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Islamist Parties and Democracy

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GOING BACK TO THE ORIGINS

Husain Haqqani and Hillel Fradkin

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How should we understand the emergence and the nature of Islamist parties? Can they reasonably be expected not just to participate in democratic politics but even to respect the norms of liberal democracy? These questions lie at the heart of the issues that we have been asked to address. In our view, any response that is historically and thus practically relevant must begin with the following observation: Until very recently, even the idea of an Islamist party (let alone a democratic Islamist party) would have seemed, from the perspective of Islamism itself, a paradox if not a contradiction in terms. Islamism's original conception of a healthy Islamic political life made no room for—indeed rejected—any role for parties of any sort. Islamist groups described themselves as the vanguard of Islamic revival, claiming that they represented the essence of Islam and reflected the aspiration of the global *umma* (community of believers) for an Islamic polity. Pluralism, which is a precondition for the operation of political parties, was rejected by most Islamist political thinkers as a foreign idea.

As should be more or less obvious, the novelty not only of actually existing Islamist parties but of the very idea of such parties makes it exceptionally difficult to assess their democratic bona fides. But this difficulty merely adds another level of complication to a problem that stems from the very origins of Islamism and its conception of the true meaning of Islam and of Islam's relationship to political life.

To appreciate the paradoxical character of the notion of "Islamist parties"—and indeed to understand and define Islamism as such—it is necessary to look back at the first organized, formal, and thus politically relevant expression of Islamism in the modern era, the Muslim Brotherhood, founded in Egypt in 1928 by Hassan al-Banna. The Brotherhood, along with the similar South Asian organization known as the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), was practically coextensive with Islamism for a considerable part of the twentieth century. (The JI, whose name means "Islamic assembly," was founded by Abu'l-A'la Mawdudi in 1941 with the Muslim Brotherhood as its inspiration.) Most if not all of today's "Islamist parties" owe their origins to branches or sister organizations of the Brotherhood or the JI. Yet, paradoxically, the Brotherhood is the original source of the notion that an Islamist party is a contradiction in terms. The questions posed by this symposium, not to mention the answers, are all in one way or another bound up with the Brotherhood, its history, and its legacy.

In considering this history, one must acknowledge that certain core elements of what has come to be termed Islamism predated the Muslim Brotherhood. One such element was the repudiation of the accumulated historical tradition of Islam on the grounds that this tradition actually constitutes a species of corruption which has distorted the pure and original meaning and practice of Islam as both a religious and a political phenomenon. A second element (the corollary of the first) was the desire to restore Islam's original purity by embracing the example of its founding generation, the so-called Salaf as-Salih, or "virtuous ancestors." Salafis, as adherents of this view may still serviceably be called, aimed to achieve a reintegration of religion and politics whose most obvious feature would be the governance of life through the full application of *shari'a* (Islamic law).

The Brotherhood and its offshoots, however, took a further step by insisting that the state take the lead in applying *shari'a*, thereby making the political act of establishing an Islamic state central to their ideology. The call for an Islamic state was the crucial ingredient that al-Banna and the Brotherhood added to beliefs—in the lost purity of Islam and the need for laws based on *shari'a*—that had already won the endorsement of such older movements as the Wahhabis of the Arabian Peninsula, the Deobandis of India, and the Salafis of Egypt.

The Brotherhood's specifically political approach compelled it to raise the question of the relationship of Islamism to parties and party government, and al-Banna gave this question a very clear answer. In his view, the Muslim Brotherhood had to be organized as a "movement" rather than a "party." Indeed, it could not be the latter. Al-Banna's explicit rejection of the notion of party appealed in part to the unattractive experience of party politics in Egypt during the decades following the First World War. In this respect, al-Banna's view was in tune with

the general distaste that party politics evoked during that era in many places, including Europe.

Al-Banna's rejection ran deeper, however, for in fact he condemned not only parties but the modern nation-state and all its institutions as fundamentally un-Islamic. In the first place, the nation-state represented a Western innovation and imposition that contradicted the transnational character of the *umma* by breaking it up into smaller units. In addition, parties as political organizations were, in al-Banna's eyes, nothing but forms of institutionalized disunity, disrupting by their very nature the inner harmony which, by his lights, was an absolutely essential feature of any Islamic polity worthy of the name.

Al-Banna held that the Islamist movement was to be guided in its reform of Muslim life at every level—from the individual through the familial and social to the political—by the model of Islam's founding generation. The Islamist interpretation of that model was embodied in the famous creed that al-Banna wrote for the Brotherhood: "Allah is our objective. The Prophet is our Leader. The Koran is our Constitution. Jihad is our way. Dying in the way of Allah is our highest hope."

This conception provided the most fundamental reasons why the Brotherhood was to be understood as a movement rather than a party, and as a movement that transcended Egypt or any other nation-state. It led al-Banna to work toward the founding of branches throughout the Muslim world, a goal that the movement would eventually achieve. But for the same reasons, these branches remained movements rather than parties for most of the twentieth century. It is only in recent years that opposition to the notion of an Islamist party has been overcome. Today, of course, with the proliferation of Islamist parties (many of which have roots in the Brotherhood movement), the notion no longer seems paradoxical. Moreover, to the extent that these parties involve themselves in politics it is, at least in the first instance, in the politics of particular nation-states, not of the worldwide Muslim community.

Does History Matter?

