Islamists in Government: Do They Moderate Once in Power?

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Brief Analysis

A senior State Department advisor and two Washington Institute scholars discuss what lessons can -- and cannot -- be drawn from the Islamist political experience in Egypt, Pakistan, Morocco, and other countries.

On April 25, 2014, Eric Trager, Haroon Ullah, and Vish Sakthivel addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Trager is the Wagner Fellow at the Institute. Ullah is a member of the U.S. secretary of state's Policy Planning Staff, where his portfolios include countering violent extremism and public diplomacy. Sakthivel is a Next Generation Fellow at the Institute. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

ERIC TRAGER

Despite regional setbacks, Islamism is still alive in the Middle East and will likely reemerge in other forms in countries such as Egypt. To better understand the future of Islamism, one must reassess why some observers expected groups like the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood to moderate once in power, and why the Brotherhood failed to do so.

In the wake of the September 11 attacks, popular discourse on Islamism focused primarily on two subtypes: terrorists, such as al-Qaeda, and rogues, such as the Iranian regime. This characterization did not fit with how the Muslim Brotherhood presented itself to many academics, however: as a "moderate" group that opposed violence and accepted democracy. Moreover, instead of demanding the implementation of Islamic law in Egypt, as in the case of the Saudi and Iranian regimes, the Brotherhood called for a less stringent "sharia reference" in policymaking. Ultimately, many Western analysts bought the Brotherhood's self-description and argued that the "moderate" and "nonviolent" Brotherhood's empowerment through elections could serve as a "firewall" against jihadism, encouraging potential Islamists to pursue change through formal institutions rather than violence. They also anticipated that the Brotherhood would continue "moderating" once it was in power, because it would have to build consensus in order to govern.

Yet these expectations wrongly characterized the Brotherhood as a democratic party with an Islamist ideology, rather than what it actually is: a hierarchical vanguard whose raison d'etre is achieving societal support and political power to resist Western political and cultural influences in Egypt. This rigid internal structure affected its behavior in power far more than its Islamist ideology.

The Brotherhood ultimately failed to "moderate" in power, as many analysts anticipated, for three reasons. First, it feared losing the internal cohesion on which vanguards depend, so its priority was appeasing a rank-and-file that wanted the Brotherhood to consolidate power quickly, rather than governing inclusively. Second, its intolerance toward outsiders -- another characteristic of insular vanguards -- further encouraged its exclusivist governing style, and Muhammad Morsi's November 2012 constitutional declaration, through which he asserted unchecked executive authority, is the best example of this. Third, the Brotherhood faced its most serious political challenge from hardline Salafists, and this compelled it to embrace a far more theocratic constitution than it otherwise might have. Of these three reasons, only this last one has anything to do with the Brotherhood's Islamist ideology.

Given that the Brotherhood is primarily a hierarchical vanguard and an Islamist group only secondarily, its failure to moderate in power does not necessarily teach us much about how Islamists in general will behave in power. But for the future, analysts should look beyond Islamist groups' stated aims and examine how they actually function internally when assessing how they will behave in power. As the Brotherhood's brief rule in Egypt illustrates, Islamists' organizational culture frequently determines their political behavior far more than their ideological pronouncements, particularly when those pronouncements are tailored for a Western audience.

HAROON ULLAH

Given its lengthy experience with Islamism, which dates back to as early as 1906, Pakistan is a useful case study for understanding groups that subscribe to that ideology. A closer look at the country's political makeup shatters five prevailing myths about Islamists.

First, the violence carried out or supported by Islamist parties in Pakistan is not indiscriminate or gratuitous, but targeted and strategic. Through connections with extremist groups, Islamists leverage political violence to push their agenda and maximize votes. In many electoral districts, voters are told that they may bear the cost of violence if they do not support a specific Islamist party.

