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The New Islamists: Pluralism and Minorities?
David Britain

In his analysis of Islamist governance on pluralism and minorities Fawaz A. Gerges concludes this special series of posts commissioned by LSE IDEAS exploring Islamism and the Arab Spring. The series also includes articles on the history of political Islam, Tunisia, Egypt and Libya.

By Fawaz A. Gerges

A big divide has emerged between liberal-minded groups and religious-based activists after the Islamists gained parliamentary majorities in the polls in Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, a divide that risks undermining transition from authoritarianism to pluralism. Wary of the Islamists' surge, liberals, leftists, and women argue that while Islamist leaders sound moderate, they harbour a conservative religious agenda, an agenda that might roll back human rights and individual freedoms. Particularly alarming to critics is the Islamists' desire to impose their own rigid interpretation of morality in the public sphere.

Since gaining majorities in these countries' parliaments, mainstream Islamist groups have been forced to outline their stances on a wide range of issues, especially with regards to Islamic law, personal freedoms, women and minority rights, and tourism. Liberal-minded activists assert that the Muslim Brotherhood, Ennahda Party, Morocco's Justice and Development Party, and the Salafists exhibit illiberal tendencies and are intolerant of the rights of minorities, particularly women.
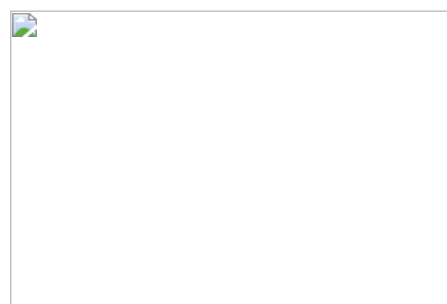
Toleration and Pluralism?

Islamists' worldview and evolution differ from one group and one country to another. Most mainstream Islamists of the Tunisian Ennahda party and the Egyptian Brotherhood variety accept the concept of citizenship and the will of the people, as opposed to the sovereignty of God, as the foundation of legitimate authority. Most do not talk about establishing Islamic-based governments as stipulated by the original manifestos of these groups and instead, they call for al-dawla al-madaniya, or a civil state. Even the Old Guard among the Muslim Brothers no longer advocate building an Islamic state. They substitute "civil" for "Islamic" in an effort to avoid using the term "secular." The concept of secularism has negative connotations among Arabs in general, not just Islamists, because of its historical association with colonialism and Westernization.

Similarly, the theocratic model in Iran has failed to fulfill the aspirations of many Islamists, thus reinforcing the shift in discourse from "Islamic" to "civil", though they are yet to flesh out what they mean by a "civil" state. Khairat al-Shater's pledge to introduce sharia law if elected president of Egypt raises serious concerns about his commitment to civil institutions and individual liberties.

Nevertheless, after their impressive performance in Egypt's parliamentary elections, leaders of the Brotherhood's newly-formed Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) publicly stressed their commitment to pluralism and to the protection of individual rights. They made it exceptionally clear that they are willing to accommodate different and diverse people into the constitution drafting process.

Two senior leaders, Mohamed Morsi and Essam el-Arian, pledged to form a national unity government with other parties. Addressing assertions often made by their secular opponents, FJP leaders insist they "would hand over power if we lose" because the public mood will no longer tolerate dictatorship. El-Arian pledged that the FJP will not change the Egyptian constitution to make all legislation comply with sharia law.

Shater's views on sharia versus those of Essam el-Arian suggest internal tensions and contradictions within the Brotherhood on this question. In contrast to Ennahda, the Muslim Brothers have not resolved this dichotomy and inconsistency partly because of the influence that conservatives still exercise within the movement, as well as the rigidity of their programs. Instead of seizing the moment and showing confidence and leadership, Shater and the Old Guard, have squandered precious good will and alienated a broad spectrum of public opinion. By repeatedly violating their pledges, they risk losing public trust, which can be fatal to their cause.

Ennahda in Tunisia is more consistent and unequivocal about respect for individual freedoms and its willingness to relinquish power if defeated at the ballot box. The party announced that sharia should not be the source for all laws, and that the new constitution should simply acknowledge that Islam is the state religion, as the old constitution did. Ennahda's decision is designed to promote national unity, suggesting a shift toward pragmatism and moderation.

