# Can Islamists BE Democrats?

Islamist groups—or those who want to build a political society based on Islamic law—present democracy promoters with a real challenge. Three authors investigate the historical forces that have shaped the political ambitions of Islamist groups in Turkey, North Africa and Indonesia.

## Turkey's Delicate Dance

by Gareth Jenkins

In the Turkish general elections of November 2, 2002, the newly-formed Justice and Development Party (JDP), composed primarily of formerly anti-Western Islamists, swept to power with a massive parliamentary majority. In a move not normally associated with Islamists, the JDP immediately set about reforming the country's flawed (if functioning) democratic system to try to meet the criteria for accession to the European Union.

At first sight, this situation seemed proof that Islam and the West were not necessarily mutually antagonistic. Not only had a party of devout Muslims come to power through a democratic process and reaffirmed Turkey's pro-Western strategic alignment (e.g., through continued membership in NATO) but it had committed itself to moving even closer to the West through integration into the European Union. U.S. observers, among others, hoped Turkey could provide a model for other Muslim nations.

Yet a closer analysis of the JDP's rise to, and record in, power not only raises questions about the depth of its commitment to eventual E.U. membership, it also reveals Turkey's unique historical experience, which arguably mitigates against the possibility of successfully transferring the Turkish model to any other country.

For over 600 years, the Ottoman Empire was seen—and saw itself—as the Islamic antithesis of the Christian West. During the nineteenth century, its slow decline in the face of increasingly assertive European powers triggered a period of acute soul-searching. Although there were conservatives who argued that the remedy for the empire's gradual disintegration was a return to Islam, the majority of the political class looked to Europe, not for the causes of Ottoman weakness but for its solution.

In 1919, after defeat in World War I had brought the Ottoman Empire to the point of collapse, an army officer, Mustafa Kemal (later known as "Ataturk" or "Father Turk"), led a successful revolt against both the ailing and discredited Sultanate and an invading Greek army, which was attempting to annex a large swathe of Anatolia. When Ataturk founded the Turkish Republic in 1923, it was to Europe that he looked for inspiration for the nation-state, in which identity was defined by political allegiance rather than religion.

Despite Turkish Islam's relatively moderate nature, characterized more by Sufi mysticism than rigid Qur'anic textualism, Ataturk believed that Islamic conservatism had been the main reason for the Ottoman Empire's failure to keep pace with Europe. He sought to break the power of organized religion, abolishing the caliphate, outlawing all Islamic organizations, arresting—and sometimes executing—their leaders, bringing all religious affairs under the control of an office tied to the prime ministry and, in 1928, embedding the principle of secularism in the Turkish constitution. As a result, unlike most other Muslim countries, where Islam became a unifying force in the nationalist struggle against European imperialism and colonialism, Ataturk's nationalism used European concepts against Turkey's own Islamic past.

Like many of the European regimes of the 1920s and 1930s, Ataturk's new Turkey was an authoritarian single-party state. His teachings, which later coalesced into the ideology now known as Kemalism, were based on the principle of secularism and designed to fill the ideological gap left by the removal of Islam as the state religion. After Ataturk's death in 1938, it was the Turkish military that assumed the role of the protector of his legacy.

Despite Kemalism's authoritarian tendencies, its insistence on Europe as a model meant that, in 1950, as parliamentary democracy spread through western Europe in the wake of World War II, it was also introduced into Turkey. However, economic and social underdevelopment had meant that Kemalism had only fully penetrated the urban elite. The lives of most people living in rural areas, the majority of the population, were still regulated by the moderate "folk Islam" of their forebears. The introduction of multiparty democracy inevitably brought Islam back into the political arena, culminating—from 1969 onwards—in the establishment of explicitly religious parties, most of which advocated a virulently anti-Western political agenda, including withdrawal from NATO, open hostility to Europe and the United States, and the inclusion of Islamic precepts in Turkey's legal codes.

Through the late 1980s and early 1990s, a succession of corrupt and incompetent governments fueled a rapid increase in electoral support for religious parties. In July 1996, the Islamist Welfare Party (WP) came to power, only to be toppled in June 1997 as the result of pressure from the Turkish military. A young generation of former WP members eventually founded their own party, the JDP, in 2001.

The WP's experience of being forced from power by the military had a powerful impact on JDP leaders. They rapidly con-

cluded that, far from threatening their values, Turkish membership in the European Union would not only result in an easing of the Kemalist suppression of Islamic piety in the public sphere but also, through the European Union's subordination of the military to civilian control, would make it impossible for them to be forced from power by the Turkish military.

Such calculations have inevitably led to accusations by the JDP's opponents that the party's political reform program is insincere, merely an attempt to create an environment in which it can introduce an Islamist agenda. Such accusations are not entirely without justification. Privately, many members of the JDP admit that, in the long term, they want to see a greater Islamic coloring to public life in Turkey and a gradual erosion of the importance of both secularism and Kemalism. Yet there is also little doubt that their long-term agenda is relatively moderate. Even relative hard-liners admit that, despite their reservations about integration with the

West, they recognize the practical need to be able to cohabit with Europe and the United States.