Second, Pakistan proves that democracy does not necessarily moderate Islamist party platforms and ideologies. While Islamists can become more moderate through repeated electoral competition, they are just as likely to become more extreme if it serves their interests. They are eager to win a seat at the table, and if toeing an extreme line will help them garner votes, they will do so.

Third, Islamist parties are not monolithic. In Pakistan, they are diverse and compete hardest against one another. To increase their appeal to the electorate, each party claims to be the most authentically religious, creating significant animosity between them.

Fourth, the idea that poverty drives militancy -- which is often assumed when formulating U.S. policy in the Middle East and South Asia -- is largely mistaken. In Pakistan, the key constituencies for Islamists hail from the thin middle class and urban areas; this and other factors may help explain why Islamist parties do better in provincial, regional, and local elections than at the national level. In order to be more effective on the ground, the United States should align its programs based on this rethinking of what drives militancy.

Fifth, Islamist parties want more than just a seat at the table. They also want to shape the debate around morality.

As for their views of foreign actors, Islamist political parties in Pakistan are not inherently anti-Western, though they frequently use religion to mobilize voters and have helped create a toxic environment in the country. Many of these parties billed themselves as anti-American while they were in the opposition, but they did so largely to maximize votes. Going forward, Washington could influence such groups through public

diplomacy and faith-based engagement. For example, by interacting with figures who hold sway among Islamists -- such as imams who are increasingly bearing the cost of violence -- the United States could greatly improve its credibility. After all, most Islamists are like other political parties: they are pragmatists, not staunch ideologues.

VISH SAKTHIVEL

The experiences of Islamist groups in Morocco, most prominently the governing Justice and Development Party (PJD), show the different levels of moderation that can apply once they are in power. There is moderation in signaling: for example, an Islamist group can send a message to constituents or authorities that it does not pose a threat. There is also moderation in behavior, which may actually be a shift in the group's ethos. And lastly, there is moderation in ideology, which yields a more fundamental change in mission. Factors that can push a group to moderate include the presence of a grand arbiter or some other power-sharing imperative.

In 1997, the increasingly popular PJD was permitted to participate in Moroccan elections. In exchange for granting this legality, the late King Hassan II extracted the party's fealty to the crown's religious and political authority, among other concessions. Under his son, King Muhammad VI, the palace continues to enjoy widespread domestic support, and in many respects, the king is linked to the country's religious identity. He maintains a monopoly on religious authority; Morocco's religious infrastructure is heavily controlled by the government-appointed *ulama* (Muslim legal scholars), who aim to limit the reach of Islamism and its interpretations of Islam outside the Moroccan Maliki tradition. Therefore, the government can argue that Islamism is not a necessary force in Morocco because the country technically has religious rule.

Over the years, the PJD has been forced to moderate, especially in its approach to legislation. But its resultant political pragmatism and moderation, which were originally meant to demonstrate loyalty, have crippled its ability to effect change on various issues. Despite this trajectory, the PJD has not abandoned its ideology. It still believes that Islam should not only inform policy, but also form the basis of Moroccan law. Yet ideological moderation is largely inconsequential in the Moroccan context because it does not have immediate political consequences. At the end of the day, the king reigns supreme, and any turn toward extremism would cause the PJD to lose the royal patronage for which all political parties in Morocco are vying. At this point, political expediency is just as important as ideology to the PJD, if not more so.

Since Morocco's political circumstances are regionally unique, the PJD's moderation -- in policy, behavior, and internal processes -- cannot be extrapolated to answer questions about Islamist groups in other countries. In addition, one cannot extrapolate from the Egyptian and Tunisian Islamist aftermath to understand how the PJD would operate if truly in power -- that is, in the absence of a greater powerbroker. When analyzing such groups, one must situate their behavior in the contexts in which they operate. Ignoring those sociopolitical contexts would result in purely speculative analysis. Finally, if political immoderation is defined as the penchant for exclusionary rhetoric and power grabbing versus a more pluralistic approach, then it is not limited to Islamists alone.

This summary was prepared by Gilad Wenig. ❖

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