CONTENTIOUS POLITICS AND SOCIAL AND POLITICAL TRANSITIONS

The Dilemma of Political Islamism

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Since it emerged in the early 20th century, the nature of modern political Islamism has been the object of acrimonious discussions between its advocators and detractors. Given that its doctrine on the ideal Islamic state is often vague beyond the slogans and that some movements that form part of this ideological family have turned to violence, there have been very different interpretations of its essence and historical meaning. In fact, at the core of its project is the application of Sharia or Islamic law, which, as it is not codified, adopts a different meaning for each religious branch or Islamist political movement.

Before the so-called “Arab Springs” in 2011, broadly speaking, there were two major approaches with regard to the nature of political Islamism. For some authors, such as the Arabist Bernard Lewis, it is a regressive, intolerant and immutable ideology that seeks to impose the return of the Islamic community to medieval religious practices. For others, such as the French academic François Burgat and the American John Esposito, Islamism is a vector of progress for Islamic countries that seek to design their own path to modernity rather than merely transposing Western models. Its rise would be the result of the empowerment of social sectors excluded by the elites that have held power for centuries and do not see it as opposed to democratic ideals although the merging between Islamism and democracy might give way to a model different from that of Western countries.

Until a decade ago, the debate on the compatibility between Islamism and democracy was mainly theoretical as there was no Islamist party or movement that had reached power through the ballot box. The Algerian FIS got closest to it by winning the first round of the

1991 Algerian legislative election, weeks before the army staged a coup and aborted the transition process. Then, the Western chancelleries backed the Algerian generals, embracing the thesis that would later become popular and is summarised in the expression “one man, one vote, one time” [1]. In other words, the Islamist parties that participated in electoral processes and, in theory, accepted the democratic system only did so with one end: to reach power and then suppress elections and implement a theocracy.

One Label, Many Sides

By 2011, the Islamist ideology label encompassed a wide range of movements. These included, among others, the Jihadist groups such as Al Qaeda, the quietist Salafist movements and what we could call Islamic parties with an institutional aim; in other words, those that seek to form part of the political structures in force although modifying them. Even this group, which is the focus of the analysis of this article, was quite diverse.

To a large extent, the differences in the postulates of the diverse Islamist parties in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region were the result of the political context of each country. Thus, for instance, in those countries where there was a national armed conflict, such as Palestine and Lebanon, both totally or partially occupied by the Israeli army, movements such as Hezbollah and Hamas had armed wings while participating in electoral processes. The others advocated achieving their political objectives through political action.

In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood, considered the first modern Islamist movement in the region and the matrix of several parties with an ideology similar to that of other countries, maintained a conservative discourse, in line with classical Islamism, in issues such as the role of women or minorities or the Sharia, categorically rejecting a separation between religion and state. In contrast, in the late 1990s in Turkey a party emerged, the AKP led by a young Recep Tayyip Erdogan, which argued that it had adopted the central postulates of the secular discourse designed by Kamal Ataturk, refusing to place Sharia at the core of the country’s legal structure.

> The majority of the Islamist political groups argued that they had embraced the democratic system and respect for political pluralism

However, most of these political groups also shared some major features: all of them formed part of the opposition in their respective countries –often being the main opposition force in contexts of authoritarianism and political repression– and in their discourses they argued that they had embraced the democratic system and respect for political pluralism, advocating the opening of a transition process. Moreover, in practice, they had waived the creation of a transnational caliphate and accepted the borders of the nation-state, many of them designed during the colonial period.

Their detractors have always doubted the sincerity of these approaches. And they had reason to do so, as there was no lack of intolerant or even violent attitudes among the members of these parties towards their adversaries [2]. Moreover, the so-called classical Islamist thinkers, such as Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb, were very critical of the concept of democracy, which they directly linked exclusively to Western political culture. Qutb, for instance, set people's sovereignty against divine will and the Quran, described as the only Constitution of the Muslims.

In contrast, most contemporary Islamist movements have ideologically evolved and argue that today that democracy is not unrelated to Islamic values, often comparing it to the principle of the *Shura*, which could be translated as "consultation" and is one of the classical criteria that a good ruler must follow according to classical Islamic thought. Elections would therefore be a kind of updating of the *diwans*, the bodies of chief officials that advised the rulers in the classical period of Islam. However, these parties never managed to design a clear detailed description of the ideal Islamic state they wished to achieve. What was hidden behind the historical slogan of "Islam is the solution"?

The Opportunity of the Arab Springs

The popular antiauthoritarian uprisings of 2011 that shook the region, better known as Arab Springs, were a historical opportunity for institutional political Islamism. The fall of the dictatorial regimes in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen and Libya and the opening of a prospect for change in other countries such as Morocco, Syria and Jordan were the scenario that Islamist movements had dreamt of for decades to be able to reach power. However, as happened in the regimes themselves, the sudden revolutionary drive took the Islamist movements aback. Most of them were not ready for the challenge of adapting to deep and dazzling changes and soon had to take on the responsibility of managing their countries in a fluid and very complicated transition context.