After it gained a majority in the Tunisian parliament at the end of 2011, Ennahda established a broad-based unity coalition to oversee transition to pluralism. In contrast to the Brotherhood, which has fielded its own candidate for president, Ennahda supported Moncef Marzouki, a liberal human rights activist, as president as part of the power-sharing deal.

Said Ferjani, a rising leader within Ennahda, noted that history will judge his generation of Islamists not on its ability to gain power but rather on what it did with that power:

> In this golden opportunity, I am not interested in control. I am interested in delivering the best charismatic system, a charismatic, democratic system. This is my dream.

Although there is heated debate among Islamists and their liberal and leftist rivals over the formation of new constitutions, the Tunisian constitution will reflect a spirit of pluralism and toleration. Islamists have a vested interest in the institutionalization of the political process that will protect them against the whims of autocratic military rulers. As Ennahda's leader Rachid Ghannnouchi put it in an interview in 2011: "Rulers benefit from violence more than their opponents do."

Various Islamist leaders stress their commitment to building institutions and safeguarding individual freedoms and minorities, and the rule of law. Ennahda has made it clear that it will protect Tunisia's small Jewish minority, which faces considerable pressure from small conservative elements in society. Ennahda's senior leadership rejected calls from extremists (and even from Israel) that Tunisian Jews should leave the country.

In Egypt, the debate on minority rights is still unfolding and is revealing a less progressive stance adopted by the Brotherhood. The party announced that while it would not oppose Christians or women standing for president, it would support a Muslim male for the position. Far from being deterred by such illiberal statements, female candidates, such as a famous Egyptian anchor woman Bothaina Kamel, have thrown their hats in the presidential ring.

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Minorities and Morality in the Public Sphere

For many women, the main issue lies in the degree of equality they will enjoy in society in the post-authoritarian political system. On the whole, Islamists, particularly the Salafists and the Muslim Brothers, remain prisoners of regressive dogmas on women. Conservative Islamists deploy scriptural interpretations selectively and claim that women and religious minorities cannot be fully equal before the law, and so cannot hold the office of president or even magistrate. This anti-democratic position is contested by pragmatists and younger, progressive Islamists, and there are important variations and differences among Islamists in various countries.

In Tunisia, Ennahda officials have repeatedly pledged to promote equal opportunities in employment and education for women, as well as freedom to choose or reject Islamic dress. Long before the Arab awakenings, Rachid Ghannouchi, Ennahda's leader, supported affirmative action to increase women's participation in Parliament, breaking with the policies of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt.Ennahda has the largest number of women parliamentarians, and supported a quota for women in parliament. According to the tolls, out of the 49 seats won by women, 42 went to Ennahda.

However, Tunisia's female activists have accused Ennahda of misleading the public and giving "false promises". This tension became clear after a female member of Ennahda, Souad Abderrahim, challenged a law that protected women who have children outside marriage and called for its abrogation.

"Such a law gives those women a legitimacy that encourages women to do the same thing. We should work on reforming them instead," said Abderrahim. While raising concerns that Ennahda Party may curtail women's rights, another member of Ennahda, interior minister Ali Larayedh, noted that "The Party will not change laws related to inheritance and polygamy because these laws are tailored for the Tunisian society."

These statements have not allayed the fears of women and liberals. Consequently, a number of female activists have formed the "October 24 Front" to defend women's rights and freedoms through monitoring the performance of Ennahda and other parties and scrutinizing the drafting of the new constitution.

The question of women's rights in Tunisia has recently become more apparent after a dispute over whether women should be allowed to wear the niqab (full face-covering veil) in universities. After being suppressed and silenced during the Ben Ali regime, Salafists have emerged into public spaces, favouring long beards and veils and demanding the application of sharia laws.

Fearing the loss of individual liberties and going on the offensive, secularists challenged Salafists on the streets and in universities. At times, the war of words between the supporters of the two camps turned into violent clashes. Pressed in the middle of this fierce struggle between secular fundamentalists and Salafi fundamentalists, Ennahda has been paralyzed, unable or unwilling to act decisively and resolve the crisis.

In Egypt, the Salafists, who won 20 per cent of seats in the new parliament, oppose women playing leadership roles in the work place or in the political space. Moreover, they favour regulating women's dress and imposing Islamic standards of modesty in the public sphere.

While the "blue bra girl" incident and the case of virginity tests suggest that the barrier of fear and taboo is gone, and that women have become more outspoken since the revolution, female representation in the political arena has dwindled. The constitutional committee in Egypt (subsequently disbanded by the court) included no women. In the March 2012 parliamentary elections women won fewer than 10 of the roughly 500 seats. As Iman Bibars, the head of the Association for Development and Enhancement of Women in Egypt, noted:

> The revolution gave us a voice and we cannot hide that… But I think the product after the revolution is against women… I was shocked the fundamentalists took over and I did not foresee a male gender constitution.

The predicament of women is no different in other countries where Islamists have made similar gains. In Jordan, the appointment of a new prime minister and a committee to review election laws and make amendments to the Constitution did not fulfill a promise to include the word "gender" in Article 6 of the Constitution. That article would have guaranteed the equality of all Jordanians before the law. In Kuwait, the victory of the Islamist-based opposition in parliamentary elections led to an all-male chamber. The four women who won seats in the 2009 elections lost them in the last round.

In addition to women's rights, morality issues are hotly debated in Arab countries that have experienced significant change during the Arab revolutions. In Egypt, in particular, where tourism plays an important role in the country's economy (generating more than 12 per cent of hard foreign currency), alcohol consumption, bikinis and mixed bathing at beaches are being reassessed. As with women's rights, mainstream Islamists have sent mixed signals to the public about their views on morality issues.

For example, Mohammad Morsi, the leader of the Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party, told the public that his party did not plan to ban alcohol in hotels and at tourist resorts or prevent Egyptians from drinking liquor in their homes. However, other members of the Brotherhood have expressed opposing views.

What should we make of the contradictory statements by Islamists on women's rights and enforcing a particular morality in the public sphere?

On the one hand, the Salafists, along with conservatives among centrist Islamists, seek to impose a regressive interpretation of morality on society at large. On the other hand, pragmatists are caught in the middle of a fierce debate and are undergoing a huge learning process, as they attempt to reach consensus on controversial questions that touch on their very identity.

For example, the Ennahda Party struggles to walk a fine line between the Salafists and the secularists and to avoid alienating and estranging either camp. In contrast, the Muslim Brothers and the Salafists in Egypt have displayed conflicting messages about their views on morality issues in the public sphere.

Nevertheless, a clear divide has emerged between centrist Islamists and the Salafists, a divide that will deepen and widen as Islamists come to terms with the responsibilities of governance and are forced to clarify their positions. Of all religious-based groups, Ennahada has exhibited the most progressive stance on women's rights and the role of morality in the public sphere, even though it has refrained from publicly confronting the Salafists. Its leaders prefer to unite all Tunisians and set an example for neighboring Arab states. Mustapha Ben Jaafar, Speaker of the Tunisian Constituent Assembly and leader of Ettakatol (a centre-left party), was appointed in charge of the commission to draft the constitution.

The Brotherhood has been slower than its Tunisian counterpart in fully embracing the equality of all citizens before the law regardless of sex, religion, and ethnicity. This nuance may be explained by the different historical experiences of Egyptian and Tunisian Islamists, as well as the influence that the Old Guard like al-Badi and even Shater, previously seen as a pragmatist, still exercises within the 86-year old Brotherhood. Moreover, the enveloping context of political instability in Egypt, versus relative stability in Tunisia, has created a polarizing atmosphere that prevents Egyptian Islamists from seriously engaging with these issues.

As can be seen, mainstream Islamists are finding their voice and way awkwardly and evasively. They are learning by trial and error. In particular, the Brotherhood has already alienated most of the political groups from the left to the right. Lacking imagination, time and again, the Old Guard has proved to be its own worst enemy, forcing decisions on rank-and-file and demanding absolute loyalty. Conservatives are testing the limits of their newfound power, falling into the trap of blind political ambition. Overreach might cost the Brotherhood critical public support and deepen the divide within the organization, as well as between the Muslim Brothers and secular-minded groups.

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