Democracy and Islamists:
what is next?

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>> Democracy without Islamists is now inconceivable in the Middle East. In the aftermath of the Arab spring, in particular, Islamist parties have won numerous elections. Their exclusion from any democratic process would put the legitimacy and sustainability of the entire process at stake. However, merely lifting the barriers to inclusion is not enough to cure the region's persistent democratic deficit. The diversity of Islamists suggests that there is no unified, one-size-fits-all formula that could guarantee their successful inclusion.

Some actors, such as the Syrian Jabhat Alnusra, are ideologically against joining the democratic process, and are therefore more likely to remain loyal to their declared objective of an undemocratic Islamist state. Others have repeatedly expressed their commitment towards the democratic process, and yet their inclusion in the aftermath of the Arab spring has yielded mixed results. The electoral victory of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in both parliamentary and presidential elections was followed by attitudes that reflected a narrow understanding of democracy – limiting it to winning power through the ballot box. This narrowness eventually contributed to former President Mohammad Morsi's demise. Meanwhile, Tunisia's Ennahda movement is still struggling – with its allies in the ruling troika – towards democracy, with sustainable good governance still faraway.

While exclusion brings oppression and aborts democracy, inclusion does not guarantee policy solutions. Dealing with this paradox thus

HIGHLIGHTS

• The exclusion of Islamists from any democratic process would endanger the legitimacy and sustainability of the entire process.

• It is now necessary to revisit socio-economic structures, broaden participation and implement comprehensive transitional justice processes that confer legitimacy on emerging political systems.

• Even among radicals, the incentive for resorting to violence can be reduced through the establishment of an efficient judiciary and the reconciliation integral to transitional justice.

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requires more sophisticated approaches that transcend traditional inclusion-versus-exclusion arguments. Most importantly, it requires revisiting socioeconomic structures, broadening participation and implementing comprehensive transitional justice processes that confer legitimacy on emerging political systems. It also means encouraging Islamists' to revise their governing strategies.

THE PRE-REVOLUTIONARY CONTEXT

From Tunisia to Libya, and from Egypt to Yemen, the Arab spring has opened the doors for integrating into the political scene previously excluded or marginalised actors, both Islamist and secular. For decades, formal democratic processes were manipulated through widespread election rigging and power centralisation. Independent institutions capable of acting as counterweights to the government, most importantly local authorities, student unions and workers unions, were either weak or dominated by the ruling parties. This was aggravated by the dismantling of traditional social institutions (such as Sufi orders and guilds), which resulted in an institutional deficit that inhibited the emergence of competent political actors in the aftermath of the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, and in conflict-ridden Syria.

Ruling parties' longstanding monopoly over the state, alongside restrictions on intermediate institutions, kept opposition actors unexposed to the management of public affairs. This proved detrimental to their competence and understanding of the state. Neoliberal reforms – most importantly massive privatisations, more flexible labour markets with serious restrictions on collective action, and the decay of the state's social responsibilities – have allowed more space for and created demand for Islamists' alternative safety nets, leading to the mushrooming of their philanthropic activities. Coupled with their political exclusion, this has contributed to the emergence of a parallel Islamist sphere, decreasing Islamists' incentive for integration.

This context left only minimal room for serious policy debates, hence facilitating Islamists' focus on identity politics – stressing the need to uphold Muslim identity and defend it against the secular threat. This served as the glue keeping Islamist organisations intact despite ideological and socioeconomic inconsistencies. It also contributed to the emergence of the long-standing slogan 'Islam is the solution', with the inherent assumption that Islam provides a closed, all-inclusive system of governance that can solve Muslim countries' chronic political, economic and social woes. Adherence to Muslim values and legislation consequently weighed more than competence in the Islamists' formula for success.

It is important to highlight, however, that not all Islamists adopted the same stance. Those operating on the margins of their respective organisations, primarily in formal civil society, were more aware of the primacy of competence over identity. Their proximity to real 'policy' and 'services' issues led them to adopt more pragmatic and policy-oriented approaches. Leaders in exile – in the cases of Syria and Tunisia – were closer to the latter group. Tensions between the core and the periphery of Islamist organisations were evident; in the pre-revolutionary context, those at the core were mostly labelled as 'conservatives,' while those operating in the periphery were seen as 'moderates'.

