

# JOURNAL OF DEMOCRACY

July 2014, Volume 25, Number 3 \$13.00



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# BOOKS IN REVIEW

## THE UPS AND DOWNS OF ISLAMISM

*Tarek Masoud*

***Temptations of Power: Islamists and Illiberal Democracy in a New Middle East.*** Shadi Hamid. Oxford University Press, 2014. 280 pp.

In May 2010, the scholar Shadi Hamid interviewed future Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi, then a member of the Guidance Bureau (governing body) of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). It was not a propitious time for the 82-year-old movement, which was then reeling from a renewed campaign of repression and harassment under Hosni Mubarak. Senior MB leaders had been jailed on what they claimed were trumped-up charges, and the movement's cadres were halfheartedly preparing for parliamentary elections (scheduled for October of that year) that everyone knew were going to be rigged in favor of Mubarak's party.

According to Hamid, who relates his meeting with Morsi in the opening pages of this book, the man who would go on to become Egypt's first democratically elected president sounded neither defiant nor defeated: "At this moment," said Morsi, "we are not seeking power because [that] requires preparation, and society is not prepared" (p. 2). Squaring this remarkable bit of modesty with the MB's remarkably immodest behavior once Mubarak was overthrown is the task that Hamid has set for himself. In the course of tackling it, he also helps us to begin understanding why the democratic experiments of the so-called Arab Spring have not panned out.

This is an important book, based on "hundreds of hours" of interviews and "over 20 months" of fieldwork, primarily in Egypt, but also in

Jordan and Tunisia. Hamid sheds much light on why it is that Islamists throughout the region made all the right noises about democracy and freedom while up against the ropes of authoritarianism, but then seemed to forget all that lofty rhetoric once they were free to swing away in the competition for power. His answer is straightforward: Under dictatorship, the name of the game for opposition movements such as the MB was to avoid arousing too much ire—either on the part of the state (which might crack down) or their fellow opposition movements (whom they needed to help push for greater political freedoms). Thus Islamists under authoritarianism tried to make themselves appear small and unthreatening. They took part in elections only gingerly (never aiming to win a majority of seats), made great shows of reaching out to ideological adversaries, and tied themselves into rhetorical knots in order to obscure the more hair-raising bits of their social agendas.

Yet once dictatorship dropped away, so too did the Islamists' mask of self-effacement and moderation. In the mad dash for votes and seats in postrevolutionary elections, the MB and its ilk went for broke, casting opponents as infidels and playing up the religiously inflected social conservatism that—according to Hamid—is shared (nay, yearned for) by the vast majority of Arab citizens. The result, as predictable as it is depressing, is that the Islamists' erstwhile allies in the “liberal” opposition felt themselves forced to turn to the streets—and, in the case of Egypt, to the “guys with guns”—to undo what they could not undo at the ballot box.

Hamid is a gifted and sensitive student of Islamists and the Middle East; there is much here for both the lay reader and the scholar. The latter will take this tome mainly as the latest salvo in an old debate over the so-called inclusion-moderation thesis. This argument—advanced by several academics and, according to Hamid, adopted wholesale by many Western policy makers—holds that having to compete (and govern) in open, democratic conditions will cause Islamists to become less extreme. For example, some say that Islamists will become too busy with the quotidian toil of governing to enact their seventh-century social agenda. Others claim that the need to garner votes will pull Islamists toward the middle of the ideological spectrum, where, presumably, all peoples around the world lie.

According to Hamid, this is a misreading of the Islamists and the societies from which they come. It has been wrong all along to think that democracy will render Islamists kinder and gentler, he appears to argue, because Islamists are deeply attached to their illiberalism, and because the voting masses are themselves neither kind nor gentle. As Hamid reminds us, “in one survey after another, large majorities say they want Islamic law to be the principal or even the only source of legislation and favor the application of the *hadd* punishments, which include cutting off the hands of thieves, stoning for adultery, and the death penalty for

leaving Islam” (p. 17). This is not the sort of *demos* out of which liberal democracies (or moderate Islamists) emerge.

There is much to commend Hamid’s narrative, which is delivered with an all-too-unusual combination of care and verve, but it nonetheless leaves us with questions. For his argument to work, the forces that compelled Islamists to be cautious, moderate, and gradualist under authoritarianism would have had to have disappeared with the advent of democratic competition. But we know—thanks in part to Hamid’s own testimony—that this was not the case, and that Islamists knew that this was not the case. For example, during the Tahrir Square protests of early 2011, Hamid tells us, the Egyptian MB feared “that even a hint of Islamism in the square would undermine opposition unity and provide the regime an opening to discredit the revolution” (p. 141). In his early discussions with Islamists during that period, he tells us, the MB indicated that it was “willing to lose on purpose,” offering “preemptive concessions” to liberals and leftists, including a pledge to neither seek a parliamentary majority nor compete for the country’s presidency (p. 142). According to Hamid, the MB was well aware that Egypt’s transition was always at risk of derailment. The Islamists had been here before, after all (in Algeria in 1992 and Palestine in 2006, when Islamist electoral victories were met with international opprobrium or even reversal at the hands of Western-backed incumbents). They knew that it could again be true, as Algerian Islamist leader Abdelkader Hachani warned in 1991, that “Victory is more dangerous than defeat” (p. 11). Consequently, Hamid tells us, in the immediate aftermath of Mubarak’s departure, the MB continually stressed the need for “consensus,” “dialogue,” and “unity.”

