

# Islam, Democracy and Secularisation

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At the beginning of the 1990s Olivier Roy (1992) had already predicted *the failure of political Islam*. Gilles Kepel (2000) reached the same conclusion in his book *Jihad, the rise and fall of Islamism*. For my own part, (Ferjani, 1992; 1996; 2005a; 2005b; 2006) I have not ceased to defend the theory that political Islam and, what is more, the reinvasion by religion of the field of politics, are signs that democracy is failing. This theory is based on the conviction that a true democracy, which supports social links through the development of socio-economic and cultural rights backed up by public services, will allow Muslim societies to envisage an escape from the despotism which has hitherto assailed them by other ways than a radical Islamic experience. Many Muslim thinkers, some of whom are from a radical Islamic background, like the Tunisian H'mida Enneïfer, have broken away from political Islam, regarding it as bound to fail. There are but few, such as François Burgat (1995; 1998; 2005), who constantly defend Islamism as leading directly towards a different modernity from the "Western model", indeed towards an "Islamic democracy". The elections experienced by Muslim countries over recent years, in particular those which took place between January 2005 and January 2006, seem to confirm Burgat's theories and contradict those of his opponents.

## The Electoral Success of Political Islam

Despite the disillusionment with regard to the experiences of political Islam in Iran, the Sudan, Afghanistan or Algeria, and despite the repercussions of the attacks of September 11 2001, Islamism does not seem to have lost its appeal among Muslims who are the principal losers in these exploits. As it happens, many radical Islamic movements and parties no longer reject in the same way the democracy they considered for a long time to be a Western system at odds with the teachings of Islam. They no longer snub the elections to which they once preferred recourse to weapons and uprisings; uprisings that were planned deep within the community through mosques and charitable and cultural organizations to increase membership among those excluded from globalization and the chaotic modernization which has shattered Muslim societies. Everywhere that they have been able to take part in local or national elections, radical Islamic movements and parties have presented candidates and led electoral campaigns which have revealed their capacity to mobilize supporters and their advance on the traditional parties and new democratic oppositions. This strategy seems to work in their favour and against the radical Islamic movements who continue to boycott elections, like the Islamic Jihad in Palestine, the Saadet Party<sup>1</sup> in Turkey, the Justice and Charity party in Morocco, the cluster of groups which advocate violent action in Egypt, Algeria, etc. and

against those who are gambling on democracy weakening their influence. Turkey, considered for a long time to be a beacon of modernity and secularism in the Muslim world, has become the reference point for all the radical Islamic movements who have chosen the same path. Despite the failure of their first attempt at participation, which led them to power and which was cut short by a new intervention by the Army for the so-called salvation of "secularism" and the "republic", Turkish Islamic radicals persevered and ended up by regaining power, first in the large towns, then during the elections of 2002, in which they won 363 seats out of the 550 which make up parliament. The army's coup de force against the Government of Erbakan did not curb the Islamic radicals' influence; quite the contrary, it legitimized them and allowed them to refocus their efforts, stronger and better prepared. Today, the experience of Turkish Islamic radicals, more than those in Iran, Sudan or Taliban Afghanistan, who saw political Islam reach the power by other means than through the ballot box, constitutes the most claimed example by Islamic radicals and by those who advocate alliance with Islamic radicals in Muslim countries, in Washington, or in European capitals which have been converted to the idea of an alternative, based on compromise with Islamists. The example of the AKP, the Islamist party holding power in Turkey, is valued highly by Moroccan Islamic radicals, whose party has the same name: The Justice and Development party (JDP), arisen from the fusion in 1996 of the Islamist or-

<sup>1</sup> The dissolution of the Islamist Refah Party (The Welfare Party), of Erbakan, declared illegal in 1998, gave rise to two parties: the Saadet Party (Happiness Party) and the Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi (Justice and Development Party), the AKP of the present Prime Minister, in power since 2002.

