupied in the past. Nevertheless, participating Islamists still find it hard to reconcile beliefs rooted in Islam with commitment to democracy, thus to participate while remaining faithful to their religious roots. All participating parties and movements are divided on these issues. The existence of the divisions within the leadership, as well as the fear of losing supporters to other more conservative religious organizations, create the ambiguities—the gray zones—in the thinking of Islamists mentioned earlier.

As a result, the thinking of participating Islamist parties and movements remains in flux, depending on the prevailing of different factions. The internal struggle for power, in turn, is influenced by external factors. The most important is the conditions under which Islamists participate politically in their own countries.

Tactical Dilemmas

Even Islamist parties and movements in the Arab world that have bitten the ideological bullet initially and decided to participate in the legal political process are forced for tactical reasons to re-examine their commitment periodically. They operate in countries where the government itself is not truly committed to democracy but uses every possible expedient to ensure that the opposition cannot prevail. Like all other opposition parties, participating Islamists thus have to decide whether they will take part in an election even if the playing field is decidedly slanted; and they must judge when the slant has become such that electoral contestation is no longer a viable option. The problem is compounded for Islamists because governments are more fearful of them than of liberal and leftist opponents, and thus often throw additional obstacles in their way.

The decision to participate in a specific election involves tactical considerations. By participating under conditions that ensure poor results, Islamist parties and movements risk undermining their standing because results will project an image of weakness. They also risk alienating further those supporters who are already skeptical about participation on ideological grounds and who find in the obstacles further proof that participation is a losing strategy. On the other hand, by participating despite the obstacles put in their way, Islamists can show they are truly committed to democratic procedures and processes, and that they are not just fair-weather democrats who only play when they can win. The refusal by Islamists to participate in a specific election also has complex effects: it reassures those followers who are critical of participation, but it confuses the rest. It also opens the parties or movements to accusations that they

are not truly committed to democracy; governments are particularly prone to make such accusations. Furthermore, boycotting elections condemns Islamists to powerlessness: a party that has renounced violence but refuses to take part in the political process has no means to exercise direct political influence.

The example of Jordan's Islamic Action Front (IAF) is illustrative of the dilemmas facing Islamist parties. The IAF was formed in 1992 in response to a new, more liberal political party law and for the specific purpose of competing in the fall 1993 elections. The late King Hussein immediately changed the rules of the political game by pushing through an amendment to the electoral law that favored the conservative tribal element and put the IAF at a disadvantage. In 1997, the IAF joined with other opposition parties to demand a change in the electoral law. It threatened a boycott if the law was not amended and made good on the threat when it was not. In 2003, it again reversed its position, realizing that it would achieve nothing by sitting on the sidelines. Thus, it participated although the playing field remained slanted. In 2007 the IAF, faced with a new wave of government imposed restrictions on its electoral participation, boycotted the municipal elections in July before fielding candidates in the parliamentary elections in November; but it won only six seats, down from seventeen in 2003.

The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt has faced similar dilemmas. The problem is complicated in its case by the fact that Egyptian laws ban the Brotherhood; therefore it cannot participate in elections as a movement, but it must either negotiate with legal political parties and run its own candidates under their banner or field its candidates as independent. The record is telling. The Muslim Brotherhood participated in the 1984 elections in alliance with the liberal Wafd Party, winning a modest six seats. It participated again in 1987 as part of an alliance with the Socialist Labor Party, and 37 of its members were elected to parliament. The government responded with additional restrictive legal measures; as a result in 1990, the Brotherhood boycotted the election alongside other opposition parties. In 1995, the Muslim Brotherhood again changed tactics and participated by fielding independent candidates. Although the government cracked down on the movement with a heavy hand, the Brotherhood managed to get one member in parliament. In 2000, the Muslim Brotherhood again participated, and seventeen of its members (running as independents) were elected. In 2005, the Brotherhood made an all-out effort and scored a major victory when its independent candidates won 88 seats or 20 percent of the total for the Egyptian People's Assembly (lower chamber of the parliament), becoming the largest opposition bloc in a half century. But in the 2007 elections for the Shura Council (upper chamber of the parliament), in which the Muslim Brotherhood participated, a fearful government used its heavy hand to prevent Brotherhood candidates from winning any seats. Later, in the 2008 municipal elections, the government refused to register almost all Muslim Brotherhood candidates and also unleashed a wave of arrests. This caused the movement to boycott the elections at the last moment.

