The Many-Colored Cloak: Evolving Conceptions of Democracy in Islamic Political Thought

Malik Mufti

Abstract

This articles argues (a) that democratic discourse has already become hegemonic among mainstream Islamist movements in Turkey and the Arab world; (b) that while this development originated in tactical calculations, it constitutes a consequential transformation in Islamist political thought; and (c) that this transformation, in turn, raises critical questions about the interaction of religion and democracy with which contemporary Islamists have not yet grappled adequately but which were anticipated by medieval philosophers such as al-Farabi and Ibn Rushd. The argument is laid out through an analysis (based on textual sources and interviews) of key decisions on electoral participation made by Turkey's AK Party and the Muslim Brotherhoods in Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. Particular attention is focused on these movements' gradual embrace of three key democratic principles: pluralism, the people as the source of political authority, and the legitimacy of such procedural mechanisms as multiple parties and regular elections.

Introduction

Alexis de Tocqueville warned almost two centuries ago that although "the democratic revolution to which we are witness is an irresistible fact against which it would be neither desirable nor wise to struggle," it did bring with it

Malik Mufti is an associate professor of political science, Political Science Department, Tufts University, Medford, MA. He specializes in international relations, comparative politics, and Middle East politics. The author is grateful to Janine Clark, Consuelo Cruz, Rob Devigne, F. Gregory Gause III, and Michael Herb for their helpful comments on various iterations of this article.

certain dangers, including the establishment of a political order that encourages atomized individuals to pursue "small and vulgar pleasures" as it "enervates, extinguishes, dazes, and finally reduces each nation to being nothing more than a herd of timid and industrious animals" incapable even of defending itself.[1] Today there is a vigorous debate about the prospects for democracy in the Muslim Middle East. In accordance with Tocqueville's insight, however, this article attempts to show that even here the spirit of democracy is already upon us, a product of intensifying pressures on the secular nationalist regimes that have dominated the region since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

Due to historical particularities – chiefly the emergence of a secular nationalist elite enjoying greater popular legitimacy and therefore manifesting greater self-confidence – Turkey made the democratic transition earlier than its Arab neighbors. Yet the essential trajectory remains the same: an intensifying struggle between the dominant elites and the populist (and therefore Islamist) movements seeking to supplant them through democratic means. While expediency is leading many mainstream Islamists to embrace one democratic principle after another, however, they have so far shown a surprising failure to grapple with the deeper implications for their doctrines and for political order more generally. Some of the greatest Muslim philosophers (*falasifah*) of many centuries ago, by contrast, did make the study of these implications a central concern, and so it is to them that one must first turn.

The *Falasifah*

The *falasifah*'s most explicit discussions of democracy occur in al-Farabi's treatise *The Political Regime* and in Ibn Rushd's commentary on Plato's *Republic*.[2] Although both are elaborations on the classification of imperfect regimes in Book 8 of the *Republic*, several observers have discerned in them a more favorable view of democracy than the one found in Plato.[3] Al-Farabi, certainly, asserts that "of all" the regimes in his parallel classification of "ignorant" cities – cities that fall short of the ideal in which the wisest rule as philosopher-kings – democracy is "the most admirable and happy."[4]

He begins by identifying freedom and equality as the twin principles of democracy. Even though freedom can engender dissoluteness and equality obscures distinctions between "the base and the noble," these twin principles combine to create a most attractive tapestry of human types: "On the surface, it looks like an embroidered garment full of colored figures and dyes.

Everybody loves it and loves to reside in it, because there is no human wish or desire that this city does not satisfy. The nations emigrate to it and reside there, and it grows beyond measure." Whatever he thinks of this popular perception, al-Farabi himself points to two particularly excellent features of democracy. First, because every type of human being can flourish in such an environment, "virtuous men" including philosophers, rhetoricians, and poets will be tolerated and flourish there as well alongside the many less admirable types – "this is the best thing that takes place in this city." Second, along with the primitive "indispensable city" (in which people subsist on bare necessities), the democratic city is the one in which "the construction of virtuous cities and the establishment of the rule of virtuous men are more effective and much easier" than in any other of the imperfect cities.[5]

Al-Farabi's appreciation of democracy, then, is rooted in his understanding (shared with other *falasifah*) of the ultimate end of politics as being the creation of conditions in which people have the maximum opportunity to realize their potential.[6] Of all the imperfect – in other words, humanly viable – regimes, democracy is the most conducive to the well-being both of the intellectual elites (by fostering an environment of pluralism and tolerance for philosophizing) and of the general populace (by making possible a government that enables all citizens to engage in the pursuits that best accord with their various natures). Finally, because its virtues and vices are rooted in its bustling and open economy – and because, in Muhsin Mahdi's words, it is "the only regime that provides ample opportunity" for cultivating the "sciences and arts essential for the establishment of the virtuous regime"[7] – both are functions of its size and level of development: "The bigger, the more civilized, the more populated, the more productive, and the more perfect it is, the more prevalent and the greater are the good and the evil it possesses." Far from the compact city-state of ancient Greece, then, the optimal form of democracy is a sprawling imperial civilization.[8]

Ibn Rushd's commentary on Plato's *Republic* follows al-Farabi's analysis closely, including where the latter diverges from Plato – for example, in his emphasis on cosmopolitan empire. Ibn Rushd, however, seems to focus more on the pathologies of democratic regimes, particularly the "entirely domestic" basis of political action within their purview. Since the unrestrained pursuit of individual desire is paramount here, both rulers and ruled typically look only to their private interests. Such self-regard, combined with the enervating effects of luxury and decadence, denudes the citizenry of the qualities – allegiance to a higher cause, self-risking courage, readiness to participate in collective civic action – necessary to resist would-be tyrants

internally and conquering invaders externally. "Unless strengthened by virtue or honor," Ibn Rushd warns, democracy "perishes rapidly."[9]

