

Islamists in Democratic Elections: Threat or Solution?

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In countries making the transition to democracy, the question of which groups will contest the elections is one of the most pressing. Should radical or religious parties be excluded from taking part in national elections? Specifically, how will Islamist¹ groups act in democratic societies?

Fears of an electoral victory by an Islamist party which then repeals the democratic system itself—following the progression “one person, one vote, one time”—have been invoked to justify the wholesale and brutal repression of opposition movements in the Arab world which use the rhetoric of Islam. To date, this fear has not been historically confirmed. The Iranian revolution occurred in an authoritarian regime, and Algeria’s elections were canceled prior to their completion. Indeed, Islamists have participated electorally in several authoritarian countries in the Arab world, regimes characterized by varying degrees of political openness such as Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt. In other regions of the world—South and Southeast Asia for example—Muslims regularly participate in electoral politics.²

I argue here that repression and exclusion of Islamists has increased support for those opposition groups, and that by contrast, democratic inclusion holds powerful institutional incentives that tame opposition movements and marginalize those who reject the democratic system as a whole. This model holds equally well in the case of Islamist parties.

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¹ Islamism, or political Islam, is often called Islamic fundamentalism, and can be defined as a movement or person that uses Islam as part of a political agenda.

² See the review by Vickie Langohr, “Of Islamists and Ballot Boxes: Rethinking the Relationship between Islamisms and Electoral Politics,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 33 (2001). She quotes Lisa Anderson, writing that, while we do not know whether Islamist governments would act democratically, we have substantial evidence that the current regimes clearly do not (608).

Social Movements and Democracy³

The basic idea behind democracy is simple: democratic systems induce players to work within the bounds of legality, since the chances of winning a fair democratic election far outweigh any possibility of overthrowing the system. Political entrepreneurs are enticed by the prospect of holding office, including situations when their movement cannot win even a plurality of seats. At the same time, a fair and open process delegitimizes those who use violence and reject the system itself, isolating them and preventing radical, regime-rejecting groups from gaining more adherents. Hezbollah's recent experience demonstrates this. While obtaining a relatively small percentage of offices in Lebanon, the group has maintained its commitment to democratic politics and re-formulated its end-state goals in the process.⁴

A scant few centuries ago, the concept of allowing the "masses" a voice in government was met with near universal alarm by the elite. As more classes of people demanded and secured suffrage, the elite saw that it had nothing to fear electorally: the masses did not take over the property of the rich, but voted instead for opportunities to become rich themselves. The electorate utilized the permitted means of expression rather than overthrowing the system itself. Thus it has been said that the ballot box is the coffin of radicalism.

So it has been with protest historically. Attacks by workers declined as union activity and strikes were legalized.⁵ The authorities began to understand that allowing some protest along pre-determined lines decreased the use of violent and disruptive tactics. Unions and opposition parties could be accommodated within the institutions of the system, allowing for a degree of cooptation along with inclusion. Similarly, rent strikes and disruptive demonstrations by the poor declined as legal organizations arose to rep-

³ Social movements are sustained challenges that make public claims against power holders, on behalf of particular groups. Sidney Tarrow, "Political Protest and Social Change: Analyzing Politics," *American Political Science Review* 90:4 (1996); Charles Tilly, "From Interactions to Outcomes in Social Movements," in *How Social Movements Matter*, ed. Marco Giugni, Doug McAdam, and Charles Tilly (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Charles Tilly, "Social Movements and National Politics," in *State-Making and Social Movements: Essays in History and Theory*, ed. Charles Bright and Susan Harding (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984). My analysis here draws on the classics of social movement theory, especially works by Charles Tilly, Sidney Tarrow, and Doug McAdam.

⁴ The group altered its objectives to accommodate the presence of Christians in Lebanon. Muhammad Hussayn Fadlallah, "Interview: Islamic Unity and Political Change," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 25:1 (Autumn 1995).