Another tactical dilemma faced by participating Islamists concerns the number of candidates they should present for elections. Like all parties, Islamists would like to win as many seats as possible. Unlike most parties, however, they cannot afford to win too many seats—and even less afford to win the elections, for fear that the government will take drastic action against them. Algeria in 1991 and Palestine in 2006 provide cautionary examples of what can happen when Islamists are too successful. In Algeria, the predicted victory of the FIS led to the cancellation of elections and a military takeover. In Palestine, Hamas' surprise victory triggered a chain reaction of negative repercussions culminating in an ongoing confrontation between Fatah and Hamas. As a result, participating Islamists have become quite cautious, deliberately limiting the number of candidates. For example, in Jordan the IAF presented only 36 candidates for 80 parliamentary seats in 1993, 30 for 110 seats in 2003, and 22 for 110 seats in 2007. In Morocco, the PJD in 2002 only ran candidates in just over half of the 91 election districts before fielding candidates in 94 districts out of 95 in the 2007 elections. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in the 2005 parliamentary elections also limited the number of its candidates. It ran independent candidates in 144 out of 444 districts. In the Shura Council elections in 2007, the Brotherhood competed but fielded only nineteen candidates for 88 seats. It is not clear that such self-imposed limits by Islamist parties and movements in fact have the desired effect of calming fears of a possible Islamist takeover. Their adversaries are sophisticated enough to look not only at the total number of seats won by Islamists but also at the percentage of victories in those districts where they presented candidates. As a result, the self-restraint can increase fears rather than cause them to abate because parties and movements that run only a limited number of candidates for obvious reasons choose the districts where they have the best chances of winning. They thus end up winning in a significantly higher percentage of districts than they probably would if they competed everywhere. Indeed, the fact that the IAF, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the PJD exercised self-restraint in the past did not keep the respective governments from increasing obstacles to their participation in subsequent elections. As a result, the Moroccan PJD did not limit the number of its candidates in the last parliamentary elections in 2007. It fielded candidates in 94 out of 95 electoral districts. However, its gains were minimal: it added only four seats to its parliamentary bloc, raising the total number to 46 as opposed to 42 in the 2002–2007 parliament.

Impact of Participation

There has been much speculation about the impact of participation on Islamist parties and movements. Would they be forced to moderate their positions and become less ideological and more pragmatic—read less religious—if they were allowed to participate? Would they be forced to accept the logic of pluralistic politics and thus the necessity to form alliances across the ideological spectrum

and to reach compromises? Or, conversely, would they become even more doctrinaire and intolerant in order to reassure their hardcore constituency that they are not betraying their beliefs but remain truly committed to Islam even after entering the world of pluralistic politics?

An examination of the participating Islamist parties and movements in the seven countries that are at the core of our discussion shows evidence of both outcomes. In some countries, participation leads to moderation; in others it does not. Furthermore, movements in the same country can switch back and forth between more moderate and more hard-line positions. The outcome, evidence suggests, depends to a large extent on the political environment and on the conditions under which Islamists participate. Briefly, the more "normal" the conditions are under which an Islamist actor participates, the more likely it is that the reformists will prevail in the leadership, the more flexible and willing to compromise the party or movement will become, and the more it will focus on the nuts-and-bolts issues on which parliaments make decisions and issue laws—more narrow, specific public policy issues rather than broad questions with far-reaching ideological implications. The other side of the coin, however, is that parties and movements that show a great deal of flexibility and pragmatism are also likely to lose support in the later elections; this can lead the pendulum to swing back. Islamists whose participation is constantly hampered by the government and whose leaders and members are thrown in jail are more likely to revert to hard-line positions and continue to be preoccupied with broad ideological issues. Participation of Islamist parties and movements with an armed wing constitutes a different case altogether.