ganisation, Al-Islâh wa'l-Tajdid (Reform and Renewal) and the MPDC (Mouvement Populaire Démocratique et Constitutionnel – The popular, democratic and constitutional movement). This coalition saw 9 of its candidates get into parliament in 1997. Becoming the JDP in 1998, it stood in the elections of 2002 and became the third parliamentary party with 42 elected members. In reality, the JDP would have won more seats if it had not given up, following negotiations with the Palace, in putting forward candidates in all constituencies. Opinion polls carried out in 2003, after the intervention of the United States and its allies in Iraq, placed them at the forefront of all political parties in the country. All the analysts predict their victory in the elections of 2007 and their leaders, who refuse to take part in a coalition to govern with other parties, are getting ready to take control of affairs, if their foreseen victory gives them an absolute majority. In Algeria, the interruption of the elections in 1992 which prevented the ISF (Islamic Salvation Front) from gaining power and the civil war which followed, did not curb the influence of political Islam. The results of the different elections which the country has seen since the end of the 1980s, beyond the irregularities, frauds and the conditions surrounding ballots, allow an estimate of the electoral weight of this political movement, considering all tendencies together, at between 30% et 40%; which in fact amounts to the main political force. It is this weight which explains the hesitations and the prevarications that may exist regarding the reform of the family code and the demands of women, which President Bouteflika has promised to address at the beginning of his first term, or regarding the cultural demands of Berber movements (some of which supported him); and in relation to the political demands of civil society and democratic movements, sacrificed in the quest to form a difficult compromise with the Islamic radicals. The “national reconciliation” which has benefited Islamists to the detriment of their victims, illustrates this orientation of the power in Algeria under the influence and pressure of the Islamists.

In Egypt, the elections of December 2005 allowed an evaluation of the political importance of the Muslim Brother-

hood and also of other different expressions of political Islam. Despite cheating, irregularities and violent interventions by the ruling party's police and militant forces (aimed at denying voters access to ballot boxes in popular quarters and villages where a massive vote in favour of opposition candidates was feared) the Muslim Brotherhood succeeded in winning 88 seats, and proved themselves to be the main opposition force. Appalled, the only solution that the reigning power has come up with is to delay municipal elections until 2008!

The elections in Palestine provide the most recent illustration of this tendency. After the failure of the call to boycott the presidential elections, which resulted in the election of Mahmoud Abbas in January 2005 with a participation level of 70%, Hamas, contrary to Islamic Jihad, took part in the municipal elections, in which they won the largest towns. Then, to the general surprise of everyone, including their own leaders, they achieved an absolute majority in the general election of January 2006, with 76 seats against 40 seats to their main rival, Fatah.

In Lebanon those elected under the banner of Hezbollah number only 12 out of 128 because of the electoral system born out of the confessional pact of 1943, with some modifications put in place by the Tâ'if agreement. However, the role played by this party in the liberation of the South against the Israeli occupation and the demonstrations that it succeeded in organising in 2005 to support Syria, as well as the negotiations carried out by other different parties, such as Christians or Muslims, with their leaders show the importance of this movement in the Lebanese political environment.

In countries where radical Islamic movements are forbidden, like Tunisia, Libya and Syria, all serious analysis considers that political Islam represents the main force of opposition. Even if there is no legal political expression, its influence on society and in the field of culture is such that the powers feel themselves compelled to adapt their discourse and political practice. The acknowledgement of this influence leads those in power, who present themselves as the last bastion against the rising tide of Islamism, into outbidding the Islamist claims for –

let's say so – pulling the rug from under their feet! The concessions they allow in this regard are so relevant that one could ask what the difference is between their politics and the Islamist project. It is the same for several opposition constituents who consider themselves to be secular and democratic.

What is taking place in the Muslim countries of the Mediterranean basin reflects what is happening in Muslim countries as a whole, as revealed also by the rising influence of political Islam among the Islamic populations and cultures in Europe and everywhere where minority Muslim groups live.

