

Islamism: from Dissent to Power

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A topical event par excellence, the Arab Spring is so in all regards. From the start, the media were present not only to carry out their prime mission of informing, but likewise, in some cases, to accompany the revolts, encourage them and even expand their dimensions and breadth. The media even became one of the imperatives of the spreading dissent. Suffice it to cite the role played by the Al-Jazeera television network during the revolts in the Arab world. A source of information but also of mobilisation, the Qatari television channel became a key factor in the development of events in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Syria and everywhere where voices were raised against the regimes in place.

The phenomenon is not only Arab, but worldwide, since the Arab Spring has become a preferred subject on television news programmes, news magazines and talk shows, particularly in the West.

The Media, the Arab Spring, and “Fast Thinkers”: The Runoff between the End of the Fundamentalist Era and the Surprise of the Islamist Triumph

The corollary of this craze for the Arab Spring was the emergence of a category of self-proclaimed specialists, “fast thinkers” of sorts that became indispensable for TV hosts lacking reliable sources of knowledge and analyses. Under these conditions, the images broadcast by television networks had

become the main source of information and therefore of analysis on TV programmes, hence the hasty and erroneous conclusions on the nature of events, their development and the actors involved. One of the errors of these analyses and commentaries, with the arrival of the first images of the popular revolts, was certainly the announcement of the decline or even the end of the Islamist era. By emphasising the absence of anti-Western slogans or references to Israel on protest banners, the Western media and its analysts of the time focused on the fundamental role of social networks in mobilising youth, the role of pro-modernity youth in fostering the protest movements, on the slogans used and on the gender balance of protest participants. All of these elements, though true, led “fast thinkers” to consider Islamist movements “dead” and speak of a new era of changes with modernising or even universalist overtones in the Arab-Islamic world. They simply forgot that this was but part of the picture and that in the other part of the picture, ignored by the media in the wake of the “revolutionary” effervescence, Islamist movements occupied a preponderant position, and that if they were not visible at the start of events it was because they did not want to be, becoming visible at the point when they felt it politically opportune.

In the second stage, the surprise of seeing the Islamists reap the fruit of the Arab revolts, namely at elections, replaced the enthusiasm that had accompanied the onset of the uprisings. The inspiration for analyses and commentary remained the same: the images broadcast by the different media stations. Commentators and analysts were surprised to see different Islamist forces emerge as events developed, or to see them slowly gaining the forefront, and above all largely win elections, this time transparent and democratic ones.

Whether in the first stage or the second one, there

was a certain penury of analysis and an increasingly obvious ignorance of the West regarding the Arab-Islamic world. Of course, this judgement must be relativised, yet the existence of certain true Western specialists on the Arab-Islamic sphere, curiously absent from the media, does not prevent us from missing the days of the pioneers of Western Arabic and Islamic studies, as, for instance, L. Massignon, H. Laoust, L. Gardet, G.E. Von Grunbaum, J.P. Charnay, W.C. Smith, J. Berque, M. Rodinson, etc.

A Few Obvious Facts on Islamisms

Five obvious facts seem to me primordial when discussing today's Islamist phenomenon. The first concerns the plural nature of Islamism. Islamism is not a monolithic movement; on the contrary, it consists of different trends whose contradictions are often deeper than those existing between certain Islamist and non-Islamist movements. Not taking this into account amounts to an abuse of language as inadequate as it is confusing.

Islamisms are the product of specific contexts and are influenced in return by these contexts. The environment where these Islamisms emerged and evolve has a great impact on their nature. These differences are not only due to the doctrinal vulgates of one or another trend, but also to the impacts of their places of emergence and development and the choice of these doctrinal vulgates; whereby the readings made of them are the product of these circumstances as well as of the behaviour of the different Islamist actors in their contexts.

The second obvious fact has to do with the characteristic that distinguishes new Islamist scholars from their forerunners, the ulemas of yore. It concerns the extreme modernity of the new scholars. This aspect has already been pointed out by numerous specialists of political Islam. A product of modern education, adopting forms of organisation arising from the same register, implementing the latest in communication and propaganda, the new Muslim scholar is the product of his time and not a relic of the past, even if on the doctrinal level a common foundation unites the two types of scholars and even if the political positions of scholars, regardless of age differences, can be reduced to several typical ideal stances.

The third obvious fact has to do with the anchorage of Islamism in today's Muslim societies. Astonishment is always expressed at the weakness of non-Islamist ideological factions vis-à-vis Islamist ones, in particular during the last rounds of elections in the Arab world, but it is often forgotten that Islamist ideology is different from other ideologies, taking its main force from the continuity between it and the deeply Islamic nature of today's Muslim societies. The return to religion, which in this case is a recovery of religiosity and cult practices, since religion has never been absent from these societies, constitutes the main asset of triumphant Islamism.

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The fourth obvious fact regards the astonishment accompanying the triumph of Islamisms, namely during recent electoral processes in the Arab world. Such astonishment reveals a failure to realise that these elections, for once transparent and democratic, did not but put into figures a reality that had previously been concealed by authoritarian regimes. Repression on the one hand and the electoral masquerades on the other had long concealed this reality. In this regard, on the altar of political realism, the free world had sacrificed victims of abuses that included the liberal and democratic factions just as much as Islamists. The victory of the latter in free and transparent elections today is a must for any democratic process worthy of the name.

The fifth and final obvious fact seems to me to relate to the relation between the Arab Spring and the current emergence of Islamism in the different countries of the Arab world. Although the Arab Spring is not responsible for the emergence of Islamisms or for strengthening them, it has, however, allowed them the opportunity of reviving their movements and appearing in broad daylight. The liberalisation of the political arena has provided an opportunity for advance and expression for Islamist movements previously fettered by the regimes in power. It is a liberalisation that benefits all movements in favour of it, but in the first place Islamist ones, for the reasons indicated above.

Islamism, from Dissent to Power: The Case of Morocco

The Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) in Egypt, the Ennahda Party in Tunisia and the Justice and Development Party (PJD) in Morocco are Islamist parties that have come into power through the Arab Spring. Seen from the West, in particular by the “fast thinkers,” this was an enormous surprise, when there had previously been extensive speculation about the absence of bearded men and Islamist slogans at protests. Only appearances were taken into account, the more complex reality being utterly disregarded.

Islamism is a multifarious movement – its forms are many and its actions varied. Management of the Islamist phenomenon by States is likewise varied, oscillating between political and security approaches. The case of Morocco is instructive in this regard.

Today, Morocco is undergoing religious reorganisation, essentially around power and the social model to be built. In fact, Islam has always played a role in politics in Muslim Morocco. As a basis for the legitimacy of power or as a form of dissent against the established social and political order, the reference to religion has never been absent from the political arena. Often present in an implicit and conventional manner at times of coolness and political calm, but also manifestly boisterous at times of political effervescence.

Islam in Morocco takes a number of ideological forms: State fundamentalism, reformist Salafism, Wahhabi Salafism, reformist fundamentalism, fundamentalist Islamism and Jihadi Salafism.

Directly affected by the State’s religious policy and the reaffirmation of the King’s religious status, Islamists express contradictory opinions, revealing their divergence of positions regarding the monarchy and the nature of the State. Due to lack of space, we will only discuss the case of the Justice and Development Party (PJD), which was recently voted into power, namely in the legislative elections of 25 November 2011.

From *Chabiba Islamiya* to the PJD, or When Fundamentalism Gives Way to Reformism

Chabiba Islamiya (Islamist Youth), the forerunner of the PJD, the party now heading the Moroccan government, was first a fundamentalist movement founded in 1969 by two public primary school teachers, Abdelkrim Moti’ and Ibrahim Kamal. The

movement had a dual structure: a clandestine group founded in 1969 and a legal association authorised in 1972.

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The assassination of the Socialist Party leader, Omar Benjelloun, in 1975 by members of *Chabiba Islamiya* ended the association’s legal existence. Other Islamist organisations would later appear, joined by former members of *Chabiba*. Among these were:

- *Al-Mujahidun* Movement, based abroad, which advocated violent action. It was attributed the attack against Hotel Asni in Marrakech in 1994;
- *Al-Badil al-Hadari*, whose posts of President of Honour, President and Vice-President were held by Ibrahim Kamal, Mustapha Moatassim and Regala, respectively;
- *Al-Jama’a al-Islamiya*;
- *Al-Haraka min Ajli al-Ummah* (Movement for the Islamic Community), led by Mohamed El Marouani.

These Islamist groups opted for the creation of either religious associations or political parties. *Al-Badil al-Hadari* and *Al-Haraka min Ajli al-Ummah*, which were organised as political parties, are banned today. Their leaders, first imprisoned with regard to the so-called Belliraj affair, are now free via royal amnesty. Belliraj is a former member of *Chabiba Islamiya* living in Belgium and suspected of leading a terrorist organisation.

Abdallah Moti’ fled Morocco after the assassination of the socialist leader, Omar Benjelloun. He was sentenced to life imprisonment in absentia in 1980. He left behind him a web of militant Islamists, some of whom gave up violence to become progressively integrated into the reformist Islamist landscape. In 1981, Abdelilah Benkirane (current Head of Government), Abdallah Baha (current Minister of State), Mohammed Yatim (current Deputy Speaker of the House of Representatives) and Saad-Eddine al-

Othmani (current Minister of Foreign Affairs) definitively broke with *Chabiba Islamiya*, of which they had been former members, and formed the association *Jama'a Islamiya* (the Islamic Community).

In 1992, in reaction to events in Algeria, *Jama'a Islamiya* changed its name to *Al-Islah wa Attajdid* (Reform and Renewal). The year 1996 opened the last stage in the history of the movement, when some of the *Jama'a* officers joined the Popular Constitutional and Democratic Movement (MPCD) party, then led by Doctor Abdelkrim Alkhatib. After the failure of several attempts to create an independent Islamist party, their membership was confirmed at the MPDC convention in June 1996. Several months later, after its union with the Movement for an Islamic Future, headed by Ahmed Raissouni, the *Al-Islah wa Attajdid* association changed its name to *Al-Islah wa Tawhid* (Unity and Reform Movement, MUR).