The environment is so important not only because it can provide incentives or erect obstacles to participation but also because most Islamist parties and movements are quite divided internally. Thus, external circumstances easily alter the internal balance of power between reformist and hard-line factions. The internal shift that led many Islamists to choose participation in legal politics as a strategy was not uncontested. In the majority of participating Islamist organizations, a part of the leadership remained skeptical about the value of participation; they feared that it would lead them to make excessive concessions and thus to dilute their religious identities without achieving concrete results. These skeptical voices are usually more silent when Islamist parties and movements are successful, with elections leading to increased presence in the parliament and expanded space for their activism. Poor election returns or increases in government repression tend to have the opposite effect, strengthening the hand of those who question the value of participation. Furthermore, external events can also have a major impact.

Participation Under "Normal" Conditions

In the context of Arab countries, participation under normal conditions does not mean participation under democratic conditions. Kings govern as well as

rule. Presidents are as irremovable as kings and, increasingly, prone to found dynasties. With the exception of Kuwait, parliaments in Arab countries have limited oversight powers—and even the Kuwaiti parliament risks dissolution every time it seriously stands up to the ruling family. In many countries, independent candidates campaigning on the basis of personal and tribal ties play a more important role than political parties and movements, regardless of their ideological background. Operating under "normal conditions" thus does not mean operating under normal democratic conditions but under the same conditions that affect all opposition actors in that country. It means operating without constant threat of arrest of the leadership and members, without police disrupting meetings, and with reasonable certainty that elected candidates will be seated in parliament. Normal also implies that the Islamist party or movement will not immediately be punished for obtaining good results and that it will be allowed to participate in future elections. Such conditions prevail at present in Morocco, Algeria, Kuwait, and to a lesser extent in Bahrain.

The country with the most favorable conditions is Morocco. The PJD's participation resulted from the convergence of choices made by both the Islamists and the king. In the early 1980s, a breakaway faction of the radical Islamic Youth Movement formed a new group, originally called al-Jama`a al-Islamiyya. From the outset it aimed at becoming a recognized, legitimate participant in Moroccan politics. The group went through successive reorganizations and name changes but never deviated from the goal of political participation. In 1997 then King Hassan, intent on opening up the political system sufficiently to ensure a smooth succession for his son, allowed the Islamists to take over a weak existing party and to participate in elections in that guise. Eventually, the party became the PJD. The party played its hand skillfully, careful not to frighten the ruling establishment by winning too many seats initially. The new king, Muhammad VI, for his part did not reverse his father's decision to allow Islamists in the political process; nevertheless, he sought to contain them by enacting an election law engineered to prevent any party from winning a majority of parliamentary seats. At the same time, the king alongside with liberal and leftist political parties made sure that the PJD would not be included in the governing coalition or even in alliances with other parties.

In parliament the PJD worked like a normal political party, focusing on public policy prescriptions without an obvious religious agenda. It even voted in favor of the new, not exclusively Sharia-based personal status code on the grounds that it was discussed democratically and the party accepted the concept of majority rule. It tried, like other parties, to lobby for constitutional and political reform to increase the oversight powers of the parliament. In other words, it played the role of the loyal opposition in a democratic system and, in the end, it paid a price for doing so. In the parliamentary elections of 2007, in which it had expected to win at least 70 seats, it only secured 46. While still winning second place, it received fewer votes than in 2002 as disillusioned vot-

ers stayed away from the polls. In the case of the PJD, thus, participation in legal politics engendered moderation—a moderation for which the party paid in electoral votes.

Algeria's Movement for the Society of Peace (MSP) had a very similar experience. A relatively small Islamist party that embraced participation and moderation in a climate where many Islamists had chosen violent resistance, it became a partner in the governing coalition under President Abdulaziz Bouteflika. In Algeria, becoming a partner in the government coalition means accepting to be a very small cog in a machine dominated by a struggle for power between the president and the military-security establishment. In the 1997 election, the MSP won 71 seats but plummeted to 38 in the 2002 elections, having few achievements to show for its participation in the government. It recovered somewhat in the 2007 elections with 52 seats but still remained considerably below the initial success. The party maintained a moderate stance despite the setback, but it failed to achieve any success to inspire and attract voters.

