

# Where now for Islamists?

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Gaining little from political participation, moderate Islamists face a choice between continued low returns and changing course, writes [Amr Hamzawy\\*](#)

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For opposition movements in the Arab world, the costs of participating in political life are high and returns low. This lesson is currently being driven home with consummate clarity to many moderate Islamist trends. Regardless of the differences in form, framework and duration of the participatory experiences of the Moroccan Justice and Development Party, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and in Jordan, the Kuwaiti Constitutional Islamist Movement, and the Bahraini Wefaq National Islamic Society, the payback on political participation has not lived up to the expectations of the leaders of these groups or their extensive grassroots bases.

The Islamists had hoped that by means of participation they could break through the barriers of restricted political plurality and bring about true reform and the redistribution of power between ruling elites and opposition movements, but they failed. They had pushed for constitutional and legislative amendments intended to increase the powers of legislative institutions with respect to the executive and to institute effective systems of checks and balances, but they failed in this too. Some had sought -- again unsuccessfully -- to overcome a history of conflict with intellectual elites and form flexible alliances with non-religious opposition movements, whereas others remained captive to black-and-white, good-versus-evil ideological approaches to politics.

The moderate Islamists also wanted to expand the scope of religion in the public sphere and to establish an organic link between the Islamisation of society and political participation. The consequence of this was that political elites severed their connection with Islamist proselytising and charity activities, which form the backbone of the Islamist social role and the mainstay of their popular and electoral bases. It simultaneously led to attacks from non-politicised Islamist (basically fundamentalist) forces that accused them of pragmatism with the implied charge of straying from the true faith and Islamic law.

The poor payback for the political participation of Islamist moderates, which can no longer be ignored in light of their electoral losses in some countries (in Jordan in 2007 and in Kuwait in 2008) and their steadily deteriorating circumstances in others (the Muslim Brotherhood-government conflict in Egypt and attempts to marginalise and undermine the Justice and Development Party in Morocco), places them face to face with three major challenges that already appear to be under discussion among some Islamist trends and the response to which will most likely set the future course for the evolution of these currents.

The first major challenge is for moderate Islamist leaders to come up with new arguments capable of convincing their popular bases of the need to persist in participatory politics as an indispensable long-term strategy in spite of poor paybacks in the short run. An analysis of

recent interviews with and statements by prominent Islamist figures reveals two basic categories of justificatory argument. The first stresses the value of the minimal benefits to be had from the mechanisms of political participation, especially in activities related to parliament and legislation, to counter the manoeuvres of ruling elites and their security agencies, and to preserve the cohesion and sustain the impetus of Islamist bases of popular support through the regular public broadcast of their demands, all of which can not be as effectively accomplished as can through the dynamism of the political processes.

The other set of arguments focuses on what we might describe as "maximalist" motives inspired by the desire of Islamists to prove themselves responsible politicians, committed to participatory politics under all circumstances (including successive setbacks) and dedicated to the advocacy of peaceful change and incremental reform, thereby putting paid to criticisms and suspicions harboured by ruling elites and non-religious opposition movements of Islamist motives and designs. It is further apparent that the more precarious the situation of an Islamist group the more it tends towards the minimalist position, as is the case with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood when tensions between it and the government intensify, and the more relaxed the relationship between an Islamist group and the government the more it tends towards the maximalist position, as is the case with the Constitutional Movement in Kuwait and the Wafaq Society in Bahrain.

Moderate Islamist movements are, secondly, faced with the ongoing challenge of finding a sustainable and practical balance between the requirements of political participation and the demands of ideological commitment. The realities of restricted plurality and the domination of ruling elites over the political system strategically and tactically compels Islamists to adopt compromising positions on major social issues, albeit such positions would necessarily vary considerably in substance from one experience to the other. These realities also compel them to develop pragmatic understandings with ruling elites and/or non-religious opposition movements in order to increase the paybacks from political participation beyond their current levels. However, Islamists are torn between this need and their ideological convictions, in addition to the very real fear of sacrificing the distinction of their political rhetoric and programmes and the danger of alienating broad and influential segments of their supporters.

Certainly, the task of striking a balance between pragmatism and ideological commitment must become increasingly difficult, if not impossible, when political participation loses its persuasive allure against the backdrop of unsatisfactory results. Already we have seen two possible reactions in play. One is to retract earlier compromise positions and revert to hardline Islamist stances, as occurred, for example, in Egypt in the draft platform of the Muslim Brotherhood Party which called for the creation of a religious body with legislative functions and which excluded, on the basis of Islamic jurisprudence, the possibility of a Copt or a woman serving as head of state. The other course, followed by the Justice and Development Party in Morocco and the Wafaq Society in Bahrain, is to engage in a long debate on the essential political component of Islamist movements, the relative weight of political pragmatism with respect to ideology, and the priorities of political participation. As interesting as such an extensive debate is to the scholar and observer, the strategic ambivalence of it is potentially costly to the movement itself.

The third challenge facing moderate Islamist movements is to rethink the substance of the relationship between their proselytising and political components and, accordingly, to devise the best possible structures for organising them institutionally. There is no doubt that the opening up of opportunities for political participation during the past few decades has led

some Islamist movements to introduce a functional separation between proselytising and politics, as embodied in the creation of political parties, fronts and associations that are institutionally autonomous from the mother movement and have inspired them to attach increasing importance to political participation as a means for promoting change and reform. On the other hand, it is not so clear whether or not combining proselytising and politics is a viable alternative or a disadvantage under conditions of closed or limited opportunities for political participation and sustained political repression.

Critical contemplation of the significance of separating proselytising from political activities in Islamist movements coincides with another important development. An echo from the past has begun to resound with increasing force and frequency. A call, harkening back to the Muslim Brotherhood's founder Hassan El-Banna, appeals for abandoning politics and returning to proselytising work with the aim of changing society from the bottom up. In other words, failures in attempts at political participation have reopened internal Islamist debate on the best approaches and means to effect change. The danger, here, is whether growing scepticism surrounding political participation could shake the commitment of moderate Islamists to peaceful change.

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