It is this danger that leads him to exhort "the wise ... to attend to such cities" in order to counteract the evil consequences of democracy while preserving the good. In doing so he uses a familiar medical trope: urging statesmen to act even more vigorously against democracy's pathologies "than the physician's precautions against the production of bad humors in bodies."[10] Here is where the *falasifah*'s political activism coincides with Islam's legal framework. In this conception, the law (Shari`ah) emerges as the fundamental element in governing a democratic polity seeking to ascend to the highest degree of excellence humanly possible. Given the variability and contingency of worldly affairs, however, the law's proper application also requires statesmen who understand its underlying intent, are accordingly able to diagnose the specific syndrome of pathologies afflicting the body politic at any given time, and have the qualities needed to impose the necessary remedies. Hence the greater emphasis among the *falasifah*, in comparison with their Platonic predecessors, on such political qualities as rhetoric (particularly in democracies, where persuasion is the norm) and courage (when coercion becomes necessary, for instance in jihad against external enemies).[11]

The *falasifah*'s distinctive political focus, then, reflects their recognition of the salience of the political context for the entire hierarchy of human pursuits, culminating, for them, in their particular concern: the quest for wisdom. Their appreciation of democracy is therefore utilitarian in nature and does not stem from any a priori commitment to its twin principles of freedom and equality. Freedom that creates space for the prudent questioning of conventional opinion is good; freedom that simultaneously encourages vile behavior may be a necessary evil, but it is an evil nonetheless. As for equality, from a moral perspective grounded in the distinction between the noble and the base, it is simply a fallacy. Instead, the *falasifah* appreciate democracy in spite of its animating principles and only because they understand it to be the most promising of the actually attainable (as opposed to the ideal) types of regime. This is far from what today would be considered a liberal perspective. In any event, they have little to say about such democratic concepts as the people being the source of political authority or about such democratic procedures as elections and representative assemblies. It can, however, be considered a perspective that is friendly to liberalism, at least in the sense of being attentive to its needs: if circumstances do give rise to a democratic regime, the *falasifah* suggest, it is worth deploying all possible resources in order to counteract its enervating deficiencies.

To recapitulate, the great virtue of democracy for the medieval *falasifah* is that it constitutes the best hope for sustaining a civilization that provides the material and social contexts necessary for cultivating excellence and whose citizens possess the virtues needed to repel internal and external threats. In the Islamic context, such a civilization will optimally be imperial in character. This is true in other contexts as well: The *falasifah* are not the only ones ever to contemplate the implications of democracy in a large and diverse polity far removed from the classical Greek model.[12] Like some of their counterparts in analogous situations, they appear to perceive in the very diversity of imperial democracy powerful supports for the kind of liberty that accords with their rationalist vision of political excellence, including the idea that pluralism reduces the likelihood of stifling orthodoxy and the consequent inclination toward rhetorical persuasion as an occasional alternative to coercion.[13] Like some of their counterparts as well, they look to a civil religion to counteract the kind of liberty that undermines the polity's moral foundations and to get people to look beyond their private concerns. Finally, because such a civil religion must be able to accommodate changing circumstances, the *falasifah*, like their counterparts elsewhere, rest their hopes for effective democracy on discerning statecraft.

As will next be shown, because contemporary Islamist democrats arrive at their appreciation of democracy from an entirely different direction, their hierarchy of imperatives differs significantly as well.

Turkish Islamists: From Erbakan to the AK Party

The evolution of Islamist political thought in republican Turkey has been shaped decisively by the hegemony of the secular nationalist Kemalist regime. As the ideology of a cadre that mobilized the nation against those western powers seeking to occupy it at the end of the First World War, won a war of liberation at staggering human cost, and erected a republic upon the ruins of the Ottoman Empire, Kemalism enjoyed a degree of popular legitimacy never approached by its secular nationalist counterparts in the rest of the Near East. Sustained by this legitimacy, during the 1920s the Kemalists enacted a flurry of secular laws that shut down religious seminaries, courts, and Sufi orders; banned polygamy and the veil; and drove Islam out of the political arena altogether. In a book explaining the ruling party's 1935 program, a republican ideologue went so far as to describe Islam as "a religion suitable for Arabs" living in the "brain-baking heat of the desert," contrast-

ing it with "the religion of Kemalism," which, he claimed, was more appropriate for Turks.[14]

Although most Kemalists never went that far, their commitment to secularism did generate a religious backlash in the form of several uprisings against the reforms that took place during the 1930s. With strong backing among the elites and even among the conservative populace as a whole, the republican leadership crushed the Islamists (along with all other rivals) and went on to rule virtually unchallenged until the transition to multi-party politics in 1950. Although several of the parties that emerged in subsequent years made overtures to religious sentiment in pursuit of votes, the vigilance of republican institutions such as the judiciary and the armed forces, which manifested itself in periodic sanctions ranging from party closures to military coups, prevented any serious reassertion of political Islamism.

Only in the 1970s could the Islamists finally venture back into the political arena under their own banner. There, they had to contend both with secularist state forces that had lost none of their vigilance or potency and with an electoral process that had been functioning (fitfully, to be sure) for two decades now and had come to be seen by mainstream public opinion as the only legitimate framework for political action. In such a context, the Islamists had no option but to uphold what they called, in the 1970 founding charter of their first political party, a "democratic legal order" that guaranteed "freedom of religion and conscience" and barred "repression of religion and lack of respect toward believers."[15]