The object of this reflection is not to linger upon the social, economic cultural and political reasons of the electoral success of Islamic radicals. Many studies have been dedicated to this subject, showing that those who have voted for these movements are not all of them Islamists. The “national disenchantment”, the failure of chaotic attempts at modernisation to which the societies concerned have been submitted; the corruption, the despotism, the social and economic effects of an ultra liberal globalisation which has thrown millions of excluded people into unemployment, misery and despair, the military defeats at the hands of Israel and powers that do not hesitate to resort to military intervention to impose their hegemony, the incapacity of existing regimes to stand up to the least of challenges, the arrogance with which Islam and Muslims are treated by the media and by the ideological discourse which has prevailed since the end of the Cold War. etc., are the many factors which have encouraged fear and withdrawal towards what is presented to be the hard kernel of wounded identity. Faced with the void left by the collapse of models which were meant to be an alternative to liberal globalisation and to powers that oppressed the people of the South, these very people saw political Islam as a way to express the rejection of an unjust and arrogant order. In those places where political Islam took power, and had time to show that it doesn't have a miraculous solution even to resolve the problems of Muslim societies, it has ceased to have the same attraction.

It is difficult, in this context to develop this question, or to tackle the different as-

pects of the debate aroused by the electoral success of political Islam. It is for this reason that this reflection will limit itself to the examination of three questions directly concerning the relationship between Islam, democracy and secularisation:

- To what extent are (or are not) the electoral victories of Islamic radical movements a confirmation of the incompatibility between Islam, on one side, and democracy and secularisation on the other?
- Does the participation of Islamist groups in elections result from a democratic conversion or from a sort of duplicity of these movements?
- Are the developmental conditions which gave rise to Christian democracy comparable to those experienced by the evolutions of political Islam during these days?

### **Democracy and Secularisation: is There Such Thing as an Islamic Exception?**

Secular people of the Muslim world and foreign observers, more or less specialised in the different disciplines, have found in the electoral scores of political Islam an additional proof which supports their concern and pessimism as to the possibility of reconciling Islam and modernity. Their reactions follow the logic of the reductionist argument that postulates the existence of an "Islamic exception". From this, some conclude that there is a necessity for a "secular dictatorship" to modernise Muslim societies and thus to ensure a "way out to religion" against their will, before allowing them access to democracy. Secularisation and the triumph of secularism in these countries would be a preliminary condition to the introduction of democracy. As long as this preliminary condition is not assured, any free election on Muslim soil would be a "democratic burial of democracy". There would even be a danger of international interference which would justify keeping this part of the world private from democracy. The essayist and great reporter Alexander Adler sums up this concept perfectly when he says: "No, at the end of the day, I would prefer that the Muslim brothers be

co-opted by the Egyptian military, who hold the essential power, rather than see them win free elections and appointing a Tariq Ramadan as Minister of Culture. By the same token, to me it seems more desirable to keep the princes of the Saudi royal family on the throne, even the ones who maintain contact with Al-Qaïda, than to see Islamist parties, like those who exist in Pakistan, take control of the Saudi Kingdom. I therefore support the idea of maintaining the most enlightened dictatorships possible – even those not enlightened at all – in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, rather than the application of democratic principles in these areas of the world, which in the immediate future would not be anything but bringers of disorder and violence". (Adler-Sorman, 2004) When you remind the proponents of this argument that it is precisely this route which has allowed political Islam to triumph in Turkey and in countries where democracy has been adjourned in the name of prioritising modernisation, of making up for lost time relative to the West, or to overcome under-development, they reply that the experiments had not the time to bear fruit and that it was necessary to prolong them before implementing "democratic overtures" which would have provoked its failure. This argument is akin to those of the authoritarian regimes which present themselves as indispensable bastions against Islamist obscurantism in order to justify their refusal of every democratic overture, their violations of human rights, their exploitation of the machinations of the state to maintain the monopoly of the oligarchies which they represent over all the areas of political life, from economic to media. This argument is also very similar to the choice of certain powers which consider that political democracy is not yet the main concern in countries where the priority should be economic development, in order to create jobs, resolve housing problems, allow a greater number to have access to education and to medical care, to prevent immigration and contain the threat of terrorism. This is why these powers continue to support regimes worn down by negligence and corruption, leading them to envisage new alliances if the Islamists cease to take on their interests and presence in a region vital for their economy.