⁵ Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978), 158.

resent their constituencies.⁶ In Italy, for a decade after the mid-1960s, terrorism took place alongside what would prove to be the more enduring trend, that of institutionalizing social movements' demands into formal, legitimate, and non-violent organizations.⁷ The democratic system responded to the presence of new groups by including them, thus ensuring the long-term survival of the system through the isolation and eventual demise of groups working violently outside fair and open institutions.⁸ Italy's Red Brigade is one such example; the Weathermen in the United States are another.

During particular eras, protest in democratic polities may become so rampant it that appears to be on the verge of overwhelming society's established institutions. This is the peak of the protest cycle. As the cycle winds down, organized movements capture the demands voiced by protesters. The demands are then moderated and formulated so that they can be accommodated within current institutional channels. In the end, according to Tarrow, it was not the police that ended terrorism in Italy, but the institutionalization of the social movements out of which the terrorists had sprung. For the hold-outs, isolated from community support, it was just a matter of time before the terrorist trend died out.⁹ In democracies that resist the pull of indiscriminate or collective repression, terrorism does not threaten the existence of the system itself; violence will continually spiral toward its demise, losing allies and support as democratic institutions expand to include new social actors. Indeed, terrorist movements in most democracies have proved to be short-lived.¹⁰

⁶ Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, "Normalizing Collective Protest," in *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*, ed. Aldon D. Morris and Carol McClurg Mueller (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992); Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977). Although the authors lament this dynamic of cooptation, it does demonstrate the power of democratic inclusion to check radical or militant groups.

⁷ Defining terrorism is a difficult and politically charged task. Here I take the definition of terrorism as the violent targeting of non-combatants by groups that are challenging the political status quo. State terrorism, or intentional violence against civilians by state or government authorities, is an analytically distinct phenomenon. Terrorism is a tactic. Thus, judgments of events as terrorist or not are theoretically separate from characterizations of the actors themselves and the justness of their cause. As Sederberg argues, the means used should not be confused with the actors. See Robert V. Keeley, "Trying to Define Terrorism," *Middle East Policy* 9:1 (2002); Peter C. Sederberg, "Global Terrorism: Problems of Challenge and Response," in *The New Global Terrorism: Characteristics, Causes, Controls*, ed. Charles W. Kegley, Jr. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003).

⁸ Donatella Della Porta and Sidney Tarrow, "Unwanted Children: Political Violence and the Cycle of Protest in Italy, 1966–1973," *European Journal of Political Research* 14 (1986); Sidney Tarrow, *Democracy and Disorder: Protest and Politics in Italy 1965–1975* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1989), 317–37.

⁹ Della Porta and Tarrow, "Unwanted Children"; Tarrow, *Democracy and Disorder*, 317–37.

¹⁰ Ted Robert Gurr, "Terrorism in Democracies: When It Occurs, Why It Fails," in *The New Global Terrorism*, ed. Kegley, Jr.

Authoritarian Systems: A Different Framework

Non-democratic systems alter this dynamics. Theoretically, repression was believed to remove one of the main pillars of social movements, namely, political opportunity. Under rational choice theory, the individual assessment of costs and benefits in an environment of likely repression was believed to lead a rational individual to refrain from social activism and protest. While tight and elegant, this theory cannot explain the numerous occurrences of activism throughout history, or the willingness of individuals to die for causes they believe in—a goal praised by Hollywood and the military alike. The American Revolution, for one, was not without costs. It began with protests and demonstrations, including a certain riot over tea in Boston.

Social scientists began to deal with this reality, admitting that they did not know when repression deterred and when it incited protest. In some situations, repression by the authorities could be an “opportunity” or incentive to increase mobilizing that would likely end in repression.¹¹ In resolving this quandary, the concept of repression must be disaggregated: the state’s use of sanctions against popular activism is not of a piece. Access and mobilizing potential are variable: Nazi and Communist groups are outlawed in some Western democracies, while other groups allied to the state obtain institutional access in otherwise closed regimes. Indeed, a black/white distinction between authoritarian versus democratic regimes is inaccurate. Wholesale exclusion is not characteristic of all authoritarian states, nor is unfettered inclusion the rule for democracies.¹² States regularly decide what groups and institutional avenues will be permitted. Police treat protesters differentially, targeting some and ignoring others. Authorities turn a blind eye to some challenger social groups, only to unleash the police against the same groups at a later date, as has been the fate of Islamist movements throughout the Middle East. The Right in the Middle East—especially the Islamist Right—was allowed a free hand, and in some cases was even unleashed to destroy the Left on behalf of the state. Many current Islamist movements are heirs to this near-universal policy of tolerance by Arab regimes. In Northern Ireland, armed militias on the side of the state received special treatment, and remained exempt from the ravages wreaked on Catholic opposition groups.¹³ Thus, merely positing state repression as a