The first free elections in several countries after the uprisings gave a clear victory to Islamists. In Egypt, in the late 2011 legislative election, Islamist parties had approximately 70% of the votes: the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) –attached to the Muslim Brotherhood– received the most votes, followed by the Salafist coalition al-Nour, the great surprise of the election. In Tunisia, Ennahda achieved 37% of the votes, far ahead of the second party, with 8%, in a highly fragmented Parliament.

That same year, the Justice and Development Party (PJD) won the elections in Morocco, where the monarchic regime continued, but, together with other results, it led to parts of the media speaking of a "green tide" because of the color traditionally associated with Islam. In Syria, there were never free elections because, months after a bloody repression, the country fell into civil war. However, the branch of the Muslim Brotherhood in the country played a central role in the Syrian National Council, the main opposition platform at the time.

In the following years, the trajectories of the Islamist parties in the region diverged even more in keeping with the context of each country. The question of what would be the style of the Islamist parties' governance in the event of winning the elections ceased to be grounds for theoretical lucubration as at least in two countries, Tunisia and Egypt, they were able to take the reins of power [3]. The experiences of the Tunisians of Ennahda and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood were quite disparate, mainly in terms of the consequences of their management of the transition. In the case of Tunisia, Ennahda in government enabled a relatively successful democratic transition while in the case of Egypt it paved the way to a military coup that led to the implementation of a dictatorship, by Hosni Mubarak, which was even more repressive than the previous one.

The Inverted Mirrors of Tunisia and Egypt

Even in 2011, the starting point of the two movements was already notably different. In the early 21st century, the Muslim Brotherhood had experienced an internal arm-wrestle between the most modernizing sectors, where young or middle-aged cadres prevailed, and the old guard, often identified as "falcons". The former called for the need for an *aggiornamiento* of the Islamist ideology, aligning themselves with the values and practices of liberal democracy and advocating a greater opening to society. The latter, guardians of tradition, won the struggle, and totally displaced the pigeons of the party management in the internal elections, unleashing a scission with the creation of the Wasat ("centre" in Arabic) Party.

In contrast, for some years Ennahda had initiated a process of ideological evolution under the leadership of the influential intellectual Rached Ghannouchi. Some authors [4] have defined this process as the *tunisianité* of the party as it incorporated the philosophical bases of the reformism of thinkers such as Taher Haddad. Thus, in the 1980s the Tunisian Islamist group, at that time under the name of the Islamic Tendency Movement (MTI), had already irritated its counterparts in the Arab world by accepting the personal code in force in the country, which prohibited polygamy although it is legal in the Quran.

Despite its reformist character, the early years of Ennahda's government were not free of tensions with the secular opposition. The process of drafting a new democratic Constitution unleashed a marked polarisation process on the model of society and the role of religion in public life, worsened by the assassination of two left-wing politicians, presumably by Jihadist groups. In fact, the democratic experiment tottered in 2013, but the concessions of Ennahda and the opposition in the so-called "National Dialogue" promoted by civil society led to the approval of a new Constitution by consensus. Some months later, a peaceful transition of power to the secular opposition took place after the holding of new presidential and legislative elections in 2014.

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In order to consolidate the transition and avoid any temptation to return to an anti-Islamist dictatorship, Ennahda sealed a deal with its great adversary, Nidaa Tounes, which led to a “great coalition” government between 2015 and 2019. In 2016, in its tenth congress, the Islamist party took a step further in its ideological evolution and established in its standing rules a separation between religion and politics. Holding positions in the party became incompatible with the activities of religious proselytism. Moreover, still under the leadership of Ghannouchi, the party abandoned the “Islamist” label and now defined itself as “Islamic-democratic”, in the wake of the European Christian-democratic parties. With its victory in the 2019 legislative elections, in which Nidaa Tounes almost vanished, Ennahda strengthened its role as a central actor in Tunisian politics.

The Muslim Brotherhood’s experience in power could not be more different. Intoxicated by its wins in the first legislative and presidential elections, the movement was unable, or did not believe it necessary, to reach deals with the secular opposition to jointly pilot the transition process. Although during its year of government Mohamed Morsi’s administration did not adopt any policy that sought to change the country’s moral code [5], it did not appease the fears of the Coptic Christian minority or the anti-Islamist sectors. Neither was Morsi capable of improving the living standards of the population, an urgent need that led them to expel him from power.

This paved the way for the ambitious general and Minister of Defence, Abdelfattah al-Sissi, to satisfy his thirst for personal power and that of his institution, an army that more or less directly had ruled the country since the 1952 Revolution. The Muslim Brotherhood did not accept al-Sissi’s coup and endeavored to revert it by mobilizing the people. In a process of escalation, the army enforced an implacable repression to establish its power [6], decapitating the Brotherhood and labelling it as a “terrorist organisation”. With its leaders serving long sentences in prison, assassinated or underground, the nature of the internal debates radically changed. It was no longer about discussing a possible ideological *aggiornamiento* for the 21st century or making a critical assessment of Morsi’s year in government but of trying to achieve the survival of the organization. Moreover, it was also discussed whether the resistance against dictatorship could legitimate some type of use of violence and what its limits should be. Repression hindered the possibility of envisaging a possible evolution such as Ennahda’s in Tunisia.