In Bahrain and Kuwait the position of participating Islamist political societies—formal parties do not exist in either—is complicated by the existence of several religious groups embodying different trends and agendas. In Bahrain, a Sunni-ruled kingdom with a majority Shi'i population, al-Wefaq Society is an opposition group representing the Shi'a, while the Sunni Muslim Brothers organized in different groups support the ruling Khalifa family. The real issue in the politics of Bahrain is not the Islamization of the state but the distribution of power between Sunnis and Shi'a. In this respect, the Shi'a community is at a great disadvantage, despite its majority status. The response of al-Wefaq has been to work for coexistence and gradual reform rather than confrontation. The leadership of the group has repeatedly contributed to defusing sectarian tensions and has sought to convey its allegiance to the state. Participation has indeed been a moderating factor. However, the limited outcome of al-Wefaq's participation in politics and the continued discrimination against the Shi'i community in Bahrain have resulted in the group losing ground within the community to more confrontationist movements.

The situation in Kuwait is somewhat different. Kuwait's Islamists are even more fragmented. The best organized group is the Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM), a Muslim Brotherhood–affiliated group with moderate ideological stances. But, anomalously, Salafi movements also participate in the legal political process in Kuwait, although they refuse to do so in other countries. Despite their willingness to participate, Salafis take uncompromising positions on moral and social issues, with a clear project to expand the space sanctioned by religion in society. Salafis have spearheaded the long battle to prevent the extension of the franchise to women; they have demanded and obtained the reintroduction of gender segregation in the universities. They have also battled against the modern dress codes and westernized lifestyles favored by young people, and in the process put a lot of pressure on the ICM to embrace socially

conservative positions. While there is no evidence at this point that the ICM is rethinking its commitment to moderate political stances, it is also clear that the competition with Salafi groups is driving the ICM toward socially conservative positions.

Participation under normal conditions, therefore, appears to strengthen Islamists' determination to be part of the legal political process of their countries. Participation also forces Islamist parties and movements to focus less on ideological issues and more on the practical challenges of sustaining their constituencies. Once in parliament, Islamists are forced to focus on the issues with which parliament is seized. In a country like Kuwait, where the life of parliament revolves around moral and social issues and the relations with the ruling family, this is what Islamists also focus on. In Morocco and Algeria, where all parties are trying to display some initiative on economic issues, education, poverty, or political reform, participating Islamists also focus on those issues. In other words, normal conditions, or what can be considered normal in these countries, force Islamists to focus on the issues that consume the rest of the political class, while ideology plays a secondary role.

Participation Under "Siege" Conditions

Participating Islamists in Egypt, Jordan, and Yemen have faced particularly difficult situations. In Egypt and Jordan, where they represent the only truly organized opposition force, Islamists have been deliberate targets of government repression. In Yemen, the Islah Union has been caught in the process of state collapse as the old divisions between the North and South, tribal divisions, and a faltering economy with growing food and water shortages are beginning to overwhelm the fragile state.

The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood provides a particularly interesting case of how thwarted participation can lead to ideological regression. As discussed earlier, the Brotherhood leadership was influenced in the early part of this decade by the views of reformers who pushed for a liberal interpretation on all the issues we defined as the gray zones in the thinking of participating Islamists. In the 2005 election, the reformers' strategy of participation in legal politics appeared to pay off when the Brotherhood secured 20 percent of parliamentary seats, although it has remained a banned organization. This was the largest opposition bloc to have been present in the Egyptian parliament since 1952. The Mubarak regime perceived it as a threat to its power, particularly at a delicate time when the country was moving inevitably toward presidential succession. The regime worked to prevent the Muslim Brotherhood from scoring similar successes in the future. Using its mighty security apparatus, the regime thus started a systematic campaign of arrests of Brotherhood members and of the movement's financial supporters. It also introduced several constitutional amendments engineered to make participation by the Brotherhood more difficult. In the 2008 municipal elections it went further by rejecting all

Muslim Brotherhood candidates until the movement decided to boycott the election in protest.