Turkey's Constitutional Court shut down that party the following year; however, its successor, the National Salvation Party, proved more durable, winning 11.8 percent of the vote in 1973 and even participating in a coalition government for a time. Necmettin Erbakan, who became its leader and would dominate Islamist politics for another quarter century, elaborated on the Islamist conception of democracy primarily as a defense mechanism against Kemalist authoritarianism: "Democracy means the people decide. But to pretend that democracy exists, to tell people they can govern themselves while seeking to shape them in the manner you want – you can't establish domestic peace with such a mentality. … That is controlled democracy, and controlled democracy is not democracy."[16] In line with such populism, his democratic agenda emphasized measures designed to shift power away from the elites and toward the masses, including an elected presidency, abolition of the Senate, referenda on all major issues, and a jury system for criminal cases.[17]

At the same time, this was not a liberal conception: Erbakan explicitly presented Islamism as an alternative both to leftist socialism and to the "liberal vision inspired by the exploitative, usurious capitalist views of the West."[18] Equally removed from the ideological commitment to the equality and freedom of sovereign individuals that drove liberal democrats and from the utilitarian reliance on diversity and freedom that attracted the *falasifah*, Erbakan's conception of democracy was animated instead by an intolerant orthodoxy manifested in the stridently anti-Christian and anti-Semitic references that peppered his speeches and publications.[19] For Erbakan and the Islamists who followed him, in short, democracy was merely a vehicle to bring about regime change and had no intrinsic connection to the functioning or sustenance of the alternative regime they envisaged. Once the change actually took place, it presumably would be of no further use and thus could be dropped.

Even at this early stage, however, some Islamists worried about the tactical deployment of democracy. Selahaddin Çakirgil, a writer associated with the National Salvation Party, warned in 1976 of the "serious internal contradiction" between "the principles of democracy" and "the principles of our own worldview" looming ahead: "[W]hile we're thinking that we'll use democracy, democracy might transform us in its own image. ... The Islamic conception and the democratic conception conflict with one another."[20] His concerns proved well-founded, because the Islamist movement hurtled in subsequent years through a series of critical conjunctures – with each step reflecting the strategic preferences of Islamist leaders, themselves shaped by earlier decisions as well as by shifting exogenous conditions – that had the cumulative effect of strengthening more liberal currents within the movement.

In 1980, for example, the chronic tension between Islamists and Kemalists (who had traversed their own path from illiberal origins to an increasingly democratic outlook) came to a head once again with a military coup that had several important consequences. First, by sidelining the older Islamist leaders – it was only in 1983 that their latest vehicle, the Welfare Party, could be constituted, and even then Erbakan remained barred by court order from active politics for several more years – it created room for new voices. Second, by reinforcing the massive reality of the security-legal establishment as an immovable guardian of secularism, it accentuated the democratic option as the only feasible avenue for political action. And third, by clearing the way for the remarkable career of Turgut Özal as prime minister and president during the following decade, it brought to the fore the

powerful electoral force into which Özal tapped so successfully, a force that combined religious conservatism with the economic (and ultimately also political) liberalism of Turkey's emerging commercial middle class.[21]

As a result, the Özal years (1983-93) became a decade of intensifying internal debate for Turkey's Islamists. Responding to the more tolerant temper of the times, the writer Ali Bulaç, for example, looked back to the Prophet's "Medina Constitution" in search of a "pluralistic model that accommodates religious ... and cultural autonomy." But he still rejected competitive democracy as an outgrowth of western values that were incompatible with Islam's communitarian spirit.[22] Welfare Party reformist Bahri Zengin, by contrast, began advocating a far more thoroughgoing embrace of democratic pluralism: "There were of course those who opposed. … Arguments were made along the lines of 'we cannot defend this [pluralism], because then we'd be defending Communists.' These debates were quite protracted. But in the end our colleagues were convinced of the need to adopt this not simply as a worthwhile tactic, but as part of our value and belief system."[23]

In fact not everyone was convinced, and Erbakan's return from legal limbo to reclaim the party leadership in the late 1980s led to an uneasy coexistence between the reformists and their opponents. The Welfare Party nevertheless continued to gain strength, finally scoring a victory by winning a plurality (21.4 percent) of the national vote in December 1995. Erbakan then became prime minister of a coalition government that, in turn, became the target of a determined destabilization campaign by the secularist establishment. At a National Security Council session on 28 February 1997, the generals handed Erbakan a secularization program and demanded that he implement it at once. Two months later they launched a series of public "briefings" to highlight his government's failures. Simultaneously, the chief state prosecutor initiated proceedings against Erbakan for allegedly subversive comments he had made in the past. Confronted with what was in effect Turkey's fourth military coup d'état, the prime minister finally resigned on 18 June 1997. Even so, the Constitutional Court subsequently closed down the Welfare Party and once again barred Erbakan from political activity for five years. As one general explained: "We love the fatherland more than democracy and human rights."[24]

The 1997 coup brought cleavages within the Islamist movement to the fore, thus serving as another event in the sequence of critical conjunctures that have shaped its evolution over the past few decades. For the radical wing, it reinforced the argument in favor of violent action. Thus the IBDA-C

(the Turkish acronym for the "Great Eastern Islamic Raiders' Front," a prominent manifestation of this current), which had already turned to terrorism in the 1990s, kept up its denunciations of the Welfare Party for falling into a democratic trap that only legitimized Turkey's secular Kemalist order.[25] Although such groups continued to surface occasionally and launch attacks such as the Istanbul bombings of November 2003 (reportedly in cooperation with al-Qa`ida), they remained no more than a marginal force within the Islamist movement.

By contrast, for the reformists – who, led by Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Abdullah Gül, broke away from Erbakan's old guard in August 2001 to form what became the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) – the 1997 coup confirmed the futility of alternatives to genuine democracy as the optimal arena in which to counter secularist authoritarianism.[26] Indeed, the AK Party repudiated the label of "political Islamism" altogether, embracing instead the idea of a "conservative democracy" in which pluralistic politics and free-market economics would safeguard civil society against attempts at "societal engineering" by a "repressive state."[27] While the tactical objectives of such relabeling are obvious (deflecting secularist pressure and bolstering the party's mainstream image in order to expand its electoral base), it nevertheless constituted a genuine redeployment in a liberal direction.