CURRENT CHALLENGES

The Arab spring has opened the doors for Islamists and other previously excluded actors actively to engage in politics and share power. The change for Islamists was too quick and exceeded their ability to cope. While not necessarily more competent than their secular counterparts, they had more organisational power. Capitalising on strong electoral machines, Islamists soon made it to power in both Tunisia and Egypt, and are likely to become a major political force in any post-Assad scenario in Syria. Once in power, they had to face unprecedented challenges. High expectations accompanying the revolution,

scepticism from political opponents, persistent economic challenges, reticent and ineffective bureaucratic institutions, and a fierce counter-revolutionary force with backing from the oil-rich Gulf further complicated the scenario for inexperienced Islamists. Egypt's Islamists were ousted from power, while Tunisia's Ennahda is still struggling with acute challenges.

The ousting of the MB's Mohammad Morsi in Egypt and the violence that followed had a significant impact on Islamists across the region. Unfolding events are contributing to the emergence of an anti-engagement narrative. This is founded on two pillars. First, there is increasing scepticism regarding the prospects of engagement. The ousting of a democratically-elected Islamist president only one year after being sworn in, alongside Islamists' predominantly limited procedural understanding of democracy, has led more Islamists to believe that they are only allowed to participate in elections as long as they do not win majorities, for they will never be 'allowed' to rule. Bernard Lewis' infamous 'one man, one vote, one time' has

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thus been reversed in the minds of Islamists; if they stretch the limits and win one time, they lose their chance forever. This sentiment is clear in the discourse of rank and file MB members, who are moving closer to the Qutbi isolationist discourse. Today, it is not uncommon to find MB youth members emphasising that today's current struggle against the military and the ruling alliance is their 'last political battle', after which they will either resign from the MB and join more 'confrontational' groups, or abandon politics and focus instead on the MB's philanthropic activities. This discourse is being increasingly adopted by Islamists in the Tunisian opposition, arguing that Ennahda's recurrent 'democratic compromises' were never enough for its opponents, and that it should adopt

a purer and less compromising position on Islamisation instead.

The second pillar of the emerging anti-engagement narrative is the lack of faith in the system's ability to bring justice. The massacres that followed Morsi's ousting provoked mounting anger amongst the Egyptian Islamist youth. The lack of credible investigations and the widespread belief that the system of justice is 'biased' and 'selective' undercuts any incentives for engagement, and compounds the isolationist stance with a less critical position *vis-à-vis* the use of violence. So far, this has not degenerated in support for large-scale violence but entailed a less hostile position regarding the assassination of security personnel in Cairo and Sinai and the presence of arms in demonstrations; and an increasing inclination towards using Molotov cocktails, sticks, stones, and in some instances, fire-arms in confrontations with security forces.

Recent developments in Egypt are triggering unprecedented reactions from the MB, but are not likely to engender any major rifts within the movement as long as tensions in the country last. By attempting to maintain organisational unity through capitalising on the context of confrontation – which automatically 'postpones' internal debates and criticism – the group seems to have temporarily retreated from its pragmatic tradition. Instead, it aims to paralyse the political process and deny the current regime the democratic legitimacy it seeks through a constitutional referendum. Whether they succeed or not, this strategy will further destabilise the current political system and complicate Egypt's transition. The Nour party and other Salafi groups – traditionally less pragmatic and more resistant to democratisation than the MB – seem to have switched positions with the Brotherhood, and are now exhibiting more pragmatism as they struggle to retain some space in a polity that is increasingly hostile to Islamists.

These complications in Egypt have significant effects on Islamists elsewhere in the region, most importantly in Syria, Libya, Tunisia and Yemen, ››››››

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where radical anti-engagement and violent movements can easily capitalise on this example and narrative. Developments in Egypt have had a mixed impact in Tunisia. On the one hand, Morsi's ousting has made Ennahda realise the magnitude of the threats associated with political stagnation, and its leadership has thus sought to strengthen the ruling alliance by offering more far-reaching compromises. On the other hand, it has empowered more radical elements claiming the fruitlessness of advancing the Islamist cause through democratic means. While Syria's dynamics are more complicated, it is safe to predict that developments in Egypt will significantly help empower more radical elements and will negatively influence post-Assad arrangements.