The unintended consequence of the government's efforts to suppress the Muslim Brotherhood was a change in the movement's internal balance of power. The reformers were discredited, and the influence of the hard-liners increased. The Brotherhood did not give up on the idea of participation; on the contrary, it drafted a program for the political party it aspired to form, following the example of the Islamists in Morocco and Jordan who had created a political arm separate from the religious movement. But the draft platform made public in the summer of 2007 showed that the Brotherhood was retreating to old positions. Two elements were particularly revealing. The first was the attempt by the Brotherhood to clarify how it would implement its stated goal of ensuring that all laws would conform to Sharia. The Muslim Brotherhood had often been pressed to clarify this point. The answer provided by the platform was to call for the formation of a council of religious scholars—to be elected by all religious scholars in the country—with the binding authority to judge the conformity of both laws and executive acts with Sharia. The proposal to place a council elected only by religious scholars above the parliament elected at universal suffrage caused a storm within the Muslim Brotherhood. Reformers were appalled; many believed that the proposed body of religious scholars was illegitimate, privileging some interpretations of Sharia over others. Furthermore, some pointed out, the formation of such a council was not based on any established Brotherhood position.

The second controversial element in the draft platform was the exclusion of women and non-Muslims from being rulers—that is from occupying the presidency and other positions of high authority. This clause was a triumph of ideology over pragmatism: the Muslim Brotherhood was willing to create enormous controversy to ban something that was extremely unlikely to happen in any case, given the society's conservatism and the relatively small size of the Coptic population—not to mention other religious minorities. In addition, some Brothers pointed out that the exclusion was based on outmoded and unnecessary legal reasoning, and it caused a politically damaging distraction.[1]

The two clauses in an otherwise unexceptional party program revealed the ascendancy of a particularly conservative faction of the leadership, but they were also met with a lot of resistance. This showed that the reformist trend still had some strength. In fact, speculation was rife throughout 2008 that the two controversial clauses might be dropped from the final party program. Nevertheless the draft party platform leads to the inescapable conclusion that thwarted participation strengthens hard-liners and discredits reformers. The same conclusion is also strengthened by the fact that in June 2008 the Muslim Brotherhood elected new members to its central bureau (the Guidance Office), most of them considered hard-liners. The Shura Council elections within the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood—the religious movement behind the IAF—in

March 2008 confirmed the same pattern. In a moment of rising tensions with the regime and facing repressive measures, hard-liners were voted in to replace more moderate leaders in both the Muslim Brotherhood and the IAF.

Most Islamist movements are structurally biased against the moderate and reform camps within them; this accounts for their relative marginality and limited influence. As a rule, a clear majority within the hierarchies and memberships of such movements are drawn to more rigid or conservative stances and are often repelled by appeals to flexibility or reform. They regard flexibility as an unacceptable compromise on principles that have over time become imprinted in the collective consciousness of Islamists as immutable tenets. Only moments of rapid transition in the political environment—when new opportunities or challenges present themselves to religious movements—are capable of altering the marginal status of moderates, enabling them to attain a degree of parity with hard-liners. Jordan passed through an extended phase of this sort from 1989 to 2005, and Egypt experienced a similar albeit shorter window of opportunity from 2004 to 2005. In both cases, moderates and reformists gradually broadened their scope of influence and succeeded in translating this into a series of policies and practices that prioritized participation in the political process and consensus making with political forces in society. Unfortunately, in the last two years the Jordanian and Egyptian regimes reverted to authoritarian policies and to security clampdowns, which seemed to target moderates with as much vehemence as they did hard-liners. This repression convinced supporters of both organizations that participation and compromise did not pay off, strengthening the hand of hard-liners. In other words, the demise of the reformers in the Jordanian and Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood is integrally related to the restrictive political environment in the two countries.