¹¹ Jack A. Goldstone and Charles Tilly, “Threat (and Opportunity): Popular Action and State Response in the Dynamics of Contentious Action,” in *Silence and Voice in the Study of Contentious Politics*, ed. Ronald R. Aminzade, et al. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

¹² Donatella Della Porta, “Social Movements and the State: Thoughts on the Policing of Protest,” in *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings*, ed. Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam: Religion, Activism, and Political Change in Egypt* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

¹³ Robert W. White, “Comparing State Repression of Pro-State Vigilantes and Anti-State Insurgents: Northern Ireland, 1972–75,” *Mobilization* 4:2 (1999).

causal variable cannot identify the effects of this repression on different groups in society. State-group interactions must first be differentiated according to who and when, challenger status and time period.

Furthermore, perceptions of legitimacy are integral to social movement trajectories. While legitimacy is a subjective or “fuzzy” concept for social science, it continually pops up, even for analysts who eschew the use of interpretive variables. Considerations of what is in an individual’s best interests alter when repression is deemed illegitimate by the community. Although state repression is intended to negatively affect mobilizing, strong group support can not only cancel but even reverse that influence.¹⁴ Using mathematical models to analyze state-protester interactions, studies have found that coercion increased protest, lending credence to a “backlash” interpretation of repression.¹⁵ In a path-breaking analysis of Islamist-state interactions in Egypt and Algeria, Hafez found that the precision of repression, whether targeted or indiscriminate, had a powerful effect on militarizing opposition movements in those countries.¹⁶ Random repression detracts from the regime’s legitimacy, creating an insurgent consciousness or injustice frame,¹⁷ through the well-known dynamics of making innocent civilians into martyrs, victims of arbitrary police coercion. In game theory terminology, indiscriminate repression violates the clarity of the authorities’ signals. Citizens are unsure what activities will provoke state coercion. Seemingly benign activities may be repressed or the populace may be repressed collectively. In this atmosphere, to protest or not to protest can bring about the same result, and thus, the incentive to stay within the system disappears. Troublemakers and law-abiders alike become the object of the coercive arm of the state. This is a practical argument against collective and indiscriminate punishment, aside from any moral or international legal motivations.

The Shape of Protest in Repressive Systems

We know that people do organize in authoritarian countries, often in the face of severe repression. When opposing groups protest under these circumstances, chances are good that violence will be one of the tactics used. Why is violence seemingly endemic to social movements in authoritarian systems? Four interrelated dynamics are operative here. First, the authorities themselves use violence. As Anderson stated, regimes often produce the opposition movements they deserve.¹⁸ Opposition groups tend to mirror

¹⁴ Karl-Dieter Opp and Wolfgang Roehl, “Repression, Micromobilization, and Political Protest,” *Social Forces* 69:2 (1990).

¹⁵ Ronald A. Francisco, “The Relationship between Coercion and Protest: An Empirical Evaluation in Three Coercive States,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 39:2 (1995).

¹⁶ Mohammed M. Hafez, *Why Muslims Rebel: Repression and Resistance in the Islamic World* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2003).