Thus pro-AK Party theoreticians such as Bulaç, who had remained ambivalent about democracy well into the 1990s, now conceded that its grounding in the periodic transfer of power through the ballot box may allow it to transcend its cultural and historical (i.e., western) origins so that it may, after all, be possible to envisage a democracy that is compatible with Islam.[28] Political pluralism, which he had previously depicted as a culturally alien competitive principle, now turned out to be indispensable, since no person or group of people can claim to articulate an infallible interpretation of God's will.[29] The "fundamental question" according to Bulaç therefore became:

> In whose name do those who govern us govern? In the name of God? No, because the governors are not God's representatives. ... Who gave this authority to the prime minister or president? Did God give it? No. We gave them the authority to govern us. In that case we can assert the following: in political order, the right to exercise sovereignty and delegate authority belongs to the nation, to the people.[30]

In foreign affairs, the AK Party's liberalizing turn was reflected in its push for Turkey's accession to the European Union (EU). Gül explained

that EU membership was desirable neither intrinsically nor for economic or geopolitical reasons, but as a "second best solution" to the internal struggle for "democracy … and human rights. ... That is the most important point. ... One would have preferred to achieve those objectives by ourselves. But we cannot."[31] Only under the protective mantle of the accession process, in other words, could the secular nationalist establishment's authoritarian tendencies be ameliorated. His argument highlights once again both the tactical origins of the AK Party's transformation and, in conjunction with its subsequent policies, how those tactical choices end up generating deeper normative consequences.

Turkey's December 2002 national elections vindicated the AK Party's "conservative democratic" turn. That turn enabled Erdogan to survive a year-long series of threats and legal challenges from the secularist establishment and lead the AK Party unmolested to a convincing victory by netting 34.3% of the vote and securing an outright majority of parliamentary seats. It also enabled the AK Party to broaden its electoral base significantly: only the secularist Republican People's Party won enough votes (19.4%) to enter Parliament as well, while all other parties fell below the 10% threshold – including the Erbakanist Felicity Party with only 2.5% of the vote. Once in power, Erdogan, Gül, and their colleagues implemented a program of economic liberalization that yielded an impressive annual average GDP real growth rate of 6.9% during the next five years. They also pushed ahead with political reforms mandated by the EU as preconditions for accession, including reducing the Turkish Armed Foces' dominance in the National Security Council, eliminating the exemption of military expenditures from public audit, and further liberalizing the cultural restrictions that had been placed on the Kurds and other ethnic minorities.

Polling data indicates that tactical liberalization at the policy level was paralleled by normative liberalization at the cultural level. In a 2003 public opinion survey, for example, 75% of respondents described competitive elections as "very important."[32] At the same time, religious sentiments remained strong, as evidenced by the fact that in the same 2003 poll 41% of respondents said that Islam should play a large role in political life, and by the fact that 51% of respondents in a 2006 poll defined their identity primarily as Muslim rather than Turkish.[33] All of this confirmed the powerful resonance of the AK Party's formula of combining Islamic values with democratic politics. The process remains in its early stages, however, with illiberal currents still in evidence both within the Islamist movement and Turkish society more generally.[34] Nevertheless, it does appear that the reciprocal

causal relationship between the dynamics at the political and cultural levels is accelerating: the AK Party's embrace of democracy as a shield against the secularist establishment is helping to consolidate the hegemony of democratic norms in society, and the deepening hegemony of democratic norms makes it, in turn, more difficult for the Islamist leadership to abandon the democratic path. Little by little, then, and much as Çakirgil had warned a quarter of a century earlier, tactical accommodations to political opportunities and constraints seem to be generating a deeper tectonic shift in the Islamist movement's normative grounding.

Turkey's secularist establishment reacted with dismay. Speaking at the War Academies in April 2007, President Ahmet Necdet Sezer called for "counterweights and brakes" on elected politicians in order to avert a "dictatorship of the majority."[35] Around the same time, the media published excerpts allegedly from retired Navy Commander Özden Örnek's diary describing discussions he and his fellow force commanders had held in 2003 and 2004 on the feasibility of a military coup – an idea that was abandoned due to an anticipated lack of support from the Turkish populace as well as the American government.[36] The military's displeasure surged again following the AK Party's presentation of Gül as its presidential candidate for election by Parliament in late April 2007. On the eve of the first round of voting, the General Staff posted a *pronunciamento* on its website warning that "no one should doubt" the role of the Turkish Armed Forces as the "decisive defender of secularism." During the legal wrangling that ensued, the military lent its support to a series of massive secularist demonstrations in Istanbul, Izmir, and other cities. Erdogan responded by calling early elections on 22 July 2007, however, and the AK Party went on to win a stunning 46.6 percent of the popular vote. Ignoring another last-minute Internet posting by Chief of Staff Yasar Büyükanit about the "centers of evil" seeking to undermine secularism, Parliament then went ahead and elected Gül president on 28 August.

The 2007 elections constituted another major turn in the democratizing spiral. In large part because the Islamist politicians had learned to reposition themselves squarely within the legal and normative parameters of Turkey's emerging democratic regime, a military command that had gone from hanging the elected leadership in 1960, to imposing a three-year military junta in 1980, to finally mounting its first "post-modern" putsch against Erbakan in 1997, now contented itself with snubbing the new president and his headscarf-wearing wife at various social venues. Cognizant of the growing internal and external obstacles to military authoritarianism at the turn of the twenty-first century, anxious to preserve the exceptionally high regard in

which it is still held by Turkish public opinion, and itself deeply conflicted between the imperatives of securing core republican principles on the one hand and maintaining its geopolitical and ideological commitment to westernization via NATO and the EU on the other, the Turkish Armed Forces command apparently concluded that it had no choice for the time being but to acquiesce in this further rise of AK Party fortunes.