The context also explains why the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood has been particularly quick to reject participation as a waste of time and effort that distracts the organization from its true goal. The dynamics of competition between moderate and hard-line leaders in the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood is complicated by the struggle for influence between Palestinians and Transjordanians over setting the movement's priorities: advancing the Palestinian cause versus working for political and social change in Jordan. Nevertheless, as far as participation in the legal political process is concerned, the ideological struggle within the Jordanian Brotherhood is similar to that in its Egyptian counterpart. Hard-liners in both organizations are skeptical of the value of political participation, and government repression makes them even more reluctant to adopt compromise positions that might alienate their popular base; moderates continue to emphasize the need for political participation as a key means of promoting reform, even if the rules of the game are unfair and the returns poor. Thus, in both movements hard-liners tend to swing back and forth between rejecting political participation and grudgingly accepting it when conditions are favorable. Moderates, meanwhile, continue to cling to the principle of un-

conditional engagement in the legal political process, but they cannot bring the entire organization with them.

Participation by Armed Movements

The most complex participating Islamist parties and movements are those that maintain an armed wing alongside the political organization. Such actors at present play a dominant role in Lebanon, Palestine, and Iraq. In all three cases, political participation takes place under highly unstable conditions; that is why the parties maintain an armed wing in the first place. The existence of the armed wings, furthermore, makes a normalization of conditions extremely unlikely, creating instead a vicious circle. The outcome is that the armed wings created to address an abnormal situation—Israeli occupation in Southern Lebanon, the unresolved Israeli–Palestinian conflict, and the rule of Saddam Hussein first and the American occupation later—eventually turn into tools used by Islamist parties and movements to increase their influence in the domestic struggle for power. It is important to note that in situations where Islamists maintain an armed wing, so do non-Islamist political actors. In Palestine, Fatah also has its militias; in Iraq, the Awakening Councils (non-religious Sunni militias first created to combat al-Qaeda) are entering the political fray. And in Lebanon, all political groups at times have formed armed organizations. This discussion will focus only on Hizbollah and Hamas, however.

Hizbollah and Hamas are Islamist movements, and both participate in the legal political process of their countries—at least when there is one. The two movements, however, are driven more by a political rather than a religious agenda. For Hamas, the problem is Israel, and the solution is not Islam but wresting control of Palestine back from Israel. The movement does not recognize the state of Israel and certainly considers the use of violence to be a legitimate tool to resist the Israeli occupation. Hizbollah also sees Israel as the major justification for the existence of its armed wing. It was formed to serve as an agent of representation for the Lebanese Shi'i community, and it was armed in the 1980s to drive the Israelis out of southern Lebanon, not to bring the Lebanese back to Islam. It continues to justify the existence of its armed wing by asserting that its weapons are those of the "resistance" and are thus needed until all Israelis are driven out of Lebanon—Israelis still occupy an area known as Shebaa Farms adjacent to the Syrian Golan Heights that both Lebanon and Syria agree is Lebanese territory—and the Palestinian problem is solved.

Neither Hamas nor Hizbollah have, to this day, used their weapons to influence elections. The January 2006 elections in Palestine, in which Hamas emerged as the winner, were judged clean by all observers, and violence was not involved. Elections in Lebanon are too complicated ever to be judged free and fair—the problem starts with the electoral law—but Hizbollah did not use violence to obtain its votes. However, both organizations have since used the weapons supposedly devoted to the "resistance" to fight and win political

battles inside the respective countries. In June 2007 Hamas seized control of Gaza. The action was dubbed by many in the West and the Arab world as a coup d'état; it was a somewhat perplexing moniker since Hamas had been in control of a legally constituted government on the basis of an election victory and a subsequent power-sharing deal with Fatah, the Mecca agreement. It was President Mahmud Abbas that dissolved the government in a move of doubtful constitutionality. Whether the name "coup" is accurate, the fact remains that once the government was dissolved, Hamas weapons became a political instrument inside the country. In 2008, Hizbollah also openly used its weapons for a domestic political purpose, something it had vowed not to do. In May 2008 it engaged in a show of force with the government, quickly demonstrating its military superiority by taking over downtown Beirut then returning seized buildings and public space to the Lebanese military. The showdown, followed by negotiations in Doha under regional and international mediation, allowed Hizbollah and its allies to gain control of one third plus one ministerial post—thus veto power over major decisions in a newly formed government of national unity.

