

**IS AN ISLAMIST DEMOCRACY EMERGING IN NORTH AFRICA?
ITS CONTOURS AND OBJECTIVES: A VIEW FROM THE NORTH***Peter Seeberg**

The main novelty of the Arab revolts in 2011-2012 is that, following the disappearance of Ben Ali and Mubarak, the Tunisian and Egyptian people for the first time have taken part in free and fair elections. And regardless of who has been elected the consequence is that state actors on the regional and international political scene will have to deal with new North African political leaders, who represent the will of the electorate. In the recent elections, large Islamist parties (Ennahda in Tunisia, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the PJD in Morocco) have won landslide victories, partly by capitalizing on moral and religious issues, but also simply because they represent the only well-organized alternative to the former authoritarian regimes.

From the North, first of all the EU and its member states, the outcome of the elections has been viewed with some scepticism, but being democratically elected the new parliaments and leaders represent political conditions, which the northern side of the Mediterranean has to recognize and develop strategies to tackle. Beyond these *policy level* realities the new developments in North Africa challenge not only European mainstream media perceptions of the political realities in the Middle East, but also concepts and theories of research on the Middle East and North Africa. It is therefore relevant to ask if it is meaningful to speak of an emerging Islamist democracy and, if so, how this new phenomenon can be analyzed.

The notion of "Islamist democracy" is in itself problematic as it strictly speaking implies that it is relevant to distinguish between "real" democracy and a specific Islamist variety. For decades, Western media and some researchers have discussed how far Islamist parties are genuine in their attitude towards democracy. The political scenes in North Africa will now deliver empirical evidence on an unlimited scale and the development since December 2010 has so far provided answers which seem to be extremely complex, not to say contradictory. The new active public sphere in the Middle East and the competitive democratic processes in which Islamist parties play a dominant role challenges not only decision makers from the North but certainly also researchers.

* Peter Seeberg is Associate Professor and Director of Studies at the Centre for Contemporary Middle East Studies, University of Southern Denmark.

(Post-)Islamist Democratic Politics

The fact that we for the first time have seen Islamists come to power in several Arab states through democratic elections does not indicate that we are witnessing completely unexpected and novel political developments. Within the last decades several researchers have envisaged possible new developments regarding the political role of Islamist parties, not the least in the light of the obvious success since 2002 for the AKP in Turkey. The Middle Eastern regimes, however, have, through different strategies based on repression or inclusion, prevented Islamist parties from being able to play any significant role in national politics – apart from Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Palestinian territories.

Partly as a result of the repressive regime policies, we have seen tendencies to fragmentation within and among Islamist political parties. These tendencies have on one side produced radical and rather isolated parties and on the other side more secular or pragmatic oriented parties, the latter being broad, popular parties, where – according to Olivier Roy – the political are given precedence over the religious.¹ Some analysts (Roy, Gilles Kepel) already claimed in the 1990s that Islamism broadly speaking was heading for decline or even defeat, while others (Asef Bayat, Arshin Adib-Moghaddam) have anticipated a new political reality beyond the old order.

It is obvious that the recent developments in North Africa contradict the idea that Islamism must be losing significance. After decades of political apathy as a result of undemocratic political structures, the Middle East – and North Africa in particular – is witnessing a repoliticization of its political culture and it seems that in this process Islamists are playing an important role. Most of the Islamist parties have evidently decided to work within the system in order to achieve gradual Islamist change and represent in many ways continuations of earlier post-Islamist democratic politics, of which the Egyptian Hizb Al-Wasat and Kefaya movements have been seen as the first significant representatives.² According to Bayat, the Kefaya movement heralded the coming of post-Islamist democratic politics, transcending Islamist politics by attempting to bridge ideological divides between religious and secular activists and between leftists and nationalists.

But imagining the revolts in North Africa in 2011 as post-Islamist revolutions, which are all on their way to presenting local varieties of well-functioning (Islamist) democracies, is of course hardly realistic. It is not possible so soon after a dramatic period of Arab revolts

1. Olivier Roy, *Globalised Islam: The Search for a New Ummah*, London, C. Hurst & Co, 2002.
2. Asef Bayat, "The Post-Islamist Revolutions", *Foreign Affairs*, Snapshot, 26th April 2011.

to predict the direction of the political development in the region. What we can say with a high degree of certainty is that strong opponents of a process where democracies based on large, moderate Islamist parties are set up stand ready behind the scenes representing political challenges and paradoxes, which will prove very difficult to tackle.

First of all, the old regimes are still there, more or less apparent and more or less powerful. The old guard in the armies, the economic elites and the former political leaders present new (coalition) governments with a need for tactical manoeuvring, because they will use any internal split as a means of regaining power. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt has in 2011 and 2012 had severe internal strife which is partly a result of different perceptions of the relation between religion and politics between factions of the party. The fact that segments of the party want a clear-cut Islamist platform can easily lead to confrontations with the representatives of the old regime, as it could be seen in connection with the presidential elections. But, on the other hand, a “modernization” of the party in the form of tendencies to secularism might drive parts of the Egyptian electorate back into the arms of the old establishment.

The Egyptian analyst Ashraf El Sherif has pointed to this internal conflict in the Muslim Brotherhood, where we see “an emboldened group of MB insiders who strongly oppose what they have characterized as the party’s extremely timid agenda of reform.”³ El Sherif makes the point that the new tendencies within the Brotherhood, by working on reshaping Islamist discourses on governance and democracy, are “undermining the polarization between Islamists and secularists that long inhibited the development of policy-oriented (rather than identity-based) party politics.”⁴ If this actually is the case, we might be witnessing important contours of a changing political Islam, on one side representing new and interesting political developments, on the other side possibilities of paralyzing faction strife.

In the October 2011 elections in Tunisia, Ennahda gained 37.04% of the votes, resulting in 89 seats in the Constituent Assembly. Even though the election results and the formation of government have left Ennahda in a dominant position regarding the shaping of Tunisia’s future, the new government will not change everything. The exiled long-time leader Rachid Ghannouchi represents a modern, reform-oriented tendency within Islamism. As shown by Francesco Cavatorta and Rikke Haugbølle, Ennahda wants to

3. Ashraf El Sherif, “Egypt’s New Islamists: Emboldening Reform from Within”, Carnegie Endowment, 12th January 2012.

4. Ibid.

reform Tunisian society in order to get rid of the former centralized state: “Young and old, the pious middle class rather supports the quest for a decentralized democracy with a thriving private sector. The new generation believes in free-market forces and wants to take advantage of the fall of the regime to expand the business opportunities they were denied under Ben Ali.”⁵

Cavatorta and Haugbølle claim that so far the new government of Tunisia seems to subscribe to a political practice informed by religious values rather than dictated by them. And even though the country still has a long road ahead of it before it might be meaningful to speak of a fully fledged democracy, elements of a new, more open policy can be observed, not the least in the foreign policy field. Tunisia was the first North African country which expelled the Syrian ambassador and severed official relations with the Assad regime and recently the government has taken initiatives to revive the Arab Maghreb Union between Tunisia, Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, and Morocco. The complex negotiations on a new constitution in Tunisia, which has a deadline for the final drafting in October 2012, so far has shown that the leading factions of Ennahda will not support making sharia the main source of legislation in the new constitution and will maintain the secular nature of the state.

But certainly the process has revealed internal disagreements within the party while radical Islamist groups outside the party, who supported Ghannouchi before the elections, are now dissociating themselves from the dominant Ennahda party. And developing Tunisia is not only a question of drafting a new constitution. The Tunisian public has begun to lose interest in constitutional reform and insists instead on progress in the national economy, the creation of jobs and fighting against enormous unemployment. Apparently, this new movement cuts across religious contradictions and represents a demographically complex mix of different groups of the Tunisian population, similar to that of the protests of late 2010 and early 2011. The protests should be taken seriously by the new Tunisian leaders, because inability in dealing with these challenges might lead to radicalization of the unemployed youth.

A Changing Political Islam?

Regardless of the in many ways positive developments in several North African states there is no guarantee that it will be possible to avoid renewed fundamentalism. The Salafists in Egypt have had unexpected success in the parliamentary elections and now

5. Francesco Cavatorta and Rikke Haugbølle, “Beyond Ghannouchi: Islamism and Social Change in Tunisia”, Middle East Report, 262, 2012, pp. 20-25.

they become part of the tactical and ideological game, making it difficult for the factions of the Muslim Brotherhood, which might want to see a gradual separation of the core ideological-religious ideas and the necessary pragmatism of everyday politics. The revolutionary enthusiasm of Tahrir might in 2011 for a while have transcended religious and ideological disagreements, but recent polls seem to present a more mixed picture: two-thirds consider democracy “preferable to any other kind of government, while just 19% say in some circumstances a non-democratic form of government may be best.” Regarding the role of Islam, most Egyptians want “Islam to play a major role in society, and most believe the Quran should shape the country’s laws,” as demonstrated by the Pew Research Center.⁶ However, a radical critique of the former incumbents based on promises of sharia-based policies might backfire, in the sense that a strengthening of the Salafists could easily be the result. As stated by Shadi Hamid, pragmatism “cuts both ways, and the rise of the Salafis is likely to drag mainstream Islamist groups – and the electorate – further to the right.”⁷

This, however, is a rather traditional “right-left” analysis, which might not grasp all aspects of the in many ways surprising development in the Arab world in 2011-2012. The uprisings perhaps should be seen as a phenomenon which we are not yet able to understand in all its dimensions. As mentioned, the Arab revolts represent a repoliticization of a region which for years had an image of unshakeable authoritarianism attributed to it. This political process of course also includes the Islamist movements and political parties. As emphasized by Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, we might be witnessing a “historical evolution that links Islam to universal principles of freedom, democracy and social equality,”⁸ his point being that a transformation is taking place, which in a sense confirms what Roy and others already claimed in the 1990s, namely that traditional Islamism might be slowly dying and that the development is signalling “the onset of postmodernity in the Arab and Islamic worlds: a radical, refreshing and emancipatory moment in human history.”⁹

Challenges for the North

Summing up, large Islamist parties have dominated the elections after the Arab revolts. And apparently the reaction in the North is ambivalent. The strong and well-organized

6. See <http://www.pewglobal.org/2012/05/08/egyptians-remain-optimistic-embrace-democracy-and-religion-in-political-life/> (accessed: 9th June 2012).

7. Shadi Hamid, “Islamists and the Brotherhood: Political Islam and the Arab Spring”, in Kenneth M. Pollack et al. (eds.), *The Arab Awakening: America and the Transformation of the Middle East*, Washington DC, Brookings Institution Press, 2011.

8. Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, “The Arab Revolts, Islam and Postmodernity”, *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*, 5, 2012, pp. 15-25.

9. *Ibid.*

Islamist parties and movements in North Africa have for years to some degree been marginalized as cooperation partners from the northern side of the Mediterranean. Rather than active dialogue, the European approaches to the Islamist parties and movements have been characterized by reluctance, due to securitization of Islamism within Europe itself, partly as a result of anti-Islamic sentiments among right-wing parties in several European states.

The policies from the North towards North Africa have been characterized by pragmatism and depoliticization of European-Middle Eastern relations. The EU has in its approach towards the MENA region avoided touching on politically sensitive issues and for pragmatic reasons supported the incumbent authoritarian Middle Eastern regimes. Behind this lie interpretations of the security environment in the Mediterranean, where common security interests between the former North African regimes and the EU have constituted an important part of the background for the pragmatism in European foreign and security policy.

With the new political realities in North Africa this view from the North is no longer feasible. The EU will have to get accustomed to more binding forms of political cooperation with the Islamist parties and movements which now dominate the political scene in North Africa. For the North, this might be the most important lesson from the convincing election successes of the Islamist parties in North Africa following the Arab revolts.

Simultaneously published as a Focus article at the Observatory of Euro-Mediterranean policies, www.iemed.org