Erdogan and the Islamist Dilemma

Although political Islamism is usually related to the Arab world, the most influential Islamist party in the last two decades is probably not from this region: the Turkish AKP led by Erdogan. From its victory in the 2002 legislative election to almost a decade later, the

party was often described as an example of the possible metamorphosis of political Islamism towards the acceptance of liberal democracy. Some authors who coined or advocated the term “post-Islamism” to describe the evolution of some Islamist parties that would have abandoned some postulates of classical political Islamism even identified it as its main exponent [7].

In that early phase of Erdogan’s government, Turkey approved a series of reforms with the aim of becoming a member of the European Union that strengthened Turkish democracy, reducing the control of the army and widening citizen rights and freedoms. For instance, the death penalty was abolished in 2002, and restrictions on the use of the Kurdish language were eased. However, following the protests against the Gezi Park development plan, the Turkish government adopted a gradual authoritarian shift that reached its peak after the 2016 coup. Erdogan not only took the opportunity to reform the Constitution and centralize power in the hands of the executive but unleashed a campaign of arrests and harassment against the opposition and any critical voice. The AKP moved from being a benchmark of moderation of one part of Islamism to become one of the main examples along with Vladimir Putin of the group of authoritarian leaders with a project to eternalize their power by manipulating the rules of the electoral game, what has been called “illiberal democracy”.

> Erdogan’s path presents a dilemma: an effort is needed to adopt the main principles of the liberal democracy or is it enough to advocate for a system that includes celebrating elections?

The trajectory of Erdogan, considered a source of inspiration by many Islamists in the Arab world after the 2011 uprisings, presents the Islamist militants in the region with a dilemma: is it necessary to make an effort to adopt the central principles of liberal democracy, as Ennahda has done, or is it enough to advocate a system that includes holding elections but does not ensure strict respect for individual rights? Given that Erdogan is one of the few allies in the power of the Arab Islamist parties – Istanbul is Moreover, the context of repression or civil war that some countries suffer does not provide the ideal climate to undertake ideological revisions. For this reason, these types of internal debates are likely to be postponed in the short term as there are more urgent needs, but sooner or later they must be tackled. And in an era of a recession of democratic ideals even in the countries that have heralded them, such as the USA, it is unclear whether his power of appeal is enough to continue driving the Islamist parties towards an ideological evolution in the same direction as in recent decades.

Faced with this scenario, and bearing in mind that plurality encompassed by the Islamist field, the European Union and its member states should avoid developing general lines of political action towards Islamism as if it were a homogenous bloc. A refined analysis is needed that makes the appropriate distinctions between parties and movements of institutional political Islamism depending on ideology and specific behavior although, in

theory, they form part of a single political family or can be considered allies. And in the case of those that have evolved positively, such as Ennahda in Tunisia or the PJD in Morocco, maintain or strengthen the contacts.

The European Union must be aware that there cannot be a democratisation, or perhaps even stabilization, of the MENA region in a context of exclusion and repression of political Islamism. Certainly, the Islamist parties or movements have lost momentum compared with the years following the Arab Springs, but theirs continues to be the ideology with a more powerful capacity for mobilization in the region. Believing that it is possible to implement successful policies of eradication of these parties or ideology as Egypt or the United Arab Emirates do is a mistake. Authoritarianism and repression can only nurture the most radical and violent side of Islamism, Jihadism. The stability promised by some autocrats of the region can turn out to be a short-term mirage, as already happened during the first decade of the 21st century, mainly lacking an inclusive economic development. Encouraging a tendency towards moderation and adoption of democratic ideals by political Islamism should be a strategic objective of the European Union.

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2 — For example, members or supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt have committed acts of sectarian violence against Coptic Christians, secular adversaries or sites considered immoral. These acts have not been continuous during the approximately one hundred years of history but rather in moments of crisis.
3 — In Morocco, the PJD also took control of the government but, as happened with its predecessors, it was limited by the enormous influence of the king and his entourage, the so-called *makhzen*, in decision-making.
4 — Cavatorta, F. & Merone, F. (2015): “Post-Islamism, ideological evolution and ‘la tunisianité’ of the Tunisi Islamist party al-Nahda”, *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 20:1, 27-42
5 — The major grievance of the secular or non-Islamist opposition was the approval of an ambiguous Constitution with respect to the role of religion in public life, which did not implement an Islamist-type system but neither did it prevent it from developing.
6 — According to some NGOs, the number of political prisoners in Egypt in the two years following the coup may be 41,000. See the following article from Human Rights Watch online.
7 — Kuru, Ahmet; Stepan, Alfred (2012). *Democracy, Islam, and Secularism in Turkey. Religion, Culture, and Public Life*. New York: Columbia University Press.
8 — In an interview with this author in 2017, Rached Ghannouchi disagreed with defining the evolution of Erdogan’s government as an “authoritarian drift” and insisted on considering it as a democratic benchmark.

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