The cases of Palestine and Lebanon demonstrate that the existence of an armed wing within an Islamist party or movement in unstable conditions inevitably become a domestic political tool. This is true even if the party or the movement is theoretically committed to non-violence in the domestic political process and claims the weapons are only directed at an external enemy. No matter why the militias exist, their presence affects the balance of power within the country. This, in turn, ensures that there will not be a normal political process and blocks any process of moderation. The question is whether the continuous inclusion of these movements in the political process would encourage them to gradually abandon their armed wings. The experiences of Hamas and Hizbollah are not very promising in this regard, but they also demonstrate that the exclusion of these armed Islamists from the political process is not a realistic option either, given the tremendous support they enjoy on the popular level. The only reasonable compromise, it seems, is for the countries in question to develop strong institutional frameworks that can guarantee that no one or combination of political actors can gain enough power to dominate the system.

Post-Participation Debates

With the exception of the armed movements, the highly feared participating Islamists have had limited impact on their countries. While everywhere they are the strongest component of the overall weak opposition, they have struggled to exert some political influence; in the end they have had little say in the formulation of new policies. For many participating Islamist parties and movements, this reality is leading to a crisis of sorts or at least to active debate. Islamists have made important ideological changes and compromises. The continued existence of gray zones should not obscure the significance of the ideological

transformation they have undergone. Islamists have also made a large investment in creating and strengthening their organizational structures. The pay-off has been limited. Most important, parties that saw themselves as a rising force four or five years ago are now coming to terms with a decline in their election results and a continuing struggle for influence.

Islamists hoped that by means of participation they could break through the barriers of restricted political pluralism and bring about true reform and the redistribution of power between ruling establishments and opposition movements, but they failed. They pushed for constitutional and legislative amendments intended to increase the powers of parliaments vis-à-vis the executive and to institute effective systems of checks and balances, but they failed in this effort as well. Some sought—again unsuccessfully—to overcome a history of conflict with secular elites and form flexible alliances across the ideological spectrum; others remained captive to black-and-white, good-versus-evil ideological approaches to politics. Participating Islamists also wanted to expand the scope of religion in the public sphere and to establish a link between the Islamization of society and their political participation. The consequence of this was that ruling establishments severed their connection with Islamic proselytizing and charity activities that form the backbone of the Islamist social role and the mainstay of their popular and electoral bases. It simultaneously led to attacks from less participation-friendly Islamists that accused them of pragmatism with the implied charge of straying from the true faith and Sharia.

The poor payback of political participation presents Islamists with three major challenges, which are already being discussed in some of their parties and movements. The response to these challenges will determine the future course of participating Islamists. The first major challenge for participating Islamists is to formulate new arguments to convince their popular bases that participation in politics is an indispensable long-term strategy in spite of poor paybacks in the short run. An analysis of recent interviews with and statements by prominent leaders of Islamist parties and movements shows that two main sets of arguments are being developed. The first stresses the value of even the minimal benefits derived from the participation in legal politics: parliamentary and legislative activity allows them to counter to some extent the maneuvers of governments as well as to preserve the cohesion and sustain the impetus of their popular base through the regular public broadcast of their demands. The second set of arguments reveals a more ambitious, maximalist agenda: Islamists must participate in order to prove themselves responsible political actors, committed to participation in legal politics under all circumstances, including successive setbacks, and dedicated to the advocacy of peaceful change and incremental reform. Such clear commitment would put an end to criticisms and suspicions harbored by ruling establishments and secular opposition movements of Islamist motives and designs. Islamists movements facing the more precarious situations, for example the Egyptian and Jordanian Muslim Brotherhoods, tend towards the

minimalist argument. Movements that enjoy a more relaxed relationship with their governments, for example the ICM in Kuwait and the PJD in Morocco, tend towards the maximalist position.