Perhaps more significantly, Kemalism has not only served as an ideological bulwark against the penetration of religion into the public sphere but has imposed experience of a parliamentary system upon the Turkish people. Unlike other Muslim countries—which tend to be ruled by authoritarian regimes and whose constitutions mostly include Islam as a defining characteristic of the state—Turkey's recent history includes the theoretical separation of religion and state and a functioning, if imperfect, democratic system. The result of Ataturk's goal of emulating the West is that the Turkish model is nontransferable. However, it is also true that, even if his secularism is ultimately diluted or destroyed and religion again colors the political arena, democracy is likely too deeply entrenched institutionally and in the collective psyche of the Turkish people to be easily uprooted. 🔴

**Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan stands in front of a portrait of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk.**

# Abandoning Reformist Islam

*by John Entelis*

Political Islam in the North African region known as the Maghreb (Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco), as in other parts of the Arab-Islamic world, represents the expression of populist discontent with an authoritarian political order. As the Arab state has failed to produce prosperity and has exploited religion as an instrument of control, it has increasingly come to be viewed by Islamists and many others as little more than an extension of an avaricious international political system, dominated by the West and serving its interests. In its essence, populist Islam speaks to the millions of men and women in North Africa who feel marginalized and neglected by their rulers, whether self-defined as "secular" (Algeria's Abdelaziz Bouteflika and Tunisia's Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali) or "religious" (King Mohamed VI of Morocco).

In response to calls for socioeconomic change in the 1980s, North African regimes began to "liberalize" state and society, permitting opposition groups (among them Islamist movements) to emerge and express their points of view. Whether legal parties such as the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in Algeria or unofficial ones such as the an-Nahda ("Renaissance") movement in Tunisia or the Welfare and Justice Association in Morocco, political Islam emerged with impressive vigor and vitality. These groups seemed to fuse issues of moral rectitude, cultural integrity, religious piety, social purpose, economic honesty and political democracy, and their work had a direct impact on people's lives. For example, they fulfilled basic social needs that the state (for various reasons) increasingly neglected, such as religious instruction, education, social services or emergency assistance. In short, political Islam, for the first time in the modern history of the Maghreb, came to represent an alternative to the state that was not itself a product of that state or its elites.

Algeria's FIS party, as evaluated by its electoral and governing performance in 1990-91, was probably the quintessential prototype of an Islamist reformist movement. Nonviolent and led by religiously devout laypeople, it sought to gain power though democratic means. The FIS captured the imagination of hundreds of thousands of Algerians suffering from long

government misrule, endemic corruption and political repression. However, Algeria's 1992 military coup marked the end of the FIS' political ambitions and the start of a bloody civil war that eliminated reformist Islam as a political force in Algeria.

Political Islam has always had an extremist dimension. Indeed, Islamism represents a broad range of political responses to the challenges of the modern world expressed through an Islamic idiom. Yet it was not until the Iranian revolution of 1979 that the Muslim world was presented with the political reality of an Islamic republic. Nonetheless, Islamism in the Maghreb in the 1980s maintained a moderate and reformist tone. But some 20 years later, Moroccan extremists led terrorist attacks in Casablanca and Madrid that killed hundreds of people. What caused North African Islamist moderates to become militants who then became madmen?

Central to this transformation has been the policies and actions of North African regimes towards Islamist movements. Initially, Moroccan, Algerian and Tunisian state authorities implemented accommodationist policies, which quickly revealed the populist potential inherent in Islamist movements. Through elections, street demonstrations, student unions and so on, Islamist parties showed the capacity to seriously challenge if not defeat incumbent regimes under democratic conditions.

Faced with that stark reality, governments responded with an array of coercive, co-optive and conciliatory gestures intended to restrain Islamism as a legitimate political force. Morocco employed legal and technical obstructions while Algeria and Tunisia have pursued eradicationist approaches to Islamist parties. For their part, Islamist movements, once on the verge of achieving power through peaceful means, have now turned to violence, which in turn has degenerated into terrorism. In some cases, terrorists in the region have found logistical, ideological and financial support from global terrorist networks like al-Qaeda.

Western nations face a "Catch-22" situation when addressing Islamism and democracy in North Africa. Ruling elites in the Maghreb are unwilling to open up their political systems to allow societal grievances to find nonviolent expression and have proved fully capable of fending off all domestic political challenges whether peaceful or violent in nature. The history of the FIS suggests that North African Islamists are capable of moderate and

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lawful engagement in the political system; however, they are unlikely to embrace such an approach before North African governments allow the creation of a public sphere in which citizens of all political persuasions can participate.

North African regimes remain fundamentally weak and devoid of institutionalized legitimacy. The strength and popularity of radical Islamic movements and the violent tactics they have chosen to use in their struggle with ruling elites flow directly from the political illegitimacy of the Arab state. In blocking the rise of moderate Islamism, incumbent regimes unleashed a much more virulent form of Islamic radicalism that cares little for cooperation or compromise. Reformist Islamism could have mediated society's anger through democratic processes had the state been sincere in its invocation of pluralist principles. Instead, a "clash of cultures" erupted. Per-

**Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika campaigns before one of his posters earlier this year.**

haps more important to Arab democracy than any imagined cultural clash with the West is the clash between elitist, secular and despotic governments versus the religious, populist masses. This clash leads to chaos at home and terrorism abroad. *(aD)*

# Indonesia's Tradition of Moderation

by Muhamad Ali

In Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation, Islamist movements are neither monolithic nor static, but they do tend to be politically moderate. This moderation has several causes: Indonesia's history of authoritarian rule, its sense of national pride and the religious aims of the country's Islamists.

The idea of an Islamic state based on *syariah* (Islamic law)—often seen as the touchstone of an Islamist agenda—has lost some of its appeal over the course of Indonesian history. The country's two largest Muslim organizations—Muhammadiyah (founded in 1912) and Nahdlatul Ulama (founded in 1926)—initially supported this goal. As a result of the political repression of the Soekarno era (1945-67), these organizations became willing to build coalitions across religious lines in order to play a role in politics. Today, Muhammadiyah and NU members, who make up more than half of all Indonesian Muslims, not only reject these Islamist goals, they themselves are a significant obstacle to the growth of radical movements. These civil society organizations are more interested in initiating dialogues and partnerships between different Islamic movements. Both Muhammadiyah and NU have established their own political parties, the National Mandate Party (PAN) and the National Awakening Party (PKB) respectively, but they work to make these parties inclusive.

The experience of living under an authoritarian regime also led Islamist organizations, which still advocate for an Islamic state, to believe that they would not succeed unless they participated in the political process. Indonesia's Islamist parties, most of which are politically moderate, garnered about 20% of the country's 113 million votes in the 2004 parliamentary elections. These parties include the United Development Party (PPP), the Crescent Star Party (PBB), the Reform Star Party (PBR), and the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS). In particular, PKS did very well (7%) in the recent elections, earning more votes than Muhammadiyah's PAN party. However, their victory was not tied solely to traditional Islamist issues; rather it arose from their image as a party that was more "clean and caring" than President Megawati's PDI-P party, thus drawing from less religious, undecided voters as well as Islamists.

A second cause of Indonesia's moderate Islamism is the country's sense of nationalism. In 1945, Soekarno introduced what would become the state ideology for an independent Indonesian nation. The *Pancasila*, or Five Principles, endorsed the belief in one God, humanitarianism, Indonesian unity, consultative democracy and social justice. The appeal of these ideas remains strong among the country's Muslim majority. Some Islamist activists even assert that to be a good nationalist and a devout Muslim are not contradictory. To love one's country is part of faith. The result is that, while most Islamists are concerned with Islamic international problems (such as the American war in Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict), they do not make these issues part of the domestic electoral agenda. Indonesian politics focus on local issues.

## "To love one's country is part of faith."

Thirdly, Islamist movements are religious and moralistic in orientation. They want to purify what they see as a Muslim society corrupted by the negative impact of Westernization, and they believe that they can do this by correcting the government's policy failures. However, a recent trend among Indonesian Islamists is decreasing their interest in politics. A growing number of Indonesian Islamists are Salafists—i.e., they seek to return to the pure form of Islam practiced during the first three generations—and Salafists are more concerned with religion than politics. Some support secular parties, like Golongan Karya (the leading party under Soeharto). Others are not interested in formal politics at all, preferring to devote their attention to religious matters. For example, a number of Salafist organizations, such as the Party of Liberation (Hizbut Tahrir) and the Mission Association (Jemaah Tabligh), support an Islamic state or the return of the transna-
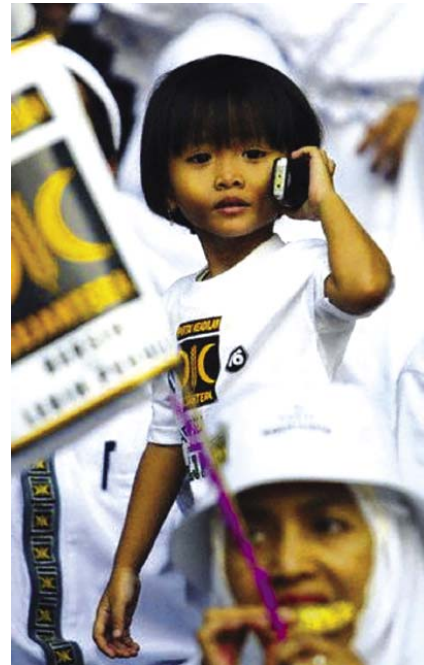


**A child at a PKS rally in Jakarta before the March parliamentary elections.**

tional Islamic caliphate, but they do not promote these ideas through participation in political parties.

The radical Islamist organization Jemaah Islamiyah, which has been linked with the terrorist group al-Qaeda, is the exception to the tendencies described above. However, it finds little support among Indonesians, the vast majority of whom denounce its violent ideology. It, and other marginalized radical groups like it, does not support pluralism or democratic politics and subscribes to the idea of a clash of civilizations between East and West. Such an ideology is shaped by international influences, not Indonesia's tradition of Islamist moderates, who embrace legitimate political participation and love of country. *(aD)*

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