A variant of this attitude consists of asking the regimes which are the primary obstacle to democracy, and which do not hesitate to resort to religion to draw from it a *pseudo* legitimacy, to make democratic overtures excluding the expressions of political Islam in accordance with the famous adage "no liberty for the enemies of liberty". Besides the problem posed even by the idea of a selective democracy, if one applies this principle, it would be necessary to begin by forbidding all political activity to parties and government who have presided for decades over the destinies of the countries concerned and to whom this question is addressed, just as to the movements of the left which have supported the different totalitarian regimes of the ex-Soviet empire, Cambodia, Albania, China, Vietnam, North Korea, etc, and which have never clearly given up the ideas in the name of which they aligned themselves behind these regimes. Yet it is often from the ranks of these movements that comes this demand for exclusion which would be applied only to the Islamic radical movements. If one applies this rule across the board, it would be necessary to forbid groups of the extreme right and the extreme left, indeed many parties and groups capable of attacks upon liberty if not in their own countries at least with regard to other peoples in the East, the West, the South or the North. Who would have the right to decide where exclusion begins or ends? And in the name of which principle can the envisaged exclusion be reserved solely for Islamists?

For those who see proof of the incompatibility between Islam and democracy in the electoral success of political Islam, it would be important to remember that the first universal suffrage in Europe and in other countries was hardly favourable to democracy. The first elections which followed the revolution of 1848 in France brought a reactionary majority to power who straight away buried the 2nd Republic and plunged the country of the "rights of man and of the citizen" back into the days of being "Elder sister of the Church". Likewise, it was via elections that Hitler and Mussolini arrived in power, only to drag Europe and the world into one of the darkest episodes of human history. One should fur-

thermore consider the election scores which the extreme right have achieved, very linked to religious extremism of a Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, Jewish, Hindu (etc.) nature, before concluding that the electoral victories of political Islam are a sign of an Islamic exception, resistant to democracy and to secularisation, and for which it is consequently necessary to either maintain the ensemble of the Muslim world under authoritarian regimes or exclude political Islam from all democratic life. Where elsewhere has this type of exclusion been advocated? Have we to make an Islamic exception or rather make exceptional the treatment reserved for Islam?

A last point concerning this aspect of the debates arising from the electoral victories of Islamists, relates to the relationship between democracy and secularism. It should be remembered that the advent of political Islam, like that of political Christianity and other similar expressions with reference to all religions, is the product of a certain degree of secularisation: it is because politics has begun to distance itself from religion and the religious is no more the only mode of legitimization, that these movements advocating an unprecedented idealization of religion appeared, which are no more than a reaction to modernity. However, in order that secularisation be complete and lead to secularism, that is to say to the official and real separation of politics and religion, it is necessary that democratisation crosses the threshold allowing politics to do without recourse to religion or any form of ideological mystification, from which all non-democratic power tries to draw a semblance of legitimacy. Nowhere other than in the supposedly secular *pseudo* republics, has the question of secularism been invoked as a precondition of democracy. The rare attempts which envisaged such a relationship between democracy and secularism were fatal both for demo-

cracy and for secularism: the examples of Robespierre in France, of Kemalism in Turkey, of the Ba'ath in Syria and Iraq, and of totalitarian regimes where a *pseudo* secularism made a pretext in order to stifle democracy, must encourage a better reflection on the relationship between democracy and secularisation. A calm reflection on the history of this relationship will show those who wish to face the truth, that what is going on in Muslim countries is not exceptional.