The second challenge participating Islamists face is finding a sustainable and practical balance between the requirements of participation and the demands of ideological commitment. As we argued before, the realities of restricted pluralism and the domination of ruling establishments over the political system compel Islamists to adopt compromise positions on major social issues. However, Islamists are torn between this need and their ideological convictions; this is in addition to the very real fear of sacrificing the distinction of their political rhetoric and programs and the danger of alienating broad and influential segments of their supporters. The task of striking a balance between pragmatism and ideological commitment is becoming increasingly difficult, if not impossible, because participation in legal politics has led to unsatisfactory results. Participating Islamists are reacting in two opposite fashions: one is to retract earlier compromises and revert to hard-line stances. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood did this in its party platform that called for the creation of a religious body with legislative functions and which excluded, on the basis of Islamic jurisprudence, the possibility of a Copt or a woman serving as head of state. The other course, followed by the PJD in Morocco and the ICM in Kuwait, is to engage in a debate on the essential political component of Islamist movements, the relative weight of political pragmatism with respect to ideology or the Islamic frame of reference, and the priorities of political participation. As interesting as such extensive debates are to observers, they create an environment of strategic ambivalence and uncertainty that could cost participating Islamists much support.

The third challenge facing participating Islamists is to rethink the relationship between their religious and political components and, accordingly, to devise the best possible structures for organizing them institutionally. The opening up of opportunities for participation in legal politics during the past few decades has led some Islamist movements to introduce a functional separation between religion and politics, as demonstrated in the creation of political parties, fronts, and associations that are institutionally autonomous from the religious movements. Such separation has allowed participating Islamists to pursue political goals more freely. As opportunities for political participation narrow, however, it is no longer so clear that the separation of political from religious activities is an advantage rather than a disadvantage.

This critical reassessment of the pros and cons of separating religious from political activities in Islamist movements coincides with another important development. The call for abandoning politics altogether and for focusing exclusively on proselytizing and charitable work is being heard with increasing frequency and strength. This is an echo from the past, harkening back to the position of Muslim Brotherhood's founder Hassan al-Banna. If the call were heeded on a

large scale, it would be the end of political participation by Islamists, with un-predictable consequences.

Evolving Movements

There are no easy answers to the questions always asked about participating Islamist parties and movements: "Are they truly committed to democracy? Will participation increase their commitments?" The evidence leads to a very unsat-isfactory, "It depends." Commitment to democracy by Islamist parties and their evolution as a result of participation are the outcome of a dynamic political process.

Many leaders and members of the Islamist parties and movements are truly and probably irreversibly committed to democracy on an individual basis, but many are more skeptical about the benefits of participation, and some even questions its acceptability. It is the balance of power among these different groups, itself determined by the politics of the country as well as the internal politics of the organization, that will decide whether a party or movement will remain committed to democratic participation.

The impact of participation is also a function of the political process. The decision by Islamist parties and movements to participate in the legal politics of their countries triggers a set of complicated processes: within the leadership of the parties and movements involved; between them and their followers; and of course between the participating Islamists and the ruling establishments and secular opposition parties of their countries. It is the outcome of these three different sets of processes that will determine the future trajectory of participating Islamists.

That trajectory, evidence shows, is likely to differ from country to country and actor to actor. Political participation under normal conditions indeed ap-pears to favor moderation and strengthen the commitment to the democratic process. Unfortunately, politics in most Arab countries cannot be characterized as normal.

While the outcome of participation is not invariably a process of further democratization and moderation, it is also clear that non-participation—either enforced by governments or chosen by the leadership of Islamist parties and movements—is a guarantee that a process of moderation will not take place. This is a sobering thought for those governments and their international backers that would like to set the bar for participation by Islamists extremely high. The choice is not between allowing the somewhat risky participation by Islamists in politics and their disappearance from the political scene. It is between allowing their participation despite the existence of gray zones with the possibility that a moderating process will unfold, and excluding them from the legal political process—thus ensuring the growing influence of hard-liners inside those move-ments and the continued existence of gray zones.

Note

1   See Nathan J. Brown and Amr Hamzawy, "The Draft Party Platform of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood," Carnegie Paper 89 (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 2008).

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