And yet those words were soon forgotten. Hamid says that the definitive split between the MB and its former compatriots in the anti-Mubarak opposition came in March 2011, just weeks after the dictator’s overthrow, when the MB joined the interim military government in calling for rapid parliamentary and presidential elections. According to Hamid, the MB claimed that quick elections were the surest way to get the military out of politics, while liberals feared that holding a vote quickly would be the surest way to guarantee an MB-stacked legislature that would dominate the work of constitution-writing and guarantee a fundamentalist, retrograde charter. (To avoid this, liberals wanted a national committee to draft a constitution before any elections were held.)

The Brothers did not budge, however, and therein lies the puzzle. The cost to them of accepting the liberals’ preferred timetable would have been relatively modest—the MB would have been unable to give free rein to its religious ambitions, but Hamid says that it really did not want to do this anyway. Why, then, did the Brothers risk alienating everyone at such a tender transitional moment? Surely they understood

that the military's commitment to democracy was shaky, that Western observers still looked askance at the MB's democratic bona fides, and that non-Islamists remained worried about a coming theocracy. In other words, all the things that had supposedly caused Islamists to "moderate" under authoritarianism were still in place, but suddenly stopped working. Why?

The MB's moderation under dictatorship and intemperance under democracy stands in direct contrast to the behavior of its Islamist counterpart, the Salafi Call Society and its affiliated political party, the Party of Light (Nour). Under Mubarak, salafists had been politically quiescent—driven by what Hamid variously describes as "textual literalism," "puritanism," and "ultraconservatism"—and given to railing against the heresies of elections and parliamentarism. "After all," Hamid explains, for salafists, "God—not parliament and not the people—is the sole lawgiver" (p. 13). Once the way to democratic competition was thrown open, however, the salafists rushed down it with alacrity. What was forbidden suddenly became permissible. And they were remarkably pragmatic. When the MB nominated Morsi to the presidency, the salafists—just as fearful as their liberal counterparts of MB domination—looked not to Morsi's "right," but to his "left," supporting Abdel Moneim Abul Futuh, an MB defector who had refashioned himself into a liberal (at least by Egyptian standards). In other words, inclusion did to the salafists the precise opposite of what Hamid thinks it did to the Brotherhood.

In the end, Hamid's explanation for the MB's puzzling and self-destructive behavior is right there in his book's title: The group was simply blinded by the temptations of power, which rendered it insensate to the perils of grasping for rule at that tenuous moment in Egypt's history. No grand social-science theory is needed to explain why the leaders of a long-oppressed political movement, finding themselves suddenly presented with a surprising opportunity, tried to grab too much too soon. For that, the most cursory understanding of human nature will do.

Still, Hamid's analysis has troubling implications, and it is not always clear that he is ready to face them. Although he is a principled foe of the Egyptian military's 3 July 2013 removal of Morsi, there is much here which supporters of that action might find congenial. There is, after all, a fine line between the claim that Egyptians are not ready for democracy (which many coup supporters would make) and the claim that Egyptians are not ready for (or, more correctly, do not want) *liberal* democracy (which is a pillar of Hamid's argument). A particularly uncharitable reader might even conclude that Hamid, with all his talk of the Arab citizen's innate thirst for the application of Islamic law, validates an older, essentialist view of Muslims that sees them, in the words of Syrian scholar Sadik al-Azm, as examples

of “*homo islamicus*” rather than as three-dimensional beings with a variety of interests and allegiances.

A second, and I believe unintended, result of this book’s argument is the message that it conveys to the non-Islamists whose support the MB is currently trying to win as it struggles against the military regime. Brotherhood spokesmen have begun to talk openly of their movement’s mistakes in power and of the need to work across party lines, but readers of this book might be forgiven for seeing in this newfound humility more evidence of the situational moderation that Hamid identifies—a pose found useful under repression, but sure to be scrapped if and when the nature of the political game shifts once again from protest and resistance to elections and governing.

Although I have focused on this book’s deeply informed and engaging discussion of the Egyptian case, it is worth concluding with the author’s treatment of Tunisia. There, the experience of Islamists in power seems to have been happier. Unlike the Egyptian MB, Hamid tells us, Tunisia’s Rachid Ghannouchi and his Renaissance Party (Ennahda) were models of pragmatism. Where their Egyptian counterparts presided over a deepening constitutional role for Islamic law, Tunisia’s Islamists agreed to leave *shari’a* out of their country’s constitution entirely, claiming that it “had simply become too divisive” (p. 200). Why was Ennahda able to resist the temptations that had felled Egypt’s MB? For Hamid, part of the answer is that Tunisian society was and is more liberal than its Egyptian counterpart. Ennahdha (which, after all, did not have a parliamentary majority) was unable to push too hard for all of its fundamentalist desiderata.

What is remarkable, though, is that despite Ennahdha’s pragmatism and moderation, it still wound up being ejected from office (although, unlike the Brotherhood, it went peacefully, and under political pressure rather than at bayonet point): In January 2014, a caretaker government took the reins in Tunis, with elections to be held by the end of the year (most likely in October or November). Tunisia, then, is not a story of Islamists behaving like extremists once in power. Instead, it is a story of truculent “liberals” who, if Hamid is right, would not take yes for an answer, and insisted on seeing a trick behind every Islamist concession. What the Tunisian experience suggests is less that the inclusion-moderation thesis is wrong than that non-Islamists have categorically ruled out the possibility that it could ever be right. Given the role of so-called liberals in reversing democratically generated outcomes in Tunisia and Egypt, we may someday look back on all the time we spent questioning only the Islamists’ democratic commitments and ask ourselves if our focus was a bit, just a bit, too narrow.

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