### Duplicity or Democratic Conversion of Political Islam?

The fact that Islamic radical groups accept participation in elections, after having long considered democracy as a political regime incompatible with Islam, and the fact that they denounce the authoritarian regimes in power in Muslim countries by demanding "free, transparent and honest" elections, and by calling for democracy and human rights, is interpreted in different ways. Some see in it a democratic conversion comparable to that which allowed the development of political Christianity at the beginning of the 20th century into Christian democracy in Europe, then into the theology of liberation of Latin America; others see duplicity in it and a strategy aimed at attaining the same objectives that many Islamist groups continue to want to achieve by violence, ideological indoctrination, the invasion of all sectors of public life so as to impose an exclusive hegemony on society.

Those of the first opinion only remember the reassuring declarations of certain Islamic radical leaders, such as the Moroccan Saadeddine Othmani; the Prime Minister and chief of the Turkish AKP, Erdogan; the Sudanese Hassan Turabi; certain figures from the Tunisian Al-Nahdha groups charged with relations with human rights organisations (especially in Europe); Tariq Ramadhan, etc.;

and leave out everything that contradicts these declarations in the actual discourse of these same leaders and hide past and present attitudes of groups to which they and other leaders of the same movements belong. They create the impression that they really want to reassure and convince themselves that the Islamists have become true democrats and true defenders of human rights that they make them out to have said on occasions when they want to hear them say. Knowing that the Islamists they promote accept the idea of referring to democracy and to human rights, but continue to oppose secularism with every last bit of energy, and refuse all ideas of secularisation which are incompatible with the political exploitation of religion, those that talk of the democratic conversion of Islam consider more and more frequently that democracy can be imagined without secularism or secularisation, and that it can express itself without problem in a religious context, whether it be that of Islam or any other religion. This is the argument defended by the Network of Arab Democrats, created in Casablanca in December 2005 on the initiative of the Centre for the Study of Islam and Democracy in Washington – under the aegis of the United States – and with the participation of Islamists known as moderates, – such as Saadeddine Othmani et Mohamed Yatim from the JDP, and the "secular democrats" – so moderate that they have accepted the shelving of their secularism in order to work with those Islamists who have not given up maintaining a religious reference.<sup>2</sup> This is also the position defended by certain protagonists of the alliance which was born out of the hunger strikes in Tunis in October and November 2005, during the World Information Society Summit.<sup>3</sup> François Burgat in France, Nathan Brown<sup>4</sup> in the United States and plenty of other researchers fascinated by political Islam, brought their scientific caution to the argument.

<sup>2</sup> See the text of this network's declaration on the website of the Centre for the Study of Islam and Democracy, based in Washington, Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy (CSID), [www.csidonline.org](http://www.csidonline.org) and the articles published on this site pertaining to this question.

<sup>3</sup> See the platform of this alliance and the debates which it has encouraged on the press pages of the opposition (notably Attariq Aljadid in the month of May and Al-Mawqif) and on sites such as those of the Committee for the Respect of Freedom and Human Rights ([www.crlidht.org](http://www.crlidht.org)) et [www.aloufok.net](http://www.aloufok.net).

<sup>4</sup> See in particular the presentation made by the PJD on the occasion of the invitation of Saadeddine Othmani, at the beginning of May 2006, by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace) published by AtlasVista Morocco, [www.avmaroc.com](http://www.avmaroc.com), on 09/05/ 2006 and the article which was published with Amr Hamzawi and Marina S. Ottaway, (2006).

Once again the example of “Christian Democracy” was invoked to give credence to the idea of a democratic conversion of political Islam: Why is something that was possible in Christian terms not possible in Muslim terms?