¹⁷ Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930–1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

¹⁸ Lisa Anderson, “Lawless Government and Illegal Opposition: Reflections on the Middle East,” *Journal of International Affairs* 40:2 (1987): 228.

the organization and tactics of the authorities, a tendency called isomorphism. Nelson Mandela, when offered freedom in return for his renunciation of violence, refused: only when the South African government renounced it, he stated, would he do likewise.¹⁹

Indiscriminate repression creates a sense of injustice among the population, but on a more concrete level it spreads the justified fear of being imprisoned, even among those engaged in non-violent activities. This fear has driven many a peaceful activist underground, removing any incentive for moderation or non-violent action in the process. Joining a terrorist organization, Della Porta states, is often a result of non-terrorist activism.²⁰ In Northern Ireland, peaceful protesters became violent when they saw that their non-violent activism was useless—the authority and its repression were deemed illegitimate, and activists feared the effect of repression on themselves or those close to them, friends or family.²¹ In fact, one of the only common elements in the individual background of terrorists is their radicalization at the hands of state authorities, either through pitched battles or imprisonment.²²

Second, authoritarian states do not always abide by universal principles, such as those enshrined in international laws like the Geneva Conventions. If the authorities have no qualms in using overwhelming force, sit-ins and non-violent protests will most likely be quashed without achieving even the publicity an unsuccessful demonstration in a democracy would likely yield. Non-violent collective action becomes meaningless. The boundary between violence and non-violence becomes blurred: according to Seidman, the rational choice to use passive tactics is conditional upon the oppressor's response.²³ As the statement by Mandela referenced above illustrates, clear-cut morality—the difference between what is right and wrong—becomes unclear to protestors when the state responds violently against all forms of protest. In the end, state repression decreases the occurrence of non-violent protest activities while increasing violent ones.²⁴

Third, when opposition itself is outlawed, challengers are pushed toward advocating revolution and not reform, since the system will not accommodate any changes or

¹⁹ Keeley, "Trying to Define Terrorism," 39.

²⁰ Donatella Della Porta, "Introduction: On Individual Motivations in Underground Political Organizations," in *Social Movements and Violence: Participation in Underground Organizations*, ed. Donatella Della Porta (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, Inc., 1992), 16.

²¹ Robert W. White, "From Peaceful Protest to Guerrilla War: Micromobilization of the Provisional Irish Republican Army," *American Journal of Sociology* 94:6 (1989).

²² Youth is the other main common characteristic. Della Porta, "On Individual Motivations." The sociological process of stigmatization is a related dynamics at work in these circumstances.

²³ Gay W. Seidman, "Blurred Lines: Nonviolence in South Africa," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 33:2 (2000).

²⁴ Mark Irving Lichbach, "Deterrence or Escalation? The Puzzle of Aggregate Studies of Repression and Dissent," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 31:2 (1987).

oppositional activism.²⁵ As protest is criminalized, politics become polarized, turning the game from a multi-sided one into a binary affair, where one must be “for or against” the state. Sides must be chosen. Fence-sitting becomes increasingly difficult as state repression intensifies. Akin to the desire to “throw the bums out,” oppositional dynamics in non-democratic settings translate into support for whatever challenger withstands the period of repression. It does not, however, necessarily indicate popular support for that opposition’s agenda.

Fourth, mobilization processes under authoritarian systems propel opposition movements to transform themselves into covert, underground, and exclusive organizations that are prone to violent tactics. Since organizing is illegal, activists use informal and decentralized networks to evade the eyes of the state. Violence is a tactic in gaining movement adherents. To persist and grow, social movements must publicly communicate that they represent a committed and organized constituency.²⁶ Denied access to avenues of legal demonstration, a violent event airing on the evening news fills the advertising bill. Furthermore, without access to public spaces, mobilization efforts often turn to religious ones, since these are difficult to repress completely.²⁷ Identity markers of social movement identification will likewise be affected. Opinions that cannot be voiced overtly will instead find expression through symbols. Styles of dress—a particular form of veiling, or a kaffiyeh—take on strong political meanings in authoritarian contexts.²⁸

In all cases, the actions of the authorities have a significant impact on opposition groups in terms of the techniques used, the ideologies drawn upon, and the collective identifications that are used to solidify the movement. The idea that opposition groups can be analyzed without reference to the authorities cannot be sustained. Challengers do not exist in a vacuum. Not only their development, but also their current strategies and tactics are affected by the configuration of actors and institutions with which they

²⁵ Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 85. Anderson quotes Robert Dahl: “Opposition that would be loyal if it were tolerated becomes disloyal because it is not tolerated.” See Lisa Anderson, “Fulfilling Prophecies: State Policy and Islamist Radicalism,” in *Political Islam: Revolution, Radicalism, or Reform?*, ed. John L. Esposito (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1997).

