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Political Islam: Discourse, Ideology and Power

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There is little doubt that political Islam (*al-islam al-siyasi*, in Arabic)[1] is one of the leading ideologies in the Arab and Muslim World nowadays. The consensual role of the Ennahda Party in Tunisia after the so-called 'Arab Spring', the government of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt for a short period, and even the institutional and pro-Monarchy government of the Justice and Development Party in Morocco are just a few well known examples of that. It is possible to track the story of the main Islamist movements in contemporary history, and even to set precisely a date – 1928 – for the birth of political Islam as the ideological foundation of a concrete social and political organization. Nevertheless, it is not that easy to try to define the concept, for what exactly is political Islam?[2] How could we possibly find a common link among the self-proclaimed Islamist associations, organizations, movements and political parties settled throughout the Arab and Muslim World and also in Europe and America?

The great influence that political Islam has had on the political and social life in the Muslim World over the past 30 years derives not only from its political practice as a political actor, but also from its political, social and cultural discourse, which has been quite influential in society. Thinkers and ideologues like the Egyptian Hassan al-Banna (1906-1949), founder of the Muslim Brotherhood and main ideological reference of political Islam, the Moroccan Abdessalam Yassine (1928-2012), the Sudanese Hassan al-Turabi (b. 1932), or the Tunisian Rachid Ghannouchi (b. 1941) are well known in the whole Muslim World and their ideas are often quoted.[3]

In general terms, the historical crisis lived by the failed state political institutions in many countries since their independences in the mid-20th century, and the social and economic difficulties that many Muslim societies have gone through, have been the setting for the emergence of the Islamist movements as opposition actors, and also for the conceptual development of their projects as a real ideological alternative to the *status quo*. In this sense, political Islam is more a wide and sometimes not very well defined project for change rather than a unified ideology of political action. As a general definition it could be stated that the Islamist project for change is a political project based on a religious legitimacy in which one of the core issues is the dialectical link between Islam and power, a key factor that has been included in the Islamist discourse and praxis by the updating of Qur'anic hermeneutics and the ideological interpretations of Islamic law.

From this perspective, the importance of the Islamist ideology can be situated as a basic resource in the competition for power by the different organizations included in the wide-range definition of political Islam. One of the main points of reference in the analysis of political Islam as an expression of an ideological and political trend (above and beyond the diversity of trends existing within the Islamist movement) is morals. The ethical-moral field is the source from which Islamist ideologues claim to derive the basis of their argument for Islamic political action and for political and social discourse. This core reference does represent an attempt to build (not re-build) an *imaginary* that is new but recognizable as far as it is clearly 'Islamic' and, therefore, to present the historical dynamic of political Islam as a movement that is not only social and political, but also moral: Islamic morality in action, foreseeing a kind of Islamic utopia, as a Muslim vanguard against oppression, corruption and injustice. The sphere of Islamist political and social action is based on the supreme moral value of justice (*'adl*) and is methodologically founded on the Qur'anic command of *al-amr bi-l-ma'rûf wa-l-nahy 'an al-munkar* (Qur'an 3:104, 110, 114; 7:157; 9:71, 112; 22:41; 31:17) ('order what is right and forbid what is wrong'). It is important to bear this in mind in the case of authoritarian political contexts in which both ethical issues like corruption or poverty, and aesthetic ones like ostentation or westernization, do possess a crucial importance and a specific political weight.

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The singularity of political Islam as a political ideology and as a socio-political movement is linked both with its ideological claims and, above all, with the specific nature of the religious, social and political context in which each one of the movements have emerged, and which sometimes turns them into what could be described as “national Islamisms” (see the cases of Hamas in Palestine, Hizbullah in Lebanon, Islamic Front of Salvation in Algeria or even the Islamic Republican system in Iran).[4] The wide diversity of ideological options in political Islam is manifested also in a broad Islamist discourse that shares a series of fundamental elements that link the concepts of *da'wa* (religious preach) and *dawla* (secular state) from the moral and legal standpoint of Islamic reform (*islâh*).

However, the discourse of Islamist parties and movements does differ in terms of the more pragmatic or strategic elements they use, as it must be borne in mind that the ideological element is the main power resource for most organizations, and it is by using this resource that they attempt to turn political Islam into a sole actor and into an specific and irreplaceable social and political (not to mention moral) point of reference within the framework of political competition for power. The main vector of the discourse and the ideology that backs it up (and which frames Islamist political practice) is the link between the citizens-believers and the state, in the vanguard of which (either in resistance, opposition or reformism) the Islamist actors are situated, in a trend that is progressively reformist in most cases.

Political practice, therefore, characterizes Islamist political actors in a unique way, clearly subordinating their discourse to the political stance in the ongoing struggle for power. The reform embodied by political institutions in some Arab and Muslim countries after the collapse of the Soviet Union (1991) and after the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ (2011) has been faced by some Islamist movements in terms of resistance from the outside of the official political game, de-legitimizing the political system as a power stance, as in the case of the outsider movements in different scenarios (see the cases of Justice and Spirituality in Morocco, the Islamic Front of Salvation in Algeria and the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria and currently in Egypt again).

The participative actors, meanwhile – both those that are included in the political game at some point, and those that orbit the game (see the cases of Hamas and Islah in Algeria, the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan and others) – view political reform from the standpoint of an opposition that is more or less loyal to the system and which, linked to a broad process of co-optation, does legitimize the political system, while stressing the moral and social element as the central axis of their political action. In this very sense, the role of the PJD in Morocco and Turkey, the Ennahda Party in Tunisia and the short government of the Freedom and Justice Party in Egypt must be observed, as international attention grows. They are interesting examples of current Islamic-oriented governments trying to implement public policies based on Islamic moral values from the top of the system: stand or reform?

Ideology or political pragmatism? That's still to be seen.

[1] See Muhammad Said al-Ashmaoui, *Al-islam al-siyasi* (Beirut: Arab Diffusion, 2004).

[2] Bashir Musa Nafi, *Al-Islamiyyun* (Doha: Aljazeera Center for Studies, 2010), 9-17.

[3] See Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi', *The Contemporary Arab Reader on Political Islam* (London: Pluto Press, 2010).

[4] See Frederic Volpi (ed.), *Political Islam. A Critical Reader* (London: Routledge, 2011).

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