At the same time, the secularist elites still wield formidable resources of their own, including an iron grip on the state's legal and security institutions. They also enjoy a popular support base of some 25%-30% of the electorate, as reflected in the election results of recent years and as confirmed by equally consistent polling data, such as the 30% or so support for the ban on headscarves in state institutions.[37] Turkish political development, in short, appears to have produced an equilibrium between two genuine subcultures: one quasi-Jacobin and elitist, the other Islamic and populist. Neither side started out inherently liberal; however, since neither can eliminate the other altogether, the vector product of their interaction has been a democratic process that has had a progressively (though by no means irreversibly) liberalizing effect on both.

If the liberalizing dynamic generated by this balance of power extends into the indefinite future, the question arises: Will Turkey's Islamist movement follow that dynamic all the way to its logical conclusion – to the point where the AK Party really does metamorphosize into a reflection of the liberal European Christian Democratic parties? And if so, what becomes of the concerns raised by al-Farabi and Ibn Rushd? How effectively will the AK Party leadership or its analogues be able to counteract the pathologies identified by the *falasifah*: the consolidation of a view of equality that erases transcendent virtues, or of a conception of freedom reduced to the unrestrained pursuit of private appetites, resulting in a polity enervated in the face of its internal and external enemies?

The guardians of Kemalism (which exhibits a Spartan sensibility of its own) have long decried liberalism's self-indulgent and corrupting tendencies. Certainly it is the case that the private sector's explosive growth in recent decades has been accompanied by the ascendance of bourgeois norms valorizing individual well-being over the interests of an interventionist state – norms that are indeed to some extent congruent with the anti-statist, or at least anti-republican, current within the Islamist movement. One result has been the greater willingness of Turks in recent years to question political and social orthodoxies and to explore their distinct individual identities, be they ethnic, sectarian, or otherwise. No less an authority than General Büyükanit

himself has assigned ultimate responsibility for this development to the efforts by "international capital" to "erode" national identities through such "liberal approaches" as the promotion of "micro" identities.[38]

On the other hand, there is as yet little evidence that either the private sector's ascendance or the Islamist movement's confrontations with the Kemalist state (and particularly with the Turkish Armed Forces) have significantly eroded the extraordinary attachment to martial values so characteristic of Turkish political culture as a whole. Moreover, there are indications that the current AK Party leadership is searching for its own alternatives to the homogeneous, insular republicanism of the Kemalist elites on the one hand, and the integrationist liberalism of the EU on the other.

Gül's somewhat reluctantly instrumental attitude toward the EU has already been noted. In a speech he delivered in 1992, he gave a clearer exposition of the alternative he had in mind. Since Turkey's "official ideology" imposed a secularist and monoculturally nationalist vision on society, he maintained, it had created a system that stood "in opposition to, and was an enemy of, its people." As a result, Turkey had become a country of "taboos, of things that cannot be said." If it could shed this "one-party era" mentality, the moral and ethical values of Islam would not only secure the unity of the population on a much firmer basis, they could usher in a "new conception" that would break through existing state boundaries, "enabling us to embrace our co-religionists and kinfolk from Bosnia ... to China."[39]

Erdogan echoed Gül in an interview he gave around the same time. He also denounced Kemalism for its "rigidly unitary" and "racist" outlook, which had plunged the country into military, moral, scientific, and economic mediocrity. Turkey was in danger: "[A] morally bankrupt society cannot secure its independence." But democracy is not the cure; it is only a means (*araç*) to the cure. The cure is the "Islamic state conception" that had once animated the Ottoman Empire and that could again serve as the grounding for a "new imperial vision" propelling Turkey to a position of greatness in the twenty-first century.[40]

It is now over a decade and a half later. Although Erdogan and Gül have become Turkey's very popular prime minister and president, respectively, they still confront a formidable secularist counterforce that is kept at bay only by the functioning of Turkey's delicate democratic balance. It therefore remains to be seen whether the AK Party leaders will ever be able to reconcile democratic practice with the imperial Islamic vision they once championed, or whether they have become inextricably enmeshed in the liberalizing, Europeanizing, dynamic that has allowed them to come this far.

Arab Islamists: The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Jordan, and Syria

The Islamist challenge to the authoritarian secular-nationalist order in the Arab world came to the fore in the 1980s with the end of the oil boom and the ensuing region-wide budget shortfalls and austerity measures. Confronted by rising and sometimes violent public discontent, many Arab governments hoped that a controlled and limited expansion of electoral contestation could serve as a safety valve. The extent to which the resulting political openings constituted serious threats to state authoritarianism has been disputed.[41] Here, however, the focus will be on the doctrinal adaptations to this changing environment undertaken by one important group of Arab Islamists – the Muslim Brotherhoods of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria – each of which began to assert itself once again on the political stage.

For the first time since being declared illegal in 1954, Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood (EMB) was allowed to field candidates in the 1984 parliamentary elections, albeit not under its own name and only after much electoral rigging that ensured it only ended up with 8 out of a total of 458 parliamentary seats. In Jordan, violent price riots in April 1989 led to the first parliamentary elections in twenty-two years. There, however, a history of cooperation between the Hashemite monarchy and the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood (JMB) against common radical secular foes created a far more benign environment than in Egypt. As a result, the JMB was able to secure 22 out of a total of 80 seats and thereby dominate the new Parliament.[42] In Syria, on the other hand, a Ba`thist regime resting on popular foundations that were weaker than those of its Egyptian or Jordanian (to say nothing of its Turkish) counterparts ruled out electoral contestation as a viable safety valve in response to the economic crisis of the early 1980s. Elements of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (SMB), in turn, resorted to a violent strategy as well, escalating the insurgency it had launched in the late 1970s into a full-scale armed insurrection in Hama in February 1982. Regime forces stormed Hama after two weeks of bombardment, leveling entire sections of the city, killing up to 10,000 civilians, and decisively crushing the rebellion.

