

Islamic Activism and Democratization

WENDY ASBEEK BRUSSE
& JAN SCHOONENBOOM

Ever since the rise of Islamic activism in the 1970s and '80s, regimes in the Middle East and their political supporters in the West have been reluctant to allow Islamic political movements full and equal participation in national elections and parliaments. Their argument has been that once such movements receive access to the political arena and assume power, they would quickly end democratic competition altogether. In view of the absolute claims of many early Islamic activists, this fear

of "one man, one vote, one time" was quite understandable. After all, these activists rejected principles of democracy and human rights as contradictory to the absolute sovereignty of God and to Sharia. They wanted the Islamization of society and the creation of an Islamic state based on their own, literal interpretations of the rules laid down in the Quran and Sunna, including the cruel *hadd* penalties. It is mainly their ideology that has inspired the widespread notion of a "clash of civilizations" between the West and Islam.

Islamic activism has proved to be neither static nor monolithic, however. Today's movements are usually very different from those of the 1970s and 1980s. Many former, revolutionary leaders have taken on more constructive roles within society and politics. Instead of striving to replace the (secular) national state, violently if necessary, with an (Ummah-wide) Islamic state, they now fight authoritarian rule through participation in the existing political system. Some have taken on board the ideas of Islamic reform thinkers who try to connect Islam with democracy by using Islamic concepts such as *shura* (consultation). Others see democracy as a valuable product of human reason that favourably relates to the intentions of the Quran. Others do not even look for a solid theological or ideological foundation for reconciling Islam and democracy. What all three groups share is the willingness to adapt themselves to existing political rules. They formulate political programmes, join coalitions, and distance themselves from the absolute truths and undefined forms of "opposition Islam" that appeal to dogmatic radicals and extremists. The younger generation, in particular, often draws on Islamic grassroots networks to gain support among ordinary citizens. They have become familiar with the role of democratic principles and human rights in the fight against state oppression, arbitrariness, lawlessness, and social marginalization.

Islamic activism in Egypt

The Jamaa al-Islamiyya in Egypt offers an example of such a transformation of Islamic activism. After violent confrontations with the government during the 1990s, which peaked with the Luxor bombing in 1997, the Jamaa leadership decided to renounce violence. This led to a secret agreement with the government in 2002 and a historic public explanation from the imprisoned Jamaa leaders about their change of course. The Egyptian authorities even allowed them to travel around various prisons to persuade their followers. The leaders also published four books in which they gave an underpinning, on the basis

Islamic activist movements and parties have become crucial political players throughout the Muslim world. In a recent policy advice to the Dutch government, the Netherlands' Scientific Council for Government Policy argues that the EU should recognize Islamic activism as a potentially constructive force for promoting democracy. The EU should use its renewed Euro-Mediterranean policy for the Middle East to support the participation within the political system of all constructive political parties, including Islamic parties.¹

of the Quran and Sunna, for the thesis that armed Islamic struggle is not legitimate. Furthermore, they distanced themselves from the Jamaa doctrine and practices of the 1970s and 1980s, including the strict interpretation of the sovereignty of God provided by Islamic thinkers such as Mawdudi and Qutb. To avoid any misunderstanding that this indeed represented a new, official position of the Jamaa, the books included the names of their authors, sympathizers, as well as all the Jamaa

founders and historic leaders. Some of them revealed in interviews that their process of reconsideration had begun in 1982 but had been eclipsed by the escalation of violence and radical splintering during confrontations with the Egyptian regime.

Despite this moderation, the regime continued its predominantly repressive approach towards Islamic movements. This treatment included the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, which has always been more conciliatory towards the regime than the Jamaa. In the full glare of the state-controlled media, prominent Brotherhood leaders have been charged with membership of a religious—and therefore illegal—organization and with undermining state security. Through the imposition of prison sentences they were removed from the political arena and many other activists were frightened off. Initially, the Brotherhood ended up further on the political sideline and experienced a crisis. Younger generations accused their leadership of being ideologically rigid, autocratic, and insufficiently open to constructive debate and coalitions with other parties. In 1996 several prominent critics decided to form a new party called al-Wasat (Centre). This party, whose founders included women and Copts, was initially considered by the regime as a clone of, and front for the Brotherhood. A principal founder, Abu-Illa Madi, two party sponsors, and thirteen leaders of the Brotherhood were arrested and accused of membership of an illegal organization and conducting political activities without authorization. Ultimately, eight Muslim Brothers were sentenced to prison terms.

Unlike the Brotherhood, al-Wasat labels itself a political party that is not linked to Islamic faith but to "Islamic culture" on the basis of *citizenship*. With this concept the party stresses to seek a society in which Muslims and Christians have an equal place as citizens. They distance themselves from the Islamization policy of the Brotherhood and, following the example of modern, formally recognized, religiously oriented parties in Turkey, Jordan, Yemen, and Malaysia, are trying to become a broad party with a democratic, and reform-minded direction that is willing to form alliances. Because of this stance, the Party (now officially called Hizb al-Wasat al-Gedid, the New Centre Party) has received support from several prominent secular opposition leaders.¹ Meanwhile, the Brotherhood has learned from its competitor and has made a political comeback. During the November 2005 parliamentary elections, its politicians presented themselves as "independent" candidates in 150 of the 444 districts, and eventually won in 88 districts. Although still formally banned, they are now the largest opposition group in parliament.

