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# When Islamists Go into Politics

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Islamist parties and movements in Arab countries have gained great political importance by making the strategic choice to participate in the legal political process and to acknowledge the legitimacy of the existing constitutional framework. Their political participation has given rise to two major concerns both in the Arab world and in the West. First, are these parties and movements truly committed to democracy? And, will participation itself strengthen their commitment to democratic norms and procedures? The experience of participating Islamist parties and movements in Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Bahrain, and Yemen, as well as the armed parties in Lebanon and Palestine, reveals a complex picture.

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## COMMITTING TO DEMOCRACY

Commitment to democracy is not an easy choice for Islamist parties. It involves some thorny ideological issues as well as some major tactical choices.

### *The Ideological Conundrum*

On the ideological level, there is a fundamental tension within Islamist parties and movements between the notion that law must be based on God's word—thus conform to Islamic law or *shari'a*—and the idea that in a democratic political system laws are made on the basis of majority rule by parliaments that are freely elected by citizens. A party cannot call itself Islamist and retain the support of devoutly Muslim followers if it renounces *shari'a* as the basis of legislation. At the same time, a party cannot call itself democratic, struggle to elect its candidates to parliament, and join together with other members of the opposition in advocating for a more open political system without recognizing majority rule as binding. The tension between the Islamist and the democratic view has not been resolved completely by any one party or movement. The outcome of this tension is that the political thought of participating Islamists contains a number of gray zones concerning the place of Islamic law in legislation, the use of violence as an opposition tool, the limits of political pluralism, the civil and political rights of individuals versus the good of the community, and the position of women and minorities within their broader societies. As a result, a constant ideological and political struggle continues between hardliners who insist that *shari'a* must be the standard against which the legitimacy of all laws is judged, and moderates, who are willing to accept laws that are passed according to democratic procedures, provided that they fall within the rather vague boundaries of an Islamic "framework." It is the outcome of the internal struggles between hardliners and conformists that will determine if Islamist parties remain committed to democracy.

Islamist organizations that participate in politics have a dual nature as political and religious actors, complicating their ability to avoid ideological ambiguities. As religious actors, they must adhere to absolute principles. As political actors, they need the flexibility to demonstrate willingness to compromise. Some parties and movements try to solve the conundrum by setting up a political party separate from the religious movement. Separation allows the religious movement to deal with absolute values, while the party plunges into the pragmatic world of political compromise.

In Morocco, Algeria, Jordan, Yemen, Bahrain, and Kuwait there are now Islamic parties (or political societies in the latter two) separate from the religious movements. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood continues to be a banned organization, therefore setting up a political party has never been a realistic alternative.

Separating the religious and political components, however, creates a new set of challenges. The party can lose the support of members of the religious movement if it strays too far.

Even worse, members' allegiance can be transferred to other religious movements that do not dirty their hands with political participation. This is a serious problem for the Party of Justice and Development (PJD) in Morocco.

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The PJD is affiliated with a religious movement called al-Tawhid wal Islah (unity and reform). As a religious movement, al-Tawhid competes with another religious movement, al-Adl wal Ihsan (justice and charity). Al-Adl, which is believed to have a much larger popular base, does not recognize the legitimacy of the Moroccan state and monarchy, and stays aloof from politics. If the PJD strays too far from doctrine or makes too many compromises to gain political respectability with a broader public, it risks seeing its followers turn to al-Adl.

Another difficult issue for Islamist parties and movements is political pluralism. They all accept political pluralism—they could not participate in electoral politics otherwise. But they are not clear about where they set the limits of pluralism. It is difficult for a religion-based party or movement to recognize the legitimacy of all points of view. Throughout the last two decades, participating Islamists have gone a long way in accepting the diversity of views in the political arena. But with regard to moral, social, and cultural issues, they still lag behind. As recently as 2007, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood published a draft party program that stipulated that Copts (and women) could not be elected to the presidency. While the clause was removed from a later draft because of internal and external outrage, the episode reveals the extent to which pluralism remains a contested issue.

### *Tactical Dilemmas*

In addition to the ideological dilemmas, political participation in states where governments are not fully democratic and fearful of Islamists poses a number of tactical dilemmas for participating Islamist groups. Two

main questions are constantly revisited: whether to actually participate in a given election when the playing field continues to be slanted and how many candidates to put forth in an attempt to gain enough seats to be effective in parliament without winning so many as to trigger repressive measures on the part of the government.

On the one hand, by participating under conditions that ensure poor results, Islamist parties and movements risk undermining their standing because results will project an image of weakness. They also risk further alienating those supporters who are already skeptical about participation on ideological grounds and who find in the obstacles further proof that participation is a losing strategy. On the other hand, by participating despite the obstacles put in their way, Islamists can show they are truly committed to democratic procedures and processes, and that they are not fair-weather democrats who only play when they can win.

By the same token, the refusal by Islamists to participate in a specific election reassures those followers who are critical of participation, but it also raises questions about the party's commitment to democracy—an accusation often made by the government. Furthermore, boycotting elections condemns Islamists to powerlessness: a party that has renounced violence but refuses to take part in the political process has no means to exercise direct political influence.

The examples of Jordan's Islamic Action Front (IAF) and Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood movement are illustrative of these dilemmas. The IAF first competed in the fall 1993 elections, only months after its formation in 1992 as the result of a new liberal political parties law. The late King Hussein immediately pushed through an amendment to the electoral law that put the IAF at a disadvantage. Thus the Islamic Action Front decided not to take part in the 1997 elections, only to reverse its position in 2003 when it realized it would not achieve anything by continuing to sit on the sidelines. The same game repeated itself in 2007 when the IAF boycotted the municipal elections in July due to increased government restrictions, but fielded candidates in the parliamentary elections a few months later.

The problem is even more complicated in the case of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, because the movement remains banned by Egyptian law. Although it cannot participate in elections as a movement, it can still negotiate to run candidates under the banner of other legal political parties or field its candidates as independents. The Muslim Brotherhood participated in the 1984 and 1987 elections in alliance with other parties and gained some seats in parliament. The government responded with additional restrictive legal measures and in 1990 the Brotherhood boycotted

the election alongside other opposition parties. The Muslim Brotherhood changed tactics and participated by fielding independent candidates in 1995 (winning one seat), in 2000 (winning 17 seats), and in 2005 (scoring a major victory with 88 seats). The government was clearly alarmed by this outcome and prevented the Brotherhood's candidates from winning any seats in the 2007 Shura Council elections; it further cracked down on the Brotherhood's candidates in the 2008 local elections, leading the movement to withdraw its participation.

The second tactical dilemma facing participating Islamists is deciding the number of candidates to present for elections. Islamists' parties cannot afford to win too many seats. Algeria .....  
 in 1991 and Palestine in 2006 provide .....  
 cautionary examples of what can happen .....  
 when Islamists are too successful. In .....  
 Algeria, the predicted victory of the .....  
 Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) led to the .....  
 cancellation of elections and a military .....  
 takeover. In Palestine, Hamas' surprise victory triggered a chain reaction of .....  
 negative repercussions culminating in an ongoing confrontation between .....  
 Fatah and Hamas. As a result, participating Islamists have become quite .....  
 cautious, deliberately limiting the number of candidates they put forth in .....  
 an election. For example, the IAF in Jordan only presented 36 candidates .....  
 for 80 parliamentary seats in 1993, 30 for 110 seats in 2003, and 22 for .....  
 110 seats in 2007. In Morocco, the PJD in 2002 only ran candidates in just .....  
 over half of the 91 election districts. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in .....  
 the 2005 parliamentary elections also limited the number of its candidates, .....  
 fielding independent candidates in 144 out of 444 districts. In the Shura .....  
 Council elections in 2007, the Brotherhood competed but only fielded .....  
 19 candidates for 88 seats. It is not clear that such self-imposed limits by .....  
 Islamist parties and movements have the desired effect of calming fears .....  
 of a possible Islamist takeover. Indeed, the fact that the IAF, the Muslim .....  
 Brotherhood, and the PJD exercised self-restraint in the past did not keep .....  
 their respective governments from increasing obstacles to participation .....  
 in subsequent elections. As a result, the Moroccan PJD did not limit the .....  
 number of its candidates in the last parliamentary elections in 2007. It .....  
 fielded candidates in 94 out of 95 electoral districts. However, its gains .....  
 were minimal: it added only four seats to its parliamentary bloc, raising the .....  
 total number to 46 (from 42 seats in the 2002–2007 parliament).

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## IMPACT OF PARTICIPATION

Participation leads some—but not all—Islamist movements to moderate their position. The outcome depends to a large extent on the political environment and on the conditions under which Islamists participate. Movements that operate under normal conditions tend to become more moderate; those participating under siege conditions do not. Operating under “normal” conditions in the Arab world does not mean operating under democratic conditions, but under the same conditions that affect all opposition actors in that country—without the threat of constant government crackdown, or punishment in the event of good election results. Such conditions prevail at present in Morocco, Algeria, Kuwait, and to a lesser extent in Bahrain.

### *Participation under “Normal” Conditions*

The country with the most favorable conditions for political participation is Morocco. The opening of the political system in 1997 by then King Hassan II allowed Islamists to form a party, which eventually became the Justice and Development Party (PJD). The new king, Mohammad VI, maintained the opening but sought to contain the participating Islamists through an election law that prevents any party from winning a majority of parliamentary seats. The PJD continued to function as a normal political party in the parliament, and even voted in favor of a new personal status code that was not exclusively based on *shari'a* on the grounds that it was discussed democratically. However, in the parliamentary elections of 2007 it paid a price for playing the role of the loyal opposition in a democratic system. It only secured 46 seats when it expected to win 70, and received fewer votes than in 2002 as disillusioned voters stayed away from the polls. Therefore, in the case of the PJD, participation in legal politics engendered moderation—for which the party paid in electoral votes.

Algeria's Movement for the Society of Peace (MSP) had an experience very similar to the PJD's. It became a partner in the governing coalition under President Abdulaziz Bouteflika in a climate where many Islamists had chosen violence. In the 1997 election the MSP won 71 seats, but has been unable to repeat this level of success. In 2002, MSP only won 38 seats, and in 2007, it did a little better with 52 seats. Despite the setbacks, the party maintains a moderate stance.

In Bahrain, the real issue is not the Islamization of the state but the distribution of power between the Sunni majority and the Shi'a minority.

The Shi'a al-Wefaq Society—the main opposition group—has worked for coexistence and gradual reform rather than confrontation, and participation has indeed been a moderating factor. However, the limited outcome of al-Wefaq's participation combined with continued discrimination against the Shi'a community resulted in the group losing ground within the community to more confrontationist movements.

Kuwait's Islamists are even more fragmented. The best organized group is the ideologically moderate Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM). ICM faces fierce competition and pressure from participating Salafi groups, who take uncompromising positions on moral and social issues such as gender segregation and dress codes. While there is no evidence at this point that the ICM is rethinking its commitment to moderate political stances, it is also clear that competition with Salafi groups is driving the ICM toward socially conservative positions.

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*“Participation under normal conditions appears to strengthen Islamists’ determination to be part of the legal political process ...”*  
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Participation under normal conditions appears to strengthen Islamists' determination to be part of the legal political process of their countries, and to focus less on ideological issues and more on the practical challenges of sustaining the support of their constituencies. Once in parliament, Islamists are forced to focus on the issues with which parliament is seized, while ideology plays a secondary role.

### *Participation under “Siege” Conditions*

Participating Islamists in Egypt, Jordan, and Yemen have faced particularly difficult situations. In Egypt and Jordan, where Islamists represent the only truly organized opposition force, they have been deliberate targets of government repression. In Yemen, the Islah Union has been caught in the process of state collapse as the old divisions between the North and South, tribal divisions, and a faltering economy with growing food and water shortages are beginning to overwhelm the fragile state.

The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood provides a particularly interesting case of how thwarted participation can lead to ideological regression. The Muslim Brotherhood's gains under the reformers' leadership led to more systematic government repression. These actions caused an unintended change in the movement's internal balance of power. The reformers were discredited, and the influence of the hardliners increased. The party's drafted

platform published in 2007 showed the Brotherhood was retreating to old positions. Two elements were particularly revealing: the proposal to place a council of religious scholars above the parliament to ensure the conformity of all laws with *shari'a* and the exclusion of women and non-Muslims from the presidency. Acrimonious debate within the organization and in the broader society caused the Brotherhood to eventually reverse its position. Nevertheless, it was clear that the hardliners had gained more power in the movement, particularly as the majority of elected members to the central bureau (the Guidance Office) in June 2008 were considered hardliners.

The same pattern repeats itself in the case of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood. In a moment of rising tensions with the regime and facing repressive measures, hardliners were voted into the Shura Council to replace more moderate leaders in both the Muslim Brotherhood and the IAF. These events lead to the inescapable conclusion that thwarted participation strengthens hardliners and discredits reformers.

### *Participation by Armed Movements*

The most complex participating Islamist parties and movements are those that maintain an armed wing alongside a political organization. Such actors at present play a dominant role in Lebanon, Palestine, and Iraq. In all three cases, political participation takes place under highly unstable conditions; indeed, this is why the parties maintain an armed wing in the first place. The existence of the armed parties in turn makes normalizing conditions extremely unlikely, creating instead a vicious circle. Armed wings created to address an abnormal situation—Israeli occupation in Southern Lebanon, the unresolved Israeli–Palestinian conflict, and the rule of Saddam Hussein first and the American occupation later—eventually turn into tools used by Islamist parties and movements to increase their influence in the domestic struggle for power. It is important to note that in situations where Islamists maintain an armed wing, so do non-Islamist political actors. In Palestine, Fatah also has its militias; in Iraq, the Awakening Councils (non-religious Sunni militias first created to combat al Qaeda) are entering the political fray. And in Lebanon, all political groups have formed armed organizations. This discussion will focus only on Hizbollah and Hamas.

Hizbollah and Hamas are Islamist movements that participate in the legal political process of their countries—at least when there is one. The two movements are driven more by a political rather than a religious agenda. For Hamas, the problem is Israel, and the solution is not Islam, but

wresting control of Palestine back from Israel. As for Hizbollah, it became armed in the 1980s to drive the Israelis out of southern Lebanon, not to bring the Lebanese back to Islam.

To this day, neither Hamas nor Hizbollah has used their weapons to influence elections. The January 2006 elections in Palestine, in which Hamas emerged as the winner, were judged clean by all observers, and Hizbollah did not use violence to obtain its votes .....  
 in Lebanon's elections either. However, .....  
 both organizations have since used the .....  
 weapons supposedly devoted to the .....  
 "resistance" to fight and win political .....  
 battles inside the respective countries. .....  
 In June 2007, Hamas seized control of .....  
 Gaza and its weapons became a polit- .....  
 ical instrument. A year later, Hizbollah used its weapons and briefly took .....  
 over downtown Beirut in order to force a redistribution of seats in the .....  
 cabinet and gain control of enough seats to have veto power on important .....  
 political decisions.

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The cases of Palestine and Lebanon demonstrate that the existence of an armed wing within an Islamist party or movement easily becomes a domestic political tool. No matter why the militias exist, their presence affects the balance of power within the country. The question is whether the continuous inclusion of these movements in the political process would encourage them to gradually abandon their armed wings. The experiences of Hamas and Hizbollah are not very promising in this regard, but they also demonstrate that the exclusion of these armed Islamists from the political process is not a realistic option given the tremendous popular support they enjoy.

## POST-PARTICIPATION DEBATES

Far from sweeping to victory and domination, as their adversaries feared, Islamist movements that have chosen political participation have had limited impact on their countries. The poor payback of political participation presents Islamists with three major challenges. Their response to these challenges will determine the future course of participating Islamists.

The first challenge is to convince their followers that participation remains the only option. Two arguments are being used for this purpose: even small gains help protect the movements from government machinations and maintain constituencies; and participation is necessary to assuage

the suspicions of Islamist parties by the government and by other opposition parties. The second challenge participating Islamists face is to develop a balance between the requirements of participation and the demands of ideological commitment. So far, Islamist movements are moving between two extremes: some are reverting to hard-line positions, as the Muslim Brotherhood did with the proposed party platform. The other is to re-open the discussion about what are the essential components of Islamist movements and the relative weight of political pragmatism and adherence to principles. The third challenge is to rethink the relationship between the religious and political components and thus to devise the best possible structures for organizing the movements. The debate is driven in part by conditions. The Muslim Brotherhood, for example, has no options but to keep political and religious work in one organization, since the government does not allow it to form a political party.

In conclusion, there are no easy answers to the questions frequently asked about participating Islamist parties and movements: “Are they truly committed to democracy? Will participation increase their commitments?” The evidence leads to an unsatisfactory answer: it depends. It is the balance of power among the different groups—itsself determined by the politics of the country as well as the internal politics of the organization—that will decide whether a party or movement will remain committed to democratic participation. ■