Despite such disparity in fortunes, all three Brotherhoods drew a remarkably uniform conclusion from the upheavals of the 1980s: given the robustness of secular-nationalist authoritarianism, there is no alternative to the electoral path, no matter how constrained.[43] EMB leader Omar al-Tilmisani, who had earlier called for "acceptance of the parameters of the political regime and readiness to work within them, and rejection of violence

and terrorism as methods for change,"[44] described participation in the 1984 elections as "the opportunity of a lifetime" for avoiding complete marginalization.[45] The JMB, for its part, signed a regime-mandated "National Charter" in June 1991 renouncing violence and embracing "pluralism" as "the way to consolidate democracy."[46] In return, and after overcoming some internal debate about the danger of being coopted, it was allowed to run municipalities and even cabinet ministries. Participation yielded many of the hoped-for benefits, such as raising the JMB's profile, allowing it to gain practical experience, and permitting it to shape social policies to some extent. Even in Syria, finally, the catastrophic confrontation with the regime eliminated (in many cases physically) hardline elements and left the exiled SMB leadership in the hands of pragmatists such as Ali al-Bayanuni, who advocated electoral instead of armed struggle.

As in Turkey, the initial choice in favor of electoral contestation reflected purely tactical calculations. This is made clear by Islamist texts written just prior to the electoral turn that revealed serious reservations about the principles of democracy. Thus EMB theorist Ali Jarisha articulated his opinion of equality by denouncing "the rule of the ignorant bleating majority." Rulers should indeed engage in consultation on key matters, but only with "people of knowledge and virtue" steeped in the principles of the Shari`ah. Even then, "Islam rejects [political] pluralism because the result is contention." The "democratic slogan" that the people are the source of authority therefore "entails error and great danger."[47] Abd al-Qadir Awda, another EMB theorist, argued that unrestrained freedom valorizes base appetites, "leaves it to human beings to establish the boundaries of everything and set the standards for human life," and privileges "individual interests and party attachments over the general interests." Islam, according to him, offers an alternative that is "higher and nobler."[48] At the same time, there is no hint here of any appreciation for the political benefits of pluralism and productivity on which the *falasifah*, for all their cognizance of the "great dangers" entailed in democracy, rested their hopes.

Nevertheless, and again as in Turkey, once the electoral choice had been made the Islamists plunged into a dynamic with a democratizing logic of its own. For the EMB, the first step was overturning the legal restrictions that prevented it from forming a political party of its own, obliging it instead to run under the banner of non-Islamist opposition parties such as the Wafd. Jarisha accordingly now included the right to form "political parties that do not contradict Shari`ah" in his 1984 model Islamic constitution, although he still could not bring himself to use the word "democracy."[49] EMB General

Guide Tilmisani, who had as late as March 1984 dismissed political parties as deriving from "a false conception of freedom" that has "seeped into us from the materialist countries," began less than a year later to talk about establishing a party for the EMB.[50] The next step in the dynamic followed quickly: if the EMB could form a political party, others could as well. Thus in Jordan, the JMB reached an internal consensus on forming its political arm – the Islamic Action Front (IAF) – relatively easily, but found itself far more divided when certain elements within the regime opposed legalizing the Jordanian Communist Party as well. Some Islamists agreed with the regime hardliners, viewing the legitimation of an atheistic movement as anathema. But they were overruled by those who pointed out that infringing one party's liberties threatened all parties.[51]

Steadily, then, the Islamists inched toward a fuller embrace of democracy – at least as it is understood in procedural terms as electoral competition among multiple political parties. As Tilmisani's successor Muhammad Abul-Nasr put it during the buildup to the next round of Egyptian parliamentary elections in 1987: "We want democracy and we call for it in a more perfect and more comprehensive aspect so that all can shelter under it. It is a fruit of the fruits of Islam, and the Muslim Brothers do not object to the multiplicity of parties."[52] Whereas establishing democracy had been the fourth priority in the 1984 Wafd-EMB election manifesto, it now ranked first.[53] A similar evolution took place in Jordan: whereas the Islamist election manifesto of 1989 avoided the word "democracy" altogether, the 1993 manifesto committed the IAF to "strengthening democracy" and ensuring "diversity and pluralism and the right to choose."[54]

Still, procedural accommodation did not yet translate into a deeper reevaluation of core beliefs. Asked in 1987 about the leftist Tajammu` Party, Abul-Nasr replied that it "cannot have a place in Egypt" because its "philosophy is based on the denial of God and [the notion] that religions are opiates of the people." Five years later his eventual successor Mustafa Mashhur said that on pluralism one needs to distinguish between the current "stage ... which entails certain imposed conditions" and the ultimate "model of the state envisioned by Islamists," in which "I see no place ... for opening the doors to the opponents of Islam for the spreading of their principles."[55]

The stage of imposed conditions, at any rate, extended into another difficult decade for the Islamists. After respectable Brotherhood showings in the parliamentary elections of 1987 in Egypt (the EMB won 38 seats) and of 1989 in Jordan, the regimes in each country imposed as many new restrictions – including increased gerrymandering, vote-rigging, and police harass-

ment – as possible short of abandoning their electoral safety-valve strategies altogether. The Islamists, who also viewed the electoral game as their optimal strategic option, for their part could only appeal to public opinion by complaining about such "undemocratic" practices. Accordingly, the EMB protested by boycotting the 1990 elections and then participated in the 1995 elections, only to have just one of the 150 candidates it fielded win a seat. In Jordan, the JMB's parliamentary contingent fell from 22 to 16 in 1993, even though its share of the popular vote slightly increased. It then boycotted the 1997 elections in protest.