A STRATEGY FOR ENGAGEMENT

Successfully engaging Islamists is necessary to guarantee the sustainable rule of law and peace in the region. But this will only be possible through a more sophisticated strategy that capitalises on previous engagement experiences. The first step is reducing the threat of Islamists' isolationism by maintaining a democratic polity that has only minimal barriers to inclusion. While advocates of violence should not be tolerated, other political actors (Islamists and seculars) should be allowed to organise themselves and actively participate in the political process. Repressive measures should be lifted from civil society and political domains alike.

Parallel to that, the very foundations of the democratic system should be revisited in a manner that empowers civil society, enables institutions capable of acting as counterweights to the government and encourages participation. Local government and municipalities could specifically act as important platforms in this regard. It is through these institutions that democracy delivers benefits to citizens and that a new generation of politicians, Islamist and secular, can acquire political training and experience both to understand the functioning of the state and to represent society. It is primarily through these institutions that dogmas can be

transcended, and the focus can shift to service and policy questions, consequently leading to the softening of the Islamist-secular divide. Any successful strategy must thus legally empower local government, push for local elections and encourage political parties to participate (though tying government funding to performance in local elections).

The empowerment of local government should be coupled with a number of measures aiming at democratising the system and boosting its legitimacy. Most importantly, the currently dominant neoliberal structures should be revisited. Restrictions on collective action and trade unions (viewed as essential to ensure system stability and keep the state in control at a very volatile moment) should be loosened to allow for the development of a more balanced and inclusive make-up. Legislation enabling more public participation in decision-making – particularly at the local level – should be pursued to broaden the system's legitimacy and make democracy more meaningful for local communities. Socio-economic imbalances should be addressed to allow for the inclusion of larger segments of society and decrease the incentive towards isolationism. Efforts should be made to decrease the income gap through the imposition of maximum and minimum wages, without exceptions, subsidies should be restructured by lifting those directed towards energy intensive industries (from which crony capitalists benefit most), and the state should assume a wider responsibility in terms of social services, most importantly healthcare and education. Allowing the formation of unions for police officers would help reorient oppressive institutions and boost their professionalism while limiting the impact of the networks of interests governing them. Collectively, these measures will lead to a more inclusive public sphere, thus reducing the parallel Islamist sphere. Incentives for isolation will thus diminish, and with the exception of actors ideologically opposed to joining the democratic process, Islamists and other actors currently on the margins will be more inclined to participate.

A comprehensive transitional justice process is crucial if all other measures are to bear any fruit. While each of the post-Arab spring countries has unique challenges, they all need properly to address the damage caused by long years of oppression and recent political crises. Far from being limited to the task of reconciliation, the process should focus on dealing with the structural causes of injustice on at least three different fronts. First, widespread human rights violations, ranging from travel bans and extra-legal detention, to torture and extra-legal capital punishments. Both Islamists and seculars have been subjected to these violations under pre-revolutionary regimes. Restructuring the system so as to impede such violations will decrease their mutual scepticism and fear as they compete for power. A tangible output of this process should be legislation guaranteeing the independence of the judiciary and the observance of human rights in legal processes.

Fixing the structural deficits that have led to the gridlock of political systems would further increase the legitimacy and inclusion capacity of emerging regimes. Pre-revolutionary contexts were not only characterised by widespread election rigging, but also by non-functioning institutions. The transitional justice process should thus not only guarantee free and fair elections, but also checks and balances that ensure the empowerment of representative institutions at both the national and local level.

Crony capitalism and prevalent corruption were also key characteristics of pre-revolutionary regimes that still need to be addressed. Egypt's privatisation process mainly benefited the regime's inner circles; such corruption must be reversed or the new regime's legitimacy will be jeopardised.

Collectively, these measures will contribute to building more democratic systems capable of including a multitude of political actors and newcomers – thus preserving the system's legitimacy. They will also help strengthen the incentives for engagement for Islamist movements.

CONCLUSION

The measures outlined in this paper will not eliminate the threat of radical movements, but will yield many positive results. By disempowering the narrative hostile to engagement, they will help limit isolationism to groups that are ideologically resistant to democracy, while encouraging hesitant groups to engage. Even among radicals, the incentive for resorting to violence can be reduced through the establishment of an efficient judiciary and the reconciliation integral to transitional justice. Among organisations committed to engagement, these measures will help transcend ideological dogmas. This will in turn increase their competence and broaden their understanding of and commitment to democracy.

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