The Political Sociology of Islamism

Kepel, G.

Research Approaches

GILLES KEPEL

The Political Sociology of Islamism

By the year 2000, Islamism will be approximately a quarter of a century old. This movement, though it claimed deep roots, surfaced and flourished with the major social breakdown which took place in the mid 1970s in the Muslim world. Twenty-five years later, social sciences – provided they take stock – have the opportunity to make a significant breakthrough in the analyses of what was one of the most puzzling – if unexpected – social phenomena of the contemporary period.

A quarter of a century covers the span of a generation. Activists who were in their twenties in the mid 1970s, on Egyptian, Pakistani or Indonesian campuses, are now middle-aged. Their black beards are turning barley and corn. They chanted slogans and forwarded the utopia of the *daoula islamiyya*, the Islamist state. As for now, for better or worse, they have a record. They are established, part of the political game. Some are in power – where they distribute patronage –, others are in jail, some dead, others in exile in the impious lands of the West – to which they have an intimate exposure –, and many are in business. In some cases, their world-view has changed. And they have children. The new generation which is coming of adult age in the 1990s has no memories of the fights of the late seventies and early eighties – the Iranian revolution, Sadat's assassination, etc. – just like the activists of the seventies were foreign to their own parents' stories: the struggle against colonialism, the battles for independence, and everything that had taken place from the middle forties to the early sixties. The young Islamists of yesterday had built their vision and mobilized their followers to a large extent as a reaction to the status quo of their time – which they described in categories of thought and speech which were grounded in Islamic parlance but adapted to the social, political, cultural and economic conditions of those days. To what extent are they still relevant for the young adults of the year 2000? The 1997 presidential election in Iran gave advance notice that a majority of the children of the Islamic republic were willing to oust the incumbents. In Turkey, Refah Partisi's short-lived venture in government showed that Mr Erbakan and his friends could not engineer enough social pressure to remain in power. Egyptian and Algerian Islamist movements, in spite of their wide following, were unable to topple the State, and could not help their splitting up into competing splinter groups: the violence and terrorism of the extremist factions blurred the accomodationist message of the mainstream organizations.

These and a few other examples should help us understand that Islamism is not the tidal wave that its supporters longed for and its opponents dreaded. It is by no means the End of History of the Muslim world today. It is but a social movement like any other – communism, nationalism, liberalism, fascism, socialism, … – which is subject to ebbing and flowing, to internal contradictions, and it has to compete fiercely with other social movements in order to attract and mobilize followers. Twenty-five years ago it was a new issue: today, it is no longer so, and we have to consider post-Islamism.

A quarter of a century of existence provides a lot of data, and allows for comparative analysis – something which was hardly feasible for those of us who engaged in early studies of the phenomenon by 1980. Then, the task of the social scientist who tackled such a topic was to be an eye-opener, to uncover the significance of Islamist movements – in contradistinction to the *prénotions* or the common wisdom of the social sciences discourse of the times, that discarded them as insignificant, epiphenomenal, reactionary, fascist, and the like. During this pioneering stage, each of us was discovering his own field, and we had very little access to comparison, because social science literature was scant. As a new phenomenon, it did not bring with it much historical depth: it could be put into perspective with earlier movements – such as the Egyptian Muslim Brothers for instance – but the social environments of British-controlled and independent Egypt were worlds apart. It could be related to intellectual history – such as the *œuvre* of Sayyid Qotb – but ideology was by no means a surrogate for political sociology. For the few who took the movement seriously at its onset, it was fascinating – all the more so because it provided for an 'indigenous' conceptual language that seemed to reveal the malfunctions of society, that had a tribune tone. But we were not equipped at the time to analyse the movement in terms of political sociology, to evaluate its relation, as an object, to the field to which it belonged. Hence, we focused on what was at hand and expedient – on discourse and militancy.