Paradoxically, however, these painful experiences also bolstered the pro-democracy Islamist leaders. First, especially in Egypt, they eliminated their internal rivals as frustrated radicals broke off to pursue what turned out to be a disastrously unsuccessful armed revolt. Al-Jama`ah al-Islamiyyah, for example, which had denounced elections as legitimizing a heretic regime, ended up collapsing under state repression and giving up the armed struggle in 1999.[56] Second, they further validated the thesis that only peaceful action stood any chance of success: "The real alternative is not between *jahili* [non-Islamic] government and Islamic government, but between *jahili* government with the participation of Islamists, and *jahili* government without their participation."[57] In 1994, JMB General Guide Abd al-Majid Dhunaybat underlined the logic of this conclusion: "[W]e condemn violence as a way of change. The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria tried it and ended up crushed by the regime. Violence was tried in other countries, and we learned a great lesson from these cases."[58] IAF Secretary General Ishaq Farhan added two years later: "Our phobia is Algeria. ... Evolution not revolution. We are committed to this approach. ... We take no issue with pluralism and democracy. If we win that's good, but if we sometimes fall short that's fine as well. Let us accept this game."[59]

As Farhan's comment suggests, however, it grew increasingly apparent during the 1990s that playing "this game" would require more than just procedural accommodations. The next critical milestone was the abandonment of the prized notion of political consensus in favor of a new celebration of pluralism, described in a 1994 EMB statement as a consequence of the "natural characteristic of ... human beings" to disagree; a consequence that, in turn, required "accepting the rotation of power between political associations and parties through regular elections."[60] Farhan echoed the point in 1996: "We see in the diversity in religions and ideologies and philosophical doctrines a matter in accordance with the nature of creation." Such natural diversity necessitates "the affirmation of forming

multiple political parties" and "the peaceful rotation of executive power" between them.[61]

Yet another doctrinal milestone came in the EMB's 2000 election manifesto, which acknowledged, in a reversal of the position held by Jarisha and other EMB theoreticians just two decades earlier, "that the people are the source of all authority, so that no person or party or grouping or body can assert for itself the right to assume power ... except on the basis of free and popular will ... [expressed] through an elected parliamentary assembly ... and for a specified time after which elections will be repeated."[62] Even in Syria, Hafiz al-Assad's death in 2000 encouraged the SMB to emerge from the shadows with calls for "political pluralism" and "true democracy."[63] Paralleling the trajectory of their Turkish counterparts, then, Arab Muslim Brothers were making a consequential transition to a politics grounded in human nature and human purpose.

Then came a powerful exogenous development that forced regimes and oppositions alike to recalibrate their strategies. The 9/11 attacks and the American intervention in Iraq led the Bush administration to affirm democratization as a policy goal for the Muslim world. Sensing that the authoritarian regimes had become more vulnerable, Arab opposition forces tried to press their advantage. In Jordan, IAF moderates defeated an internal challenge by pro-boycott radicals and took the party back into the national elections of June 2003, where its 10.7% share of the vote gave 17 of the 30 candidates it fielded seats in the restructured 110-seat Parliament, thereby confirming the IAF as the dominant opposition force.

In Egypt, a group of Islamists, liberals, communists, and others meeting at the home of an EMB member in November 2003 founded the Kifayah ("Enough") movement, which went on to stage something of a novelty in the Arab world: mass demonstrations demanding democracy. When government harassment drew a call from President Bush for Egypt to set a democratic example in the Middle East, the regime changed tack by holding relatively freer parliamentary elections and allowing the EMB to participate under its own name, though still not as a formal political party. In those elections at the end of 2005, the EMB won 55% of all the races it contested, while almost 70% of official NDP candidates lost races in which they ran against an EMB candidate. Despite the fact that it vied for only about 160 of the 456 seats, and despite intense last-minute voting irregularities, the EMB ended up with an unprecedented 88 seats in Parliament. One of the younger EMB leaders tried to allay secularist concerns even before the voting had ended: "We believe that the domination of political life by a single political

party or group, whether the ruling party, the Muslim Brotherhood or any other, is not desirable: the only result of such a monopoly is the alienation of the majority of the people."[64]

In Syria, where American pressure made the regime appear particularly vulnerable, SMB officials positioned themselves for a transition. Muhammad Faruq Tayfur, al-Bayanuni's deputy, asked foreign states to recognize the SMB "as a moderate movement far removed from terrorism and violence ... I assure you one more time that the phase of violence [in the 1980s] was a transitory phase in the history of the organization."[65] On 3 April 2005 the SMB issued a "National Call for Salvation" that described the "great earthquake ... the storm ... the flood" unleashed by the new American approach in the region, and warned Syria's leadership:

> The era of single party rule has ended ... the sun of liberty has begun to dawn on the world, and the people are becoming the decision makers. The foreign forces that supported despotism and dictatorship for sixty years have admitted their mistake and retreated from it. Do not the custodians of the despotic regime in our country realize that the external backing that used to protect them from the people's wrath has now forsaken them?

It is therefore time to construct a "national front" that "excludes no one" and to implement a "peaceful revolution" through "free and fair elections" for a new national assembly and the establishment of "a democratic constitutional republic."[66] Al-Bayanuni hammered on the theme of pluralism, insisting early the following year that the SMB's objective was a "civil, democratic state" rather than an Islamic republic: "We definitely don't see ourselves as the alternative. We see ourselves as partners with others in the coming stage."[67]

While it is still too early for a definitive assessment of the impact of post-9/11 American policy on the regional order, mainstream Arab Islamists have already drawn some conclusions. First, as the SMB's "National Call for Salvation" indicates, they believe that the secular-nationalist regimes have received a critical blow. For reasons they did not entirely understand – IAF leader Zaki Bani-Rsheid speculated that the Bush administration might have been internally conflicted on this point – the Americans had unloosed the democratic genie.[68] EMB gains in Egypt and the Hamas victory in Palestine during the winter of 2005-06 made the Americans reconsider, leading to a subsequent re-intensification of regime repression. But it was too late, for "the democratic reform process is not like a switch you can flick on and off."[69] Second, the readiness of al-Qa`ida and similar groups to

resort to indiscriminate terrorism (as in the Amman hotel bombings of November 2005) delegitimized them in the eyes of public opinion as well and neutralized their attacks on the Muslim Brotherhood for favoring electoral contestation.[70] Third, finally, by flicking the democracy switch on, the Americans had reinforced an underlying consolidation of pro-democratic attitudes at the popular level. For example, even before 2001 the percentage of Egyptians who considered democracy "important" had risen from 35.3% in 1988 to 78.4% in 1992; by 2000, no less than 96% of them had come to consider it the best form of government. After the American intervention in Iraq, the percentage of Jordanians asked whether democracy "can work here" rose from 63% in 2002 to 89% in 2005.[71] As one Islamist official put it: "[T]he conviction in favor of democratic reform is now established among the people."[72]

Generalizations even within the Arab context need to be made carefully, as significant variations can be identified on many aspects of the unfolding experiments in party politics.[73] Nevertheless, the sequence of decision-making junctures originating in the regime crises of the 1980s do appear to have brought mainstream Arab Islamists, as exemplified by the Muslim Brotherhood, to a nexus of political incentives and constraints similar to that encountered by their Turkish counterparts. Even the secularist counterweight is in evidence, despite the relatively weaker roots of Arab secular-nationalist regimes and their consequently narrower popular base. In a 2003 poll, for example, 43.5% of Jordanians expressed a preference for "secular democracy" as opposed to 47.1% who preferred "Islamic democracy" (and 9.4% who preferred "authoritarianism" of either stripe) – a proportion mirrored in Algeria, Iraq, and Palestine as well.[74] Moreover, 33% of Jordanians and 34% of Egyptians polled in 2005 said they would not trust a popularly elected Islamic government to abide by the rules of democracy.[75]

Although the democratizing dynamic fostered by such a landscape remains in its early stages and much can happen that could derail it altogether, a point at which some important questions arise has already been reached. On the one hand, Arab Islamists stress that by democracy they mean only the procedural framework – in IAF leader Bani-Rsheid's words, "one mechanism among others" – for the selection and rotation of governors; they do not mean an equality that levels all distinctions or a freedom that "allows what is forbidden and forbids what is allowed." On the other hand, it is difficult to isolate procedural innovations from their deeper consequences. Bani-Rsheid's insistence that the acceptance "of [procedural] democracy is a settled matter" led him, when asked whether the Islamists would accept a freely elected atheistic communist government, to reply:

"Yes. ... We will not agree with them, but we will not take up arms and we will accept it. And we will wait for the next round of elections."[76] But once that key point is conceded, what happens if the atheistic government's notion of what ought to be allowed conflicts with that of the Islamists? Or indeed, if the Islamists themselves disagree? The mainstream Arab Islamists have not yet thought through the proper relationship between human or political authority and divine or religious authority. They have not even shown any indication, unlike some of their Turkish counterparts, of thinking to look back at their own imperial heritage for inspiration.[77]

Conclusion

There has been a consequential evolution in Islamist thinking during the past few decades on three crucial points. The first is from an aversion to pluralism as a generator of strife and disorder to an acknowledgement of the "natural," and therefore legitimate, diversity of political opinions. The second is from an insistence on God's evident will as the sole source of political authority to a recognition that since no one person or group can lay claim to a definitive interpretation of God's will, the people as a whole must be the source of political authority. The third is from a blanket rejection of democracy as an alien import to an embrace of parties, elections, and other manifestations of democratic procedure as the most appropriate mechanisms for governance in our times.

Today's mainstream Islamists did not arrive at these conclusions by proceeding from individual freedom and equality as foundational philosophical premises. Instead, they arrived there through the series of tactical countermoves directed against the various authoritarian secular-nationalist regimes discussed in this article. Yet as the AK Party's experience seems to suggest, those same tactical accommodations can end up delivering Islamists to a conception of democracy, one in which political authority arises from the free and equal competition of opinion among the people, that is increasingly difficult to distinguish from its western variants.

Politics not being the realm of the inevitable, circumstances may yet derail the democratizing dynamic and validate the arguments of its opponents. Nevertheless, mainstream Islamists expect enough of a secularist counterweight to remain in place for the foreseeable future to rule out violent struggle as a viable alternative. Their commitment to democratization, therefore, remains genuine on an important level, resting as it does on the assumption of a congruence between core religious principles and the prevailing values of the masses. Popular opinion is variable, however, and the experi-

ence of democratization in other lands suggests that such an assumption may not be warranted. Wherever such a congruence has broken down, moreover, it is religion rather than democratic opinion that has usually given way.

A parallel trajectory in the Islamic context can therefore be expected, at the very least, to put pressure on religion as an effective moral foundation for the political order. The implications are profound. A recent article about a group of disillusioned former Islamist radicals in Saudi Arabia described how some decided to work within the system, others turned to liberal democratic opposition, and still others withdrew from politics altogether. One drove the author to a colony of baboons in the countryside, "some of them fornicating, masturbating, howling and laughing. Thabet slowed down, lingering in their exuberance. 'I want their life,' he said, and drove off."[78]

The medieval *falasifah* anticipated much of this. They argued that democracy, for all its desirability, tends toward a nihilism that undermines the polity at home and renders it vulnerable abroad. They further suggested that religion, although containing potentially effective antidotes, cannot simply provide the solution itself because of the incongruence between the certainty of its unitary truth and the shifting ground of common opinion. As a result, finally, the *falasifah* recognized the need for a third, hegemonic, principle to mediate between them so that the verities of religion are applied appropriately to ever-changing situations. They called this principle deliