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Studying Islamism after the Arab Spring

Where have we come from?

Before the so-called 'Arab Spring' something of a consensus existed among scholars of the Middle East that Islamism represented the most significant ideological movement, and most potent oppositional force, in the region. Due to the social resonance of Islam, and hence of political ideas couched in an Islamic framework, many assumed that the only thing preventing Islamists from taking power across the Arab world was the presence of authoritarian regimes prepared to use force against Islamist challengers, as well as able to co-opt Islamist ideas and actors (Browsers 2010). Some implicitly justified this state of affairs by insisting that Islamist ideology could not be reconciled to democracy and that Islamist groups, whatever they claimed, harboured a hidden agenda to create oppressive Islamic states (see e.g. Tibi 2009).

Other scholars have argued that political Islam was a 'failure' because Islamist elites gave up on the ideal of an Islamic state; or that Islamism strengthened existing authoritarianisms by pacifying society such that people felt that a better, more authentic, life could be achieved without disturbing the status quo (Roy 1994). Political scientists, taking their cue from trends in Western electoral politics, explored how Islamist leaders might act strategically, undergo processes of political learning, and 'moderate' their behaviour and ideology in order to succeed in semi-democratic arenas (Schwedler 2011).

All of these approaches, though not without value, shared the implicit or explicit conviction that Islamism constituted a quasi-hegemonic, if multi-faceted and transforming, ideological and social movement. Although Islamism had been attracting significant academic attention since the 1970s, and especially since the Iranian Revolution (Davis 1987), the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 prompted a revival in 'Islamism studies', partially as a response to criticisms that Middle Eastern Studies had 'dropped the ball' in failing to understand the nature and magnitude of the threat to the West. The result was a tilt in favour of studying Islamism as a discrete phenomenon and a concomitant neglect of other movements and ideologies that may have had equal, or greater, political significance.

Where are we now?

The Arab Spring uprisings immediately challenged this somewhat myopic obsession with Islamism. These were not 'Islamic revolutions'. The mobilisations appeared spontaneous, but were a result of converging cycles of protest and contention from which Islamists had often been conspicuously absent (Gunning and Baron 2013). The scale of the protests, moreover, debunked the idea that Islamism had succeeded in pacifying Egyptian society. And subsequent election results and polling revealed that the popularity of Islamist parties was contingent at best (Lust, Soltan, and Wichmann 2012).

The justification for the intense interest in the compatibility, or lack thereof, of Islamism (or Islam) and democracy has also been called into question. However flawed the Brotherhood's brief experience in power may have been the ouster of a democratically elected president, and the subsequent quasi-genocidal (Shaw 2013) persecution of the Muslim Brotherhood, suggest that those citing an unreconstructed Islamism as the greatest threat to democracy in the Middle East may have been looking in the wrong place.

The unpredictable institutional environment and contradictory political dynamics unleashed by the Arab Spring militate against any reliable predictions about the future of any 'manifestation' of political Islam, but there will undoubtedly be an ongoing reconfiguration of the Islamist scene across the region. While it remains crucial to reject a 'one size fits all' approach to Islamism, it is perhaps more important to problematise the idea of Islamism as a discrete phenomenon or uniquely resonant set of ideas in Muslim societies, as well as the concomitant assumption that Islamist groups have an intrinsic political edge over their rivals.

Where are we going?

The coup against the Brotherhood in Egypt further compels us to question our assumptions about the popularity and power of Islamist groups vis-à-vis other ideologies and political movements. Clearly, when forced to choose between the army and the Muslim Brotherhood Egyptians throughout the country have not only chosen the army, with all the continuity that implies with pre-2011 Egypt, but have also accepted, and participated in, the sectarian demonization of Islamists (Sheikh 2013).

One kind of 'reality check' that the current conjuncture should provide for students of the Middle East in general, and those interested in political Islam in particular, is the need to understand the ideological, and not just coercive or clientalist, role played by Arab authoritarian regimes in the so-called 'post-populist' era. Just because Islamist activists have accused regimes of moral and intellectual bankruptcy does not mean that scholars must follow suit. Islamism is not, and was not, the only ideological game in town.

It is true that Islamism filled the void created by the decline of the Arab nationalist left in the wake of the 1967 war. It is also true that, in comparison with liberalism or socialism, Islamism appears to share more with the 'traditional' mores and beliefs of Muslims. But if there is a 'hegemonic' political ideology in Egypt it is not Islamism but an Egypt-first form of nationalism focussed on the military as the embodiment of national unity, security and pride. This ideology has become hegemonic, and 'common sense' to the extent that it has been largely unnoticed by those obsessed with Islamism, not because it is intrinsically persuasive but because it has been consistently projected by Egypt's military regime since the 1950s.

A related assumption than needs to be problematised is that Islamist movements are powerful because they channel popular aspirations and values. Islamism's hold over the popular imagination has arguably been mythologised because of its association

with the transcendental. Images such as those of the Iranian Revolution, in which multitudes marched under Khomeini's banner, also fed into the idea of Islamism as a 'force' or 'tide'. But the fate of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt has exposed the often chimerical nature of Islamist groups' appeal and capacity for mass mobilisation: in the face of effective counter-mobilisation it can quickly evaporate.

This dynamic runs deeper than Egyptians having lost faith in the Brotherhood because of its poor performance in government, though this played a role. It also relates to the obstinate ideological power of a military regime, established over decades and bolstered by material structures. And this in turn suggests we need a more inclusive and open-minded approach to the relationship between ideas and power within post-populist authoritarian states, beyond just looking at Islamism.

The counterexamples of the Iranian Revolution and other cases where Islamism has apparently triumphed over secular authoritarianism also do not prove that the mass resonance of Islamist ideology was a critical factor. They rather suggest that Islamism, like other ideologies, has political traction to the extent it is supported by or able to articulate with state power. The Iranian Revolution was able to succeed as an 'Islamic revolution' not because of the appeal of Islamism among the Iranian people, but because the revolution fractured and then appropriated the Shah's military and political power.

This is something Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood were unable to achieve, but there is no reason just yet to rule out the possibility that some kind of Islamist ideology will become more explicitly articulated with military power in Egypt in the future (Springborg 2013). And a corollary to the observation that Islamism does not necessarily represent the 'will of the people', but may thrive if articulated with state power, is the need to remain open to the idea that credible opposition to authoritarian rule, over the long term, may not come in a familiar Islamist package.

Political preferences are malleable. It is toward understanding how specific groups utilise Islamist ideas in reshaping the collective imagination over time, and how these processes in turn affect the popularity, strategies and political behaviour of state and non-state actors, that the study of political Islam should be directed in the years to come.

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