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**Evolving Interplay of Islam and Politics from Islamist to  
Islamic Democrats**

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# Evolving Interplay of Islam and Politics from Islamist to Islamic Democrats

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## Abstract

Islam is unique in its relationship with politics. It plays an important role in politics and governance initially under the *Rashidun* and subsequently in many Muslim empires. The collapse of Ottoman caliphate in 1922 and process of decolonization which started in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century led to start of many Islamic movements in newly independent Muslim countries. These movements are at critical juncture; as Muslims around the world are polarized around two extreme in political front, on the one hand we have Islamic radical groups like ISIS, Al Qaeda etc and on the other hand secular parties which does not see any role of Islam in politics and governance in Muslim countries. Many traditional Islamist parties are now evolving into Islam democrats. Unlike Islamist the approach of Islamic democrats is more inclusive, they want to integrate Muslim religious values into political platforms designed to win regular democratic elections (Nasr 2005). The Ennahda Party of Tunisia reflects this evolution from Islamist to Islamic democrats. Ghannouchi (2016) outlines this transition, and argued that today Tunisian are less concerned about islamization or secularization of society rather they are interesting in building a governance system that is democratic and inclusive and meet their aspiration of better life. The paper is an attempt to investigate this shift and its consequences for Islamist across Muslim world.

## Introduction

The religion has played an important role in politics in historical perspective. Religion is considered one of the reasons that led to early state formation. Religion helps in create a shared identity beyond kin and tribe and help to establish state in its primitive form. It plays an important role in creating a rule of law and constraining the power of kings and monarchs. The constraints on the power of executive give rise to basic level of accountability and rule of law. The rules and regulation given by religion also facilitate commerce and trade between its followers. The shared identity created by religion and rules of the commercial interaction also facilitates the interaction among followers of particular religion. The relationship between religion and state is not same across different religions. In most of polytheist religions like Hinduism, the government is considered “unfortunate necessary”, the focus is social sphere above that of political. (Dalton 2011). In monotheist religions like Christianity and Judaism, politics and state functioning is not of primary concern. In case of early Christian it was said they refused military service and wouldn't accept government office or governing of cities. (Wilken 1984). Although subsequently different political groups from right to left and even libertarian argued that Christianity endorse their particular point of view on politics and state based on their reading of Christian religious text. In the case Islam, the relation between Islam and politics is quite different from other religious traditions. This unique Islamic experience is explained by Hamid (2016) in his book “Islamic Exceptionalism”. Islam right from the beginning has close relationship with politics and state governance. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) unlike Jesus and Moses, was not only messenger of GOD but also the ruler and statesman. He not only developed the early Islamic state and also manages its affairs for years. This has consequences for Muslims after fourteen centuries across the world. The nature of relationship between Islam and state has changed over the last many centuries but the connection between them is intact. Islamic by nature is political with details instructions on politics and governance.

## Islam and Politics

Islam unlike many other religious tradition has always been closely connected with politics and state. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) has established a state in Medina and manages its affair for years, during this period there are many Quran instructions revealed which has clear instructions on politics and state affair and there are also many Hadiths dealing with this interaction of religion and politics. The foundation of Islamic political philosophy is that it does not allow distinction between spiritual and temporal, religious and secular unlike western tradition where God and Caesar are clearly separated. The relationship between Islam and politics, power and authority, has shown lot of diversity but it was under the broad pattern of unity of religion and state. The relationship between religion and state is dynamic in Islamic tradition keeping in view the changing circumstances but it was anchored on holistic unity between them. The half of the Islamic world comes under the colonial rule of European states in nineteenth century. The vast Muslim territories come under relatively smaller European empires. This has resulted in intellectual and practical challenge for muslim across the muslim world. The onslaught of western modern ideas of democracy, secularism and nation states posed number of pertinent questions for Muslims. The collapse of Ottoman Caliphates in 1924 eliminates the symbolic unity of state and religion in muslim world.