The need for constructive European engagement

Unlike what many "clash thinkers" and authoritarian regimes impute, Islamic politics do not constitute a homogeneous, immutably fundamentalist, and/or violent threat. It is true that threats do arise from jihadist groups. However, while their ideology and actions have caused widespread damage and fear, they are not representative of the political developments in the Middle East. Nor is the evolutionary path

The European Commission now stresses that Europe should be open to ties with all the relevant democratic actors, including Islamic political movements and parties.

of Islamic activism in Egypt so unique. Many other Islamic movements and parties have undergone similar endogenous reform processes. This can be observed in Jordan, Morocco, Kuwait, and Yemen, where Islamic parties can now take part in politics under certain conditions. Consequently, non-religious parties have taken more heed of the voters' wishes to see political programmes reflect religious values. The result is increasing competition for the large group of voters in the middle of the political spectrum, which leads to further moderation and readiness to compromise. The political agenda and behaviour of these Islamic parties also serve as examples for movements in neighbouring countries and other regions. Even in Egypt and Tunisia, where religious political parties and movements still have no access to the political arena, the success of Turkey's religiously inspired AKP serves as a source of inspiration for pragmatism and the gradual appropriation of democratic and human rights concepts.

The current turmoil in the Middle East should not block our view of such promising developments. The member states of the EU, who have Muslim states as their immediate neighbours and many Muslims among their own populations, cannot remain aloof. Relations with and within the Middle East have become a crucial influence on their international as well as their domestic internal stability. An inward-looking EU, which renounces external ambitions, only creates an illusion of security that does not remove existing vulnerabilities. Moreover, aloofness would mean ignoring opportunities to support promising developments within the region. At the same time, recent history shows that democracy cannot permanently be imposed from outside. It needs to emerge primarily from within.

Euro-Mediterranean policy and European neighbourhood policy

The EU can and should use its "soft power" to stimulate endogenous steps towards democratization. In the past, the EU's advocacy of democratization in the Middle East was directed towards secular movements and parties, even though these had little political legitimacy among the local population. Its so-called Euro-Mediterranean Policy (EMP) was even designed to curtail the popularity and influence of Islamic activist movements. Created in the wake of the Oslo Peace agreements (1993), its charter originally intended to settle the peace relations between the Arab world, Israel, and the EU. With the rise of the FIS and the civil war in Algeria fresh in memory, however, the framers of the so-called Barcelona declaration on the EMP (1995) associated Islamic activism chiefly with fundamentalist, violent movements that would seriously undermine stability in the region. Scenario's of "one-off elections" dominated their risk analyses.

In its original form, the EMP rested on the assumption that mutually improved market access in combination with foreign direct investments, and multilateral trade liberalization could set in motion a process of economic growth that would lead to a strengthening of the rule of law and democratization. Political reforms would be stimulated best by supporting secular opposition groups, Western-oriented NGOs, and so-called civil society organizations. Ideally these would gradually develop into countervailing powers that could extract democratic concessions from the incumbent regimes. So far, however, these groups have played only a marginal role in politics and society. By clever combinations of repression, patronage, and co-optation, they have been sidelined or "bought off." Many "official" NGOs, such as community service organizations, unions, and chambers of commerce now have close economic and personal ties with policy-makers whom they do not wish to jeopardize. Yet, the Islamic-inspired political movements, parties and organizations that do manage to mobilize the masses of ordinary citizens (including also women), have thus far not been involved in the EMP.

Despite its low public profile and very modest record over the first ten years, the EMP can potentially support democratization. Now, there exists within the European Commission and among the member states support for a renewed EMP that introduces a firm link to the bilateral policy of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). This latter policy instrument can introduce a more forceful linkage between political reform efforts by individual countries and positive incentives such as



PHOTO BY YOAV LEMMER / © AFP, 2006

improved access to the internal EU market, financial aid, and loans. In this manner, a better balance can be achieved between the multilateral co-operation of the EMP and the individual reform trajectories of the ENP. The range, emphases, and tempo of the reforms no longer need to depend on the least enthusiastic reformers among the Middle Eastern partner countries.

In a remarkable change of course, the new EMP has abandoned the premise that secular forces in the region are natural allies in the battle against Islamic activism and that NGOs outside the political arena always provide the most important impulses for democratization. The European Commission now stresses that Europe should be open to ties with all the relevant democratic actors, including Islamic political movements and parties. This change forms an important opening for constructive engagement with Islamic activism. What remains unclear, however, is the extent of support for its position among EU member states. Recent calls by the Commission for defining a standpoint on democratic Islamic parties has found little resonance on the ministerial level. "Islam" has become a very sensitive issue in most member states and politicians are clearly reluctant to be seen to endorse the Commission's views.

Muddling through?

While violent confrontations are now increasingly being framed as clashes between the West and Islam, it is no longer possible to maintain the status quo by muddling through. Also in its own interest the EU should step up efforts to stimulate endogenous democratization in the region. It should explicitly recognize Islamic political and social groups as *potentially* legitimate and credible partners for constructive engagement. This recognition must not only penetrate the bureaucratic circuits of "Brussels." EU governments should explicitly endorse this new policy and explain this to their own populations. In the current polarized climate they will thus send the signal to people in the Middle East and to their own (Muslim) populations at home that all constructive political activists, including religiously inspired groups, will be taken seriously as potential allies in the pursuit of political participation, democratization, and improvement of human rights. Accordingly, the EU may regain some credibility regarding its own commitments to these values.

Note

1. Scientific Council for Government Policy, *Dynamism in Islamic Activism: Reference Points for Democratization and Human Rights* (Amsterdam University Press, 2006).

Wendy Asbeek Brusse is Researcher at the Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy.
Email: asbeek@wrr.nl
Jan Schoonenboom is Member of the Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy.
Email: jan.schoonenboom@hetnet.nl