

Islam and democracy

Uneasy companions

Three articles that look at political Islam in the Arab world, the Turkish model and the philosophical puzzle caused by Islam and democracy seeking to coexist

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“OF COURSE they say nice things these days,” says a Lebanese woman, a sophisticated Sunni Muslim in her 50s, gliding between English, French and Arabic. “They know who they’re talking to. But you cannot trust them—absolutely not.” Again and again, in secular and liberal circles in Beirut, Cairo, Rabat, Tunis and even Ramallah, the seat of the Palestinian Authority, you hear almost identical dark warnings against the Islamist movements that are gaining ground across the Arab world as dictators are toppled, tackled or forced into concessions.

Islamist spokesmen and leaders of the revived Islamist mainstream, in particular the Muslim Brotherhood and groups akin to it, are bending over backwards to give reassurances that they will promote a peaceful, pluralistic and tolerant version of Islam. The rights of women and religious and ethnic minorities will be respected, they say, and the people’s democratic verdict will be accepted if they lose elections.

Whatever their doubts, most democrats in the Arab world reckon that Islamists who say they will abide peacefully by the rules of the game must be allowed—indeed encouraged—to participate in mainstream politics: far better than forcing them into a violent, conspiratorial underground. All the same, the well of mistrust on both sides runs deep.

Many liberals still think the Islamists, however mild they sound today, are bent on taking over in the long run, would abandon democracy once they got into power and would use every sort of chicanery and violence to achieve their goal. Liberals who hate the dictatorship of Bashar Assad in Syria fear that Islamists will emerge as the chief opposition to him. And quite a few liberals still question the sincerity of the Turkish government, widely cited by Arab Islamists as a fine example of pious politicians who play by the rules of a modern democracy.

For their part the Islamists across the region, who have suffered decades of torture, prison and oppression under various secular-minded tyrants, are wary lest they be blocked from power, as they have been before, sometimes violently, especially if they become too popular too fast. Many of them remember the first round of a general election in Algeria in 1991 when their friends in the Islamic Salvation Front won hands down—and were then prevented by the army from taking power, prompting a bloody, decade-long civil war.

So what or whom should one believe? Amid the turmoil of the past six months, five things have become plain. First, the revolutions that have ousted dictators in Tunisia and Egypt and threaten to do the same in Libya and Syria have owed virtually nothing to political Islam and everything to the simple secular democratic demand of frustrated peoples that they be free to choose their own leaders.

Second, the extreme wing of political Islam, epitomised by al-Qaeda, has completely failed to benefit, except perhaps in the ungovernable badlands of Yemen. Third, however small Islam’s

role in the revolutions, the political forces under its banner, especially the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the like-minded Nahda in Tunisia, are now set to emerge as the biggest parties after general elections due before the end of the year. Fourth, the Islamists will not on their own win outright majorities in the new parliaments. And therefore, fifth, the emerging mainstream Islamist groups all say they will seek to govern in coalitions with secular and other parties during the fragile transition from dictatorship to democracy.

“We won’t try to get a majority,” says Khairat el-Shater, a burly engineer who spent 12 years behind bars and is widely regarded as the organisational brains behind the Muslim Brothers in Egypt today. The Brotherhood has recently created a new party called Freedom and Justice to run for parliament. Mr Shater says it will contest no more than half of the seats for parliament and does not expect it to end up with more than a quarter of them.

Likewise, Nahda in Tunisia says it hopes to get a similar score. A recent opinion poll, necessarily rough and ready after decades when it was rash to air political preferences openly, put Nahda at 14%. But most Tunisians have apparently yet to make up their minds. No one really has a clue what the Islamists are likely to get in either country in their first completely free elections. Few people think they will exceed 25%. That, however, could be twice as much as any of the secular parties.

Both Nahda and Egypt’s Muslim Brothers, conscious of the fears they inspire, insist that they would not want to rule alone even if they did win majorities. They both also say that they will not present a candidate for the presidential contests.

The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, founded by Hassan al-Banna in 1928, is by far the beefiest and most influential of the Arab world’s modern mainstream Islamist movements. In the minds of liberals the Brotherhood has long been tainted with violence, even if it has not always been of its own making. In 1948 one of its members assassinated Egypt’s prime minister. Banna was himself shot dead in 1949. Sayyid Qutb, the Brothers’ most influential thinker, who was in prison from 1954 to 1964, drove the movement in a revolutionary direction, until he was hanged in 1966. Some of Qutb’s disciples went on to become still more radical—and violent. His brother, Muhammad, was an early mentor of Osama bin Laden, whose longtime deputy, now al-Qaeda’s leader, Ayman Zawahiri, an Egyptian doctor, was a Brother.

But for the past three decades the Brothers and like-minded Islamists have generally adopted more peaceful methods, despite the battering they took under Hosni Mubarak (Egypt’s president from 1981 until February this year) and Tunisia’s long-serving leader, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali (1987 until January 2011). According to the Islamists, each of those leaders put 30,000 of their members in prison at one time or another. Many were tortured.

Nowadays they insist they do not thirst for revenge. On nearly all the key issues that so worry secular liberals, most of them now express mild views. Women should have full rights. Wearing the veil must be a voluntary matter. Alcohol should not be banned. Western tourists may wear bikinis on beaches set aside for them. Though Islam must be a main source of law and custom, the sharia should not be imposed, except in civil matters such as marriage and inheritance, where it already prevails. In Egypt the Brothers stress a need for equality for the Copts, the country’s Christian minority, variously estimated at between 7% and 10% of the population.

Even on Israel they tend to echo the latest policy of the more emollient of the leaders of Hamas, the Palestinian Islamist group that is a branch of the Muslim Brothers. The Egyptian Brothers say they will “respect the treaties” between Israel, Egypt and Jordan, where a party close to the Brothers coexists uneasily with the royal Hashemite rulers.

But still the fears among liberals continue. They note anxiously the advance across the region of a Salafist movement of puritanical zealots who supposedly want to imitate the ways of the *salaf*, the “predecessors” who accompanied the Prophet himself. In Egypt they have been responsible for burning churches and hounding Copts, and espouse an intolerant version of Islam that is often described as close to that of the Wahhabist Saudis. Leading Brothers do not condemn the Salafists, generally reckoned to account for 5% of potential voters, out of hand but say they believe that they can be drawn into the peaceful mainstream.

The Islamists are playing a cautious, long-term game. The economies of all the Arab countries affected by the awakening have been clobbered. All elected governments will have to take nasty decisions, almost certainly incurring unpopularity. The Islamists do not want to take power, alone; better to share the blame. Hence, also, the Egyptian Brothers’ recent unlikely alliance with the army, which oppressed them for so long. Mr Shater says he now trusts the generals, acknowledging, apparently with no qualms, that they are likely to retain political influence in the years ahead.

The doubts persist. “It is an 80-year project,” says a grandee of the liberal Wafd party, referring to the Brotherhood’s origins. “In the long run they want an Islamic state, a caliphate.”

But the Islamists cover a wide spectrum and no one can say for sure where Egypt’s Brothers or Nahda in Tunisia will end up on it. The head of a Tunisian think-tank, Fares Mabrouk, argues that Islamists must be allowed to take their place in the new democracies, despite the risk. “The problem of the Arab world is that we don’t yet know what democracy looks like.”