Is this history still relevant? Do not today's Islamist parties, those walking contradictions of the original transnational and integralist tenets of old-school Islamism, mark a decisive break with the past? Can we not therefore dispense with all this history and even with the notion of Islamism as such, except insofar as it might serve to describe such radical jihadist groups as al-Qaeda, for whom party politics and elections remain anathema? According to this line of reflection, the notion of an Islamist party would retain its paradoxical character. But that might only mean that, strictly speaking, what is really at issue is not Islamist parties but rather Islamic (or better yet, Muslim) parties that have evolved away from their Islamist roots to become genuine parties in the modern and

perhaps also the democratic sense. Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP), for example, is often cited as the perfect instance of such an evolution. Should we not, then, reframe the question in these terms? To repeat: Can we not dispense with this history?

Perhaps at some point in the future we will be able to do so. But surely we cannot do so yet. To begin with, whatever evolution has taken place has occurred within contexts in which the Islamist movement has been under constraint or even duress. There may be a more than accidental connection, after all, between the moderation of the AKP and the existence in Turkey of a powerful and assertive secularist establishment, fortified by a Kemalist military that barely more than a decade ago pushed an Islamist-led government out of office by means of an institutional coup. Jordan and Morocco also are noted for having relatively moderate Islamist parties; each of these countries has a robust, strongly engaged monarchy (a king who rules and does not merely reign) backed by a potent internal-security apparatus. With circumstances such as these in mind, it is fair to ask: How much of the original Islamist perspective and legacy has been sincerely modified or abandoned by these parties and to what extent has pluralism been fully embraced? Or are we merely witnessing a phase of tactical retreat and camouflage that Islamists will abandon once they calculate that conditions are more favorable?

Most Islamist parties have not expressly repudiated their historical legacy. It thus survives as a standard to which appeal can be made both from within and outside such parties—in the first case by hard-line factions within the ranks, and in the second by other and more radical Islamist groups that flatly reject any form of pluralism altogether. In a formal sense, the weight of the past can be seen in the name of the reformed Islamist parties: Most if not all of them use the words "justice" and "development" in their names. This is meant to distinguish them from earlier and more purely modern parties that often gave themselves names featuring words such as "freedom" and "progress." Thus in Morocco, one finds that the Islamist formation is called the Party of Justice and Development (PJD), while the old-line nationalist party of the center-right is called Istiqlal, after the Arabic word for independence—a harking back to the anticolonial struggles of a half-century and more ago. The use of the word "justice" so prominently by the PJD is meant to evoke that party's ties to the traditional terms of the Islamic political past, which stressed the claims of justice rather than of freedom or liberty. Indeed, the latter had practically no standing whatsoever in traditional Islamic societies.

More substantively, however, the potential or actual force of the Islamist legacy is bound up with the question of the status of *shariʿa*. As has often been observed, the *shariʿa* understood as divine law and thus as the will of God stands in tension with any alternative understanding of legislation as deriving from human will, as expressed for instance via

the decisions of elected legislators. But as a practical matter, of course, even the divine law requires human intermediation for its implementation, and this intermediation has taken various forms over the course of Muslim history.

In practice, the issue for contemporary democracy and especially liberal democracy will turn on whether an Islamist party and the state that it might govern can admit the legitimacy of some political and legal authority in addition to (and somehow combined with) the authority of Islamic law. From the point of view of liberal democracy, such a party and state would have to accept (if only tacitly) the principles of a private sphere and of individual rights—principles by which liberal democracy stands or falls. Such a sphere might permit—but would not require—the private adherence to Islamic law.

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In terms of electoral politics, the issue might be stated as follows: How do or will Islamist parties define the minimum qualifications of electors and candidates for office? Is every adult citizen a potential candidate for office and electoral participation? Or are the franchise and office to be restricted either to Muslims in general or, even more menacingly, only to those Muslims who conform to Islamist standards—that is to say, those who are "true Muslims" rather than "Muslim unbelievers" or "backsliders" or "neopagans." Mawdudi used the terms "Muslim by choice" and "Muslim by chance" to distinguish between the two categories. The latter is a category that has come to figure prominently in contemporary Islamist discourse. Jihadist groups have used it to justify the murder of other Muslims, especially Muslim rulers and their allies. Islamist parties might use it to legitimize the idea of refusing to give up power after they have won office through elections. Hence the fear that Islamism will lead to dictatorships of the pious modeled on communism's dictatorships of the proletariat.

As mentioned above, Muslim political history shows some variability in the implementation of Islamic law. Indeed, the determination and implementation of Islamic law were often matters handled in the "private sphere" by clerics lacking political power. At least after the time of Muhammad and his immediate successors, Islamic jurisprudence developed largely at some distance from the rulers of the polity. This was responsible for the well-known fact that Islamic law comes in at least four major "schools" or variants. The adherence to Islamic law coexisted with the separate and de facto superior authority of Muslim political rulers and their various dynasties. Thus Muslim experience does not lack for a variety of political arrangements within which separate layers

or spheres of law can be present at the same time. Indeed, such a variety exists today in the practices of various Muslim countries.

It is difficult to say, however, what bearing this might have on Islamist political practice, since the original Islamist impulse was to regard this variability, whether noted in the past or the present, as a sign that all was not well in the Muslim world. It is of course possible that Islamist parties might come to rethink this matter—initially perhaps as a matter of necessity in the face of countervailing political forces, and then more positively through the elaboration of a new political theory. But the latter has certainly not occurred yet, and the former has so far produced results that, as the case of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood shows, must be called ambiguous at best.