Those of the second opinion insist on the duplicity and treachery of Islamic radicals by promoting everything which contradicts the profession of democratic faith in figures and trends, presented as an example of the democratic conversion of political Islam: the absence of self-critique regarding antidemocratic ideas and practices contrary to human rights (like the support for the regimes of the Taliban, the Islamic Republic of Iran, the crimes of the Sudanese State when Turabi was Minister of Justice, and where M. M. Taha was condemned and executed as a renegade for the same ideas that are demanded today by the same Turabi, etc.), the silence over what is being said and done by other Islamists who continue to reject democracy and human rights, the persistence of hostile attitudes towards freedom of conscience (notably for Muslims who are forbidden to change religion), towards the rights of women (it is important to recall on this subject that many Islamists known as “moderate”, like Tariq Ramadhan and the Tunisian Rachid Ghannouchi sit beside Y. Qaradhawi in the European Council of the Fatwa, which defends polygamy) and towards secularism. They suspect that the Islamists are sharing out the roles: some playing the democracy and human rights card to reassure the United States, the European States and those powers ready for certain democratic overtures, to win the sympathy of the defenders of human rights; the others continue to defend an orthodox Islamist line, demanding the introduction of a Muslim theocracy faithful to the teachings of A. Mawdudi, H. Al-Banna, S. Qutb, Khomeini, etc. There is no lack of examples on the sharing out of roles: The AKP in Turkey play for the respect of republican and secular institutions – at the same time as maintaining their reference to Islam – the rapprochement with Europe and the moderation with which the Saadet party, the other branch of the Refah party, maintains a line faithful to the traditional demands of Turkish Islamists. Many

of the deputies elected under the AKP banner defend the Saadet positions which hold power in several of the country’s large towns. The two parties refrain from attacking one another and keep their hostility for their secular adversaries. All the same, in Morocco, this distribution of roles is made at the heart, even at the direction of, the JDP. The Secretary General, S Othmani and a part of the leadership play for the respect of the institutions, democratic overtures and moderation whilst Moustapha Ramid, certain deputies and local executives maintain a line which allows the JDP to benefit from the vote of the Association of Justice and Charity of Sheikh A. Yassine and to keep contact with the radical expressions of political Islam. We will find the same distribution of roles, more or less mirrored, between Hamas and the Islamic Jihad in Palestine, the Muslim Brotherhood and the “jihadist” groups in Egypt and Jordan, at the heart of Nahdha and amongst these and other more or less moderate expressions in Tunisia, between the different expressions of political Islam in Algeria and everywhere where strong relationships and the political situation oblige Islamists to opt for this type of strategy, which is a double edged sword.

Beyond that which opposes them, these two viewpoints – democratic conversion and duplicity – have in common an overestimation of the unity and the strength of political Islam. The first considers it to be a force which from now on has to be reckoned with, and with which one must compromise and ally in the hope of gaining its friendship, or at least not attracting its wrath; the second sees it as a monster capable of calling all the shots without giving anything away, and that it is necessary to exclude it by every means in order to prevent harm. They also have in common not seeing the reality of political Islam other than from the angle which reinforces their own party view: for or against the opening up of the political arena to Islamic radical groups, for or against an alliance between democrats and the enthusiasts of political Islam? It seems to me that the question is more complex and needs to be tackled differently than from the exclusive angle of immediate political considerations.

### **Under What Conditions can Political Islam be Absorbed by Democracy?**

The friction, the spectacular U-turns such as witnessed the recent stances of Hassan Turabi, the contradictory declarations and attitudes of leaders and of Islamist groups, must be interpreted as the signs of a crisis which has only just begun. In fact, if it is premature to speak of a democratic conversion in the ranks of political Islam, it is important not to hold on to a monolithic and reductionist vision of this movement. The contradictions which exist at its very heart do not only indicate duplicity or a well thought-out and controlled strategy. The disenchantments with relation to the Iranian, Afghan and Sudanese experiences; the consequences of the attacks of September 11th 2001 in New York, of May 16th 2004 in Casablanca and the other attacks perpetrated upon Madrid, London and in different countries, Muslim or not; the failure of the strategies adopted by the Algerian Islamists; being brought face-to-face with the realities of power after electoral successes, as in Jordan in the 1980s, in Turkey, in Palestine and elsewhere; the lack of support of Saudi Arabia and of certain financial backers, etc.; – all of these factors shook convictions, upset schemes, challenged plans, and divided the unity which the Islamic movement displayed, when it was still no more than a critical project playing on the failures and the difficulties of its adversaries. Today Islamists are held to account for their courses of action, to justify and assess, to give explanations on the actions for which they are responsible, and to answer questions concerning their attitudes. All of this cannot happen without effects, and U-turns are not unheard of, nor are prevarications, contradictions, omissions, silences over embarrassing subjects, double-speak and everything that is hidden by those who speak of a democratic conversion of political Islam and emphasised by those who insist upon the duplicity and deceit of Islamic radical leaders. These are the concrete manifestations of a crisis which will finish, sooner or later, by producing separation and division between those who are sincerely in favour of the democratic cause and those who will stay faith-

