

Democracy, Salafi Style

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Articles & Testimony

One of Saudi Arabia's most popular hardline clerics just embraced democracy. Should we worry, or applaud?

The Muslim Brotherhood has so far emerged as the clear political winner from the popular uprisings that have seized the Arab world. In Egypt and Tunisia, its affiliated political parties have each won power outright in democratic elections. But the Brotherhood isn't the only movement mixing faith and politics in the new Middle East: Salafis -- hardline conservatives who model their lives on Prophet Mohamed and the first three generation of Muslim leaders following his death -- are setting aside years of theological opposition to democracy to participate in the political game.

This sea change was driven home earlier this week when Saudi Salafi heavyweight Sheikh Salman al-Awdah took to his Twitter feed and Facebook page to proclaim: "Democracy might not be an ideal system, but it is the least harmful, and it can be developed and adapted to respond to local needs and circumstances." Although Awdah notably made his announcement on his English and not Arabic social media platforms, where his audience numbers in the millions rather than the tens of thousands, the sentiment is still positively Churchillian -- echoing as it does the late British prime minister's maxim: "It has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all the others that have been tried."

Awdah's pronouncement is significant due to his history and popularity within the Salafist milieu. He was one of the key leaders of Saudi Arabia's *sahwa* ("awakening") movement, which butted heads with the House of Saud most prominently during the Gulf war in the early 1990s. During those years, key Saudi religious scholars and *sahwa* activists signed two petitions admonishing the Saudi royals for their reliance on the United States, and calling for the creation of a *shura* ("consultative") council that would grant greater authority to the religious establishment to determine whether legislation was truly in line with Islamic law.

The House of Saud viewed these letters as a direct threat to its power, and consequently arrested Awdah and other

sahwa figures in 1994. Awdah would not be released until 1999. Although he has not been as overt in his criticisms of the regime since his release, he is not part of the official religious establishment and has a level of independence, which has afforded him the ability to maintain a large following without being viewed as a lackey of the government.

Osama bin Laden was one of the young Saudis deeply affected by Awdah's stand against the Saudi regime in the early 1990s. The al Qaeda chief viewed him as an intellectual mentor, and allegedly told his former bodyguard Abu Jandal that if Awdah had not been imprisoned, he would not have had to raise his voice up against the Saudi ruling family.

The al Qaeda leader's admiration highlights Awdah's influence among not only mainstream Salafists, but some of the more radical wings of the movement. Awdah himself was never an al Qaeda sympathizer. He would rebuke bin Laden in 2007 during Ramadan, saying, "My brother Osama, how much blood has been spilt? How many innocent people, children, elderly, and women have been killed ... in the name of al Qaeda? Will you be happy to meet God Almighty carrying the burden of these hundreds of thousands or millions of victims on your back?"

Prior to the Arab uprisings, the large majority of Salafis viewed democracy as contrary to Islam. The crux of the Salafist argument is that electing legislators to create laws infringes upon the sovereignty of God, who is the only valid sovereign in the world. Therefore, by establishing the supremacy of democracy, one is putting humans on the same level as God and thus one is worshipping another. As a consequence, one is no longer truly a Muslim because one's beliefs have slipped into polytheism. The burgeoning Salafist parties across the Middle East, however, show the monumental shift away from this doctrinaire position.

But Awdah's remarks are an acknowledgment of the changing political landscape in the Middle East. The list of legal Salafist parties in Arab countries making the transition to democracy continues to grow. Egypt has three Salafist parties, which together hold roughly 25 percent of seats in parliament, while Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen have one each. With these parties quickly becoming accepted players in the political game, this new era could see the proliferation of political movements established by formerly non-politicized Salafis.

Awdah's comments may resonate further in countries still living under the yoke of authoritarian rulers than those undergoing a political transition. If he is more outspoken in the coming months or years, especially in Arabic, it could reinvigorate past failed attempts to reform, or even unseat, the House of Saud. That possibility, however, still remains beyond the horizon -- in the short term, the kingdom appears stable.

Democracy has exposed Salafis to a difficult question: Do they maintain their doctrinal purity or attempt to truly influence their destiny -- a path that was closed to them under authoritarian regimes? It appears that some Salafis have had the foresight to see the necessity of joining the process.

Of course, taking part in the democratic process does not make one a liberal in the Enlightenment sense. Important questions remain about Salafi groups' shift to democracy. Is it pragmatic or a true ideological commitment to democratic principles? Will joining the process liberalize such parties to the extent that they could provide more competition in the election process, or will it create a populist push between Islamist parties to prove who is truly following God's will? It is still too early to assess the answers to these questions one way or the other, but the result of Salafis' participation in the political game will likely vary by country, depending on the local context.

Salafis' participation in the political game also raises important policy considerations the United States should take into account. True, the U.S. government, and the West in general, have few points of ideological agreement with these Salafi movements. For example, all of the Salafi parties would like to end interest-based banking, which they view as haram, and have a very narrow view of the rights of minorities, women, and homosexuals. But bringing them into the mainstream political process holds the possibility of drawing individuals away from the more extreme jihadist interpretations of Salafism. These movements may be troublesome political players, but democracy

provides a more positive outlet for change than violence.

Awdah's remarks highlight an important ideological shift within the Salafi movement over the past year and a half. It suggests that the United States should continue to pursue a policy that helps and encourages the emerging Arab democracies to open up so that individuals within them can shape their own futures. Salafis are poised to become key political players in the new Middle East, and should be given the space to continue their ideological evolution.

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