²⁶ Tilly, “From Interactions to Outcomes in Social Movements,” 157.

²⁷ Using religious forums to organize grievances also mitigates against distinctions based on class or markers characteristic of groups involved in more typically recognized civil-society organizing. The place dictates the identity invoked in collective organizing, to a large degree. Gatherings in a church or mosque will draw the community sharing that particular belief, a group that will include multiple social classes and conflicting economic interests.

²⁸ On women’s dress in the Muslim world, see Fadwa El Guindi, *Veil: Modesty, Privacy and Resistance* (New York: Berg, 1999); Arlene Elowe Macleod, “The New Veiling and Urban Crisis: Symbolic Politics in Cairo,” in *Population, Poverty, and Politics in Middle East Cities*, ed. Michael E. Bonine (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997); Jenny B. White, *Islamist Mobilization in Turkey: A Study in Vernacular Politics* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002).

are confronted. That is good news for policy-makers, providing opportunities to alter the trajectory of opposition movements.

Conclusion: Who Fears Islamists in Parliament?

Democratic inclusion can greatly decrease the incentive to use violent tactics, by providing opportunities to moderate political entrepreneurs and drawing support away from radicals. When radicals do obtain elective office, they inevitably demonstrate an inability to alter the basic institutions any more than their non-radical colleagues, thereby de-mystifying their radical ideology in the eyes of the public.²⁹ Advanced democratic countries have not been devoid of such challenges, but have withstood assault by absorbing some radical groups, de-legitimizing those who stray too far from accepted norms, and allowing others to try their hand at obtaining the populace's electoral approval. The beauty of democratic competition is that many contend for the popular vote, and rarely is any populace united, Muslims included. Candidates attempt to differentiate themselves from others, splitting the popular vote in the process. Algeria's infamous elections, if they had been allowed to run their course, would probably not have produced a supermajority of the type able to create a new constitution.³⁰

Is this pure idealism? Would allowing Islamists a role in electoral politics lead to the abolition of representative institutions altogether? Are Islamists the exception to the rule, since the commitment of at least some Islamist groups to democracy is questionable? This is precisely the point: democratic institutions foster moderation even among radical rejecters of the system. If the level of political liberalization is credible and fair, the populace will withdraw support from those militants or radicals who reject the system.³¹ Analyses of terrorist movements affirm the necessity of societal support. Otherwise, there is nowhere to hide from police, and communities will not long risk their own safety to protect terrorists when other avenues for voicing demands and obtaining redress are available. This is why terrorist organizations in democracies do not last. Democratic societies curtail the trend at the outset, deterring the production of future generations of terrorists.³²

An electoral victory by Islamists is always a possibility. Democracy is a procedural system, wherein only the process, not the outcome, is fixed. As countries make the transition to a more open political system, they will inevitably experience social pro-

²⁹ David A. Snow, et al., "Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization, and Movement Participation," *American Sociological Review* 51:4 (1986). Iran demonstrates the populace's disillusionment with radical movements when they finally gain power, as does the example of Hezbollah in Lebanon. While support for the latter still exists, it has been limited to a minority in Lebanon's representative government.

³⁰ The success in question here occurred in the first round of a two-round election, and was perceived as a protest vote against the ruling government.

³¹ Radical refers only to tactics used, such as terrorism or militancy, not to political platforms.

³² Gurr, "Terrorism in Democracies." This does not mean an immediate end to all terrorism; existing terrorists remain criminal, but the trend will attract fewer new adherents.

test. The more closed the system, the more protest and oppositional mobilizing that liberalization will produce.³³ The situation will be messy. But providing avenues of inclusion channels a majority of political entrepreneurs to work within the system, not outside it.

³³ Tarrow, *Power in Movement*, 77–8.