Since then, the environment of the research on Islamism has undergone a sea change. Scarcity was replaced by hypertrophy. Many valuable studies (and many less valuable) were published, and their first and foremost asset was to provide grounds for comparison. It is outside the scope of one individual, even of a team of scholars, to cover an array of movements that function in so many different societies and use so many different idioms. Fieldwork research is now available on Islamism in China; Southeast, South and Central Asia; Iran; Turkey; Africa; the Arab world; Europe; and America. To take but one example, students of the Arab world, who rarely know Urdu, had to rely on hearsay when it came to Mawdudi and the *jamaat-e Islami*: now that we have S.V. Nasr's superb scholarship, not only can our knowledge *per se* of that ideologue and his organization make a leap forward, but it also brings invaluable food for thought when one embarks on a study of FIS or *Refah*. Hence, the challenge of the social sciences has changed: though there always will be a lot more to discover, much has been done in terms of description and inventory of Islamist movements as an object of research. What remains in front of us is the study of the interaction between such an object and the social field in which it functions. In other words, the political sociology of Islamism is now the continent to be explored.

One of the difficulties of this task is due to the extremely politicized aspect of the majority of the literature which is produced on Islamism, and the strong normative pressure which is exerted on scholars to take sides – something that blurs the very process of research. To some extent, the present situation is comparable to studies of communism in the post World War II period, when specialized scholars were caught between the hammer of the fellow traveller and the anvil of the social traitor. Nowadays, one is torn between apologists and enemies. Both groups are backed by powerful, well-funded interest groups and foundations, control research centres, university chairs, journals, and the like, particularly in the United States. When one does not want to enrol in either camp, financial resources become scarce. Both apologists and enemies share one basic assumption: Islamist movements as they view them are representative of Muslim societies today. Either they are altogether 'bad guys', hostile to the West, and should be contained; Or they are mainly 'good guys' – except for a few 'extremists' – with no hostility to market forces, and they should be co-opted into power. An increasing amount of the social sciences literature on Islamism is now being produced in order to reinforce either of these two normative views.

The risk here is to jump to conclusions and to miss the object of research – to confuse the representation of Islamist movements with their reality. All the more so as the movements themselves contribute to this process of representation as they produce a lot of discourse, which is self-promoting. Some is aimed at the West, some at local bases of support. Some is replete with *salam*, some with *jihad*. Twenty years ago, when nothing was available but discourse and militancy, we had to take discourse very seriously. Nowadays, with a quarter of a century of social history of Islamism, we should start with facts, and consider discourse as part and parcel of the political process, not as a key to its understanding.

One very simple starting point, for those convinced that it is now time to take stock, would be to look back at the divergent fates of Islamist movements in the many countries where they have emerged – and for which there is serious monographic research available. How is it that they have been successful in some cases, managed to seize power, have failed in others, were unable to resist state repression and/or to mobilize wide enough a constituency? Comparative data now allow researchers to find new evidence on the social cluster that composes Islamist movements: everywhere, they brought together different social groups with diverging agendas, which could remain united under certain circumstances, but whose alliance could break under other circumstances. If one compares the movements of Iran and Algeria, for instance, one of the keys to understanding why they succeeded in seizing power in one case and failed in the other lies in the interaction between the pious middle-classes, the young urban poor and the Islamist intelligentsia in each society. In Iran, Khomeini managed to control the whole mobilization process and keep all groups united until the outcome of the revolution. In Algeria, the FIS was able to mobilize side by side the *hittistes* and the goldsmiths during the early phases, from 1989 to 1991, but it was incapable (lately) to prevent the splitting of the ranks between the pious middle-classes and the young disenfranchised – something which hampered its capacity to seize power, and then to resist repression. Such phenomena should lead us to be more aware of the social composition of the Islamist parties, and of the relevance of social factors to their capacity for mobilization – whether it be in the case of Refah Partisi, of Jama'at-e Islami and the other Pakistani religious parties, of the Arab Muslim Brothers organizations and their rivals within the political Islamic field, of ICMI and the Muhammadiyya in Indonesia, etc. To what segments in contemporary Muslim societies do those movements eventually deliver, and what do they actually deliver – particularly when they have partial or hegemonic access to power? And, conversely, which are the social groups that feel deprived, or ill-treated by them?

A quarter of a century should have been long enough for social scientists to dispel their fascination for the mystique of contemporary Islamism: it is now high time for scholars to treat it like any other social object – something which may well, in turn, shed more light on our understanding of the social use of religion on the eve of the twenty-first century. ✦

Prof. Dr Gilles Kepel is the director of research at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique and professor at the Institut d'Études Politiques in Paris.