ful to the theocratic ideas of political Islam. But it will not be able to play a part until, on one hand, democratisation produces its effects upon Muslim reality, at an institutional level and in terms of social relations and peoples' attitudes, and on the other hand, when Islamists come face to face with rational democrats capable of confronting them uncompromisingly and ready to defend them when they are unjustly deprived of their rights. Today, these conditions are far from being met. Democracy is threatened everywhere by the effects of globalisation or the economic liberalism calling more and more upon clericalisms, old and new, and prefers to lean on authoritarian regimes rather than on the development of democracy. In the majority of Muslim countries, it is still a demand made by associations and movements who have little influence upon society, confronted by the authoritarianism of reigning powers and the rise of political Islam. Often, their weakness drives them, simultaneously or one by one, to place themselves behind dictators who stifle them for fear of the danger of Islamic radicalism, or behind political Islam to show their rejection of the corruption and tyranny of the powers that be. We are very far from the conditions which allowed the passage from a political Christianity in Europe which arrogantly rejected democracy, human rights and all forms of secularisation to a Christian democracy which was made up of the established members of a modern, democratic and secularised society. This is why the urgent priority for democracy is not to make an alliance with political Islam in the name of a hypothetical democratic conversion, total or partial, of its supporters, nor to play along with authoritarian powers who want to exclude arbitrarily from political life the adversaries which they fear to be a threat to their hegemony over society and the state. The urgent priority is to create a democratic pole capable of being a cre-

dible alternative to current powers, and to political Islam.

### Conclusion

The electoral successes of political Islam are not the product of an adherence to its ideas of the world, social relations and politics. It is elsewhere very difficult to identify a coherent and common project for all the groups of the movement. Outside the demand for an "Islamic State", which is more a standard than a clear vision of what it ought to be, of the rejection of what Islamists attribute, pell-mell, to "Western influences" – secularism, the total respect of freedom of conscience, and complete sexual equality – on all the other questions, political Islam has nothing specific and the groups which comprise it are very divided. It is the vagueness of its policy documents and the radicalism of its arguments against hegemony, as well as the arrogance of Western powers and their allies – including corrupt and authoritarian Muslim regimes – which explain political Islam's success, coupled with the absence of another credible, sufficiently organised alternative to these regimes. It would therefore be improper to conclude from this any specificity of Islam which would make it a religion particularly incompatible with democracy and secularisation, as the supporters of a certain reductionist cultural simplification and the prophets of cultural wars like to relate. Even if it is too soon to talk of an end to political Islam, either by a conversion to democracy of the groups which represent it, or by the arrival of an alternative secular democracy which has trouble in asserting itself, the total triumph of these groups does not constitute a fatal destiny from which the Muslim world will not be able to escape and with which it is necessary to compromise, in the hope that it will be, "a fertile regression".<sup>5</sup> There exists in Muslim societies

a profound hope of modernity, freedom, equality and dignity, an associative movement which carries forward these aspirations, and democratic forces which, if sufficiently united, recognised and aided, can help to make such a regression totally unnecessary.

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<sup>5</sup> Views of L. Addi on the subject of the electoral victory of the FIS in Algeria at the beginning of the 1990s.