The victory of the Islamists in free and transparent elections today is a must for any democratic process worthy of the name

Following the 1997 elections, the new balance of power in the MPDC resulted in the party's being renamed Justice and Development Party (PJD). The party's varied participation in electoral processes eventually lent it a normalcy that made it one of the main political forces in the Kingdom.

The PJD/MUR movement's double structure has allowed its actors to carry out religious action through the MUR and, at the same time, political action through the PJD. The new political situation created following the events of 16 May 2003 (terrorist attacks in Casablanca) led the movement to turn towards a sort of specialisation of its senior party members, some becoming more active in religious affairs while others occupied the niche of political action through the PJD.

Insofar as the nature of the political regime, PJD and MUR leaders assert that question should not even be posed, since Islam, as established by the Constitution, is the State religion and the head of

state is a Commander of the Faithful. The form of confessional State being thus confirmed by law, the content must be promoted through religious preaching within society and political action in the institutions, in a strategy where the appropriation of the traditional principles of monarchic legitimacy also serves to legitimise the political action of Islamists in a political sphere called upon to separate from the religious sphere. Integration in this sphere requires allegiance to the monarchy and commitment to the Islamic identity of the State, the main themes in the discourse of integrated Islamists, particularly after the 16 May events.

With regard to this matter arose the issues of the relationship between politics and religion and of the nature of the State, an issue that King Hassan II seems to have settled during his long reign (1961-1999). Indeed, in a speech delivered before the members of the regional ulema councils on 2 February 1980, King Hassan II stated in this regard: "it is true that the government and the ulemas constitute one and the same family. Religion and worldly affairs intertwine. The day when the Muslim State separates religion and the earthly world, that day, if ever it should arrive, would justify our celebrating in advance the funeral of such a State."

King Mohammed VI confirmed this conception of the State the day after he rose to the throne. The issue of religion, however, again arose, but this time more shrilly, following the events of 16 May 2003 and the emergence into broad daylight of terrorist fundamentalism on the country's political stage. The King again had to redefine the politics-religion relationship and the function of Commander of the Faithful in a non-secular State. Three speeches by King Mohammed VI, delivered on 29 May 2003, 30 April 2004 and 30 July 2004, essentially focused on the religious question and the relationship between politics and religion. "A clear separation," stated the King, "must be made between religion and politics, considering the sacred nature of the dogma conveyed by religion, which should be exempt from any discord or dissension by its very nature, whence the need to counter any instrumental use of religion to political ends."¹ The king moreover asserted that "under Morocco's constitutional monarchy, religion and politics are only united in the figure of the King, Commander of the Faithful."²

¹ Royal Speech of 30 April 2004

² Throne Speech of 30 July 2004

Translated into practical terms, this maxim consists in the assertion of a monopoly of the State in religious affairs. The principle of the Commandership of the Faithful legitimises this assertion by lending it a doctrinal basis in the Muslim theory of power.

Integration of Islamists in the Political Arena

The Islamists participated in the legislative elections of 14 November 1997, which resulted in parliamentary seats being won by members of this movement. With nine MPs, under the aegis of a long-standing party, the Popular Constitutional and Democratic Movement (MPCD), so-called moderate Moroccan Islamists entered the House of Representatives with the blessing of the authorities, who had opted for the political normalisation of this movement. Far from reflecting the real weight of Islamist movements in the Moroccan political arena, these elections nonetheless revealed Islamist intentions to gain power. The path was opened for their access to parliament through these elections. With representation limited to nine MPs, they were immediately subject to an “entrance exam” during that legislature. Sanctioned by a good mark, the normalisation of the Islamist movement would be confirmed in the September 2002 legislative elections. With 42 MPs, among them six women, in the Assembly of Representatives in the new legislature, the PJD became the third political force in the country after the Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP) and the Istiqlal party. Received and interpreted as a spectacular break-

through by the Islamist movement, this score is, in fact, the expression of a political fact already longstanding in Morocco, which the country’s official political map, as drawn until then by the administration in power, had not revealed. The following (2007 and 2011) legislative elections confirmed the real weight of legalist Islamists in Morocco’s current political landscape.

The PJD’s performance at elections, in particular those of 25 November 2011, have made it the country’s top party today. As such, it is currently leading a real shift in government.

It is not enough to integrate Islamist movements into the legal political sphere to prevent the birth and development of fundamentalism, or even the most radical Islamist terrorism

Aimed at the main organisations of political Islam, the strategy of Islamist integration in the legal political sphere has only been partially successful. The *Al-adl wa Al-Ihsan* movement remains impervious to this appeal. The terrorist attacks of 16 May 2003 and those following relativised the impact of this strategy. Events have demonstrated, in fact, that it is not enough to integrate Islamist movements into the legal political sphere to prevent the birth and development of fundamentalism, or even the most radical Islamist terrorism.