### The rise of Political Islam.

The Collapse of Ottoman Caliphates and the increasing colonization of Muslim world by European empires have resulted in number of challenges for Muslims. The political Islam in its multiple variant is 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon although some researcher tries to locate in 19<sup>th</sup> century anti-colonial movements. The reaction to overwhelming strong colonial influence on Muslim world resulted in Islam based anti-colonial movements in different countries. The institutional form of resistance came in play by the name of political Islam in second half of twentieth century. First movement in this regard, Muslim Brotherhood was established by Hasan al-Bana (1906-1949) in Egypt. This political Islam is not monolithic but broadly speaking, it refers to interpretation of Islam as political ideology with system of comprehensive ideas for political and social action (Safire 2009). This ideological bent of religion thus provides tools for organizing society and state. Hasan al-Bana has conservative sufi upbringing, in the backdrop of colonization and he experienced western hegemony first hand in Ismailiyya. The was trend of pushing Islam to only private sphere of life as exemplifies by kemalist turkey after abolition of caliphate (Soage 2008). This according to Bana is continuous deterioration of true Islam and only solution is to go back to true Islam by gradual establishment of shariah. Lia (1997) argued that it marks an important milestone in modern muslim political discourse. This political rule of Islam is rooted in conviction that Islam is complete code of life and solution to all the problems. Hasan al-bana died at relatively young age of 43 thus unable to articulate his ideas on islam as system in persuasive ways. This task was latter accomplished by Syed Qutub from Egypt and Mawlana Sayyid Abu al-'A'la Mawdudi from Pakistan. Maulana Mawdudi was foremost muslim ideologue of twentieth century and considered a pioneer of political Islam. Maulana Maudidi was born in 1903 in Aurangabad, India. His father Ahmad Haman was one of the first student of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's Anglo-Oriental College (Jackson, 2011). He studied law and started practice in Aurangabad. But latter in 1900 he took bayah and joined chisti sufi order and abandoned everything connected with western modernity. This change in view of Ahmad Hasan has profound influence on young Abu al-'A'la Mawdudi. He was raised to become an alim (religious scholar) and taught classical Islamic education in Arabic, Persian, Islamic law at home. Maulana Mawdudi's world view is based on his extensive self-study of Islamic and western traditions. Mawdudi's ideology is deeply influenced by Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) life and establishment of Islamic state in Madina. Mawdudi's thought are influenced by historical context as he presented his ideas. The case in point is his views on increasing power of state have pushed him to reinterpret Islam in unique way. In 1938, he wrote on the increasing power of state;

“Gone are the days when if the state presented its economic, educational, industrial, or social scheme, people made fun of it by calling it grandmotherly legislation. The situation has completely changed. Now the state's arena has almost become as all-encompassing as that of religion. Now it also decides what you are to wear or what not to wear; whom you are to marry and at what age; what you are to teach your kids and what mode of life you are to choose; ... what language and script you are to adopt. So, the state has not left even the most peripheral issues of life independent of its ultimate right to intervene” (Mawdudi 1981: 5).

The rising strange state indicates that in order to protect the right of Muslims (who were minority in India), there is need to re-interpret Islam which can control the state apparatus. The religion Islam thus turn into an ideology based on reading of Islamic history in new way and focus on early state formation in Madina by Prophet (PMUH) and running of state by rightly guided caliphs (*Ramshidun*). In this understanding of Islam based on “golden age narrative”, it is religious duty of Muslims to establish Islamic state which follows the golden age of Islam. He gave lectures and wrote pamphlets which latter published in 1941 under the title Islamic law and constitutions, where he presented his theory of Islam as political system. He declared that Islam is not mere a religion with religious function and rituals rather it is *deen*, a complete way of life to guide us in every sphere of life. He considered Islam a revolutionary ideology who want to change the social order of entire world and rebuild it based on its teaching (Mawdudi 1976). He saw no boundaries between religion and politics rather he saw religion as moral educator of politics and argued that;

“the separation of politics from morality and religion has created more problems than it has solved. The result is that there is skepticism in thought, confusion in values, expediency in standards, vulgarity in behavior and opportunism in diplomacy. Politics has become out and out Machiavellian and this state of affairs has greatly impaired the poise and tranquility of life” (1980 (originally 1941): p7)”

In order to bring down Machiavellian form of politics he argued that we need to infused the politics with religion. Although he agree with the notion of democracy but he did not completely accept the western style democracy. He make a clear distinction between western style democracy and his version of democracy he called “theodemocracy” and said that in Islam, the sovereignty belong to GOD and human has restricted sovereignty with the guidance of Islam. (Mawdudi 1947).

He founded monthly magazine Tarjum nul Quran in 1931 to propagate his ideas and founded a political party named *Jamaat-e-Islami* in 1941. *Jamaat* track in electoral politics is unimpressive but it is well organized democratic party and it was able to spread its ideas across the country. He was instrumental in creation of multiple Islamist political parties across Muslim world.

Political Islam, like any other movement has lot of diversity in their ideas and means to achieve their goals. But the interconnection of politics and religion is overreaching theme of different variants of political Islam. Bokhari (2013) classify Islamist based on their view on nation state and democracy. These are;

- a) *Acceptors* Most of Islamist groups are acceptors, they recognized the importance of rule of law and democracy. They work within the system for the establishment of Islamic state. Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and *Jamaat –e-Islami* in India and Pakistan are leading examples of acceptors.
- b) *Propagandist* The Islamist group comes under this category reject the state and target the society directly. They believe in influencing public opinion and get support from powerful elements in government apparatus like Hizb-ut- Tehrir.
- c) *Insurrectionists* these groups reject both nation state and democracy and relay on arm struggle to achieve their goals. Their approach is top down violent political change. Al-Qaeda and ISIS are more prominent example of insurrectionists.

These categories can help us in analyzing different Islamist group more efficiently. The reductionist scholar sometime bundles up different groups in single category as if there is no diversity in these groups.

There are multiple challenges faced by Islamists across Muslim world, which results in failure to get acceptance from general population in Muslim world. The neoliberal economic program and rising middle class led to change in thinking and strategies of Islamist and thus transformed themselves into post-Islamism. There is visible shift in this direction in many Muslim countries but before looking at that we need to define post-Islamism.

Amin (2016) outlines the main feature of post-Islamism quoting Bayat(2007) and others like Tibbi (2008), Yilmiz (2008) and Lacroix (2004) as follows;

- a) Due to multifaceted crises, the support for Islamism decreases, and created conducive conditions for rise of post-Islamism.
- b) The exclusive, monopolist, puritan, static and revolutionary account of political Islam has been changing in favor of more inclusive, society-centric, vigilant towards individual liberties, and concern of women, youth and non-Muslim and hermeneutically. A movement away from fixed scripture towards historicity.
- c) Post-Islamism is not distinct from Islamism but a variant of it.
- d) Post-Islamism cannot be equated with anti-Islamic or secular but secularization of state/society and prevalence of religious ethics in society.
- e) Post-Islamism can be persuasive argument only if an Islamist organization retreats from establishing an ideal Islamic state.
- f) Post-Islamism may refer to multiple discursive and physical spaces through which reformers/ Post-Islamists may influence Islamists thought and strategy.
- g) Post-Islamism proffers a framework where political reform is linked to religious reform.

The broad characteristics outline above can be observed in the working of many Islamist parties across Muslim world. In a recent edited work Bayat (2013) explains the changing face of political Islam across Muslim world as:

“These diverse narratives suggest that there is not one but many different trajectories of change that Islamist movements may experience. Iran’s post-Islamism developed on the perceived failure of the ruling Islamist politics to address fundamental citizen needs. Turkish Islamism “adapted” itself to meet the political realities of the country as well as its position vis Europe. While in Morocco and Indonesia (as in Iran and Turkey) the Islamist parties self-consciously departed from an Islamist past to act as players in the nations’ politics, the Egyptian Muslim Brothers and Lebanese Hizbullah pursued somewhat ambivalent courses of change. They were pushed largely by the events and geopolitical realities of their own settings and the region, without, however, undertaking a systematic reevaluation of their ideologies. In Egypt, the old guard of Muslim Brothers continued to pursue an “Islamizing” agenda, while its “youths” leaned toward a post-Islamist perspective; and in Lebanon the Hizbullah changed more in practice than in rhetoric. In Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, strands of post-Islamist outlooks emerged to redress what was seen as the harm that Islamism had inflicted on society and faith. Finally, the experiences of Sudan and Syria reflect the presence of some forms of post-Islamist trends long before the global rise of Islamist movements since the 1970s. Most of these trends and movements came to life in and were informed by the post-Cold War political climate, in which the language of civil society, democracy, and reform had assumed unprecedented global currency. The narratives also show that the forms, depth, and spread of post-Islamist experiences may vary. Yet they all point to some shift in vision. In each of these cases, *post-Islamism* denotes a critical discursive departure or pragmatic exit, albeit in diverse degrees, from an Islamist ideological package characterized broadly by monopoly of religious truth, exclusivism, and emphasis on obligations, toward acknowledging ambiguity, multiplicity, inclusion, and flexibility in principles and practice” (p.25)

### **From Islamist to Islamic Democrats**

The post Arab spring experience in Egypt, where the world leading Islamist party Muslim Brotherhood came into power democratically, was pushed out of the government after one year has policy implications for other Islamist groups. The particular case in point is drastic change of strategy at Tunisian Islamist party Ennahda. The collapse of Ben Ali government in 2011 has space for Ennahda in political sphere. It won first free election in Tunisia history by taking 37% of the popular vote. Despite winning election, it has stepped down due to public agitation. The experience of Muslim brotherhood in Egypt has pushed them to resign because the leadership realizes that the alternate could be complete military takeover, which can result into their elimination from political sphere.

The Islamists groups like other ideological groups can be divided in moderator and radicals. The distinction is based on the role of these group roles in the mainstream political process. The moderate groups are those who participate in democratic process and believe in gradual process. The radical groups want to dismantle the existing system and rebuild their own utopia. These broad classifications have their own problems as analytical tool. Schweldler (2011) argues that a better way is to adopt distinctions specific to individual issues. The distinction between legalist and contextualists as in the case of reading of religious text. Another way to look at the behavior of different Islamist groups is by using the lens of moderation. Moderation can be considered as movement from radical to moderate rather than specific category. The liberal notion of human rights, democracy, pluralism and tolerance are connected with moderation. Ghobashy (2005) has presented the case of inclusion of Islamist group; she looked the evolution of Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in recent years. She find that like any other social or political movement, Brotherhood has faces internal conflict heated debate and social and political transformation over the period. The participation in election has reduced the influence of radical members in the party decision making process.

### **The case of Ennahda**

The case of Ennahda from Tunisia is important in the process for transition from political Islamist to Muslim democrats. The Arab spring started in Tunisian and spread to other countries. Tunisian jasmine revolution resulted in outset of Zin al Abadine Ben Ali and his repressive regime. There were only two presidents in Tunisia since getting independence in 1956. It reflects oppressive nature of government and lack of competition in political sphere. Ennahda was founded in 1981 as Islamist party, inspired by Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt. The governments in Tunisia were repressive, they banned Ennahda, many went into exile and newspapers associated with Ennahda were also banned. The Ben Ali regime (1987-2011) maintains an illusion of western secular hypothesis (Esposito 2016). The economic imbalance, corruption and crackdown on political activists and lack of political activism have led to the regime downfall. Ennahda won first free election in Tunisia after the Arab spring in 2011, which makes it biggest political party in Tunisia. Ennahda joined hand with two other

secular political parties to form Troika for constitutional assembly. The military takeover of Egypt by toppling the democratically elected government of Morsi has pushed Ennahda to share more power with other parties and independent candidates. The leadership of Ennahda realized that they might lose the democratic opportunity provided by Arab spring in Tunisia.

### **From Political Islam to Muslim Democracy**

The leader of Ennahda, Ghannouchi (2016) put forward the case of Ennahda's transition from political Islamist to Muslim democrats. He argued that after the collapse of Ben Ali regime in Tunisia, all political parties can freely participate in the political process. The repressive regime is now over and citizen can practice their religion without any coercion. In this background the Ennahda part on its tenth party congress held in May 2016 has made far reaching changes in structure and strategy of the party. The series of changes includes the decision to focus exclusively on politics and leave the other social, religious and educational activities. The result is separation of political and religious sphere. Ghannouchi (2016) argues that:

The focus of the party is now on creates solutions for different socio-economics problems faced by Tunisians. Although the principles of Islam can guide the party but religion cannot be used for political gains. The new constitution provides guarantee for the religious freedom thus the political struggle to achieve it is futile exercise. The Ennahda party members look more at AKP of Turkey rather than Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt as role model. (Monica 2017)

### **Implications for Islamist cross Muslim world**

The public opinion surveys indicate the strong desire by Muslims in Islamic world that Islam should play a significant role in public life. In pew survey in 2012 majorities in many countries like Pakistan, Egypt, Jordan believe that Quran should be strictly followed in the legislative process and many other countries like Turkey, Tunisia significant portion of population argues that values and principles of Islam should be followed in that country. The recent pew report on State and religion reports that, Islam as state religion is in 27 countries out of total of 43 countries with official state religion. This constitutional and public support of religion is usually not translated in electoral success for Islamists across the Muslim world. The failure of Islamist to translate the general positive view about religion and public life into electoral success is across the Muslim world with few exceptions.

The Muslims voters despite the devotion to Islam are not willing to completely support the Islamic parties in electoral process. The Islamists are responding in different ways to overcome their increasing political irrelevance. This political failure of these parties result into disillusionment of their members and even some of them are drifting towards radical parties. Kurzman et al (2010) looked at 89 parliamentary elections in 21 countries over last forty years with one or more Islamist parties. The empirical analysis shows that these parties have received only a small fraction of the vote. The numbers shows that in all of 89 elections, median performance is 7.3 percent of the vote and 6 percent of the seat in parliament. If we add up the votes of all the Islamist parties in a given election still median vote is 15.5 percent and 15 percent of the vote. The recent by-elections in September and October 2017 for two national assembly seats in two important cities of Pakistan; Lahore and Peshawar reflect the voter preference, which clearly indicates the lack of support for religious political parties.

In the light of these developments, I think that if mainstream Islamist parties want to become relevant in Muslim counties and influence their respective national policies, then they need to make fundamental change in their ideological orientation and strategies. The best model in this case is to borrow from experiences of two Islamist parties; Ennahda in Tunisia and Justice and Development party (AKP) in Turkey. In case of Ennahda, the Islamists across the Muslim world can learn from their intellectual leap and transformation from political Islamist to Muslim democrats. The Islamist parties need to create a distinction between Movemnet *Haraka* and Party *Hizb*. In case the distinction is blurred as in case of Muslim Brotherhood then it will led to blame the movement for mistune of party and vice versa (Hamid and McCants 2017). The arguments put forward by Ghannouchi (2016) in this regard are quite persuasive. In Muslim majority countries there is no restriction

on practicing Islam. The Islamist could perform better if like Ennahda they transform themselves into Muslim democrats and create a separation of religion and state. The separation here is not in the western sense of complete secularization rather Islam can be used to guide the policies by nudging the policies through its value system. In the case of AKP of Turkey the lessons can be learned on economic front. The AKP is consistently popular among Turkish people despite its recent authoritarian bent. Gidengil et al (2014) studies the factors behind electoral success of AKP in Turkey. Their results indicate that in addition to religiosity, the party performance in improving the economy and their social services are crucial factors in electoral success of the party. The combination of these two Tunisian and Turkish Model can help the Islamist to influence the public life.

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<sup>10</sup> This ruling, however, is a sign that some elements within the Egyptian state still favour a drastic escalation of violence against Morsi supporters. Doing so might come at the cost of the rule of law: After the trial's March 22 opening session, Tarek Fouda, head of the lawyer's syndicate in Minya, said that the presiding judge had "veered away from all legal norms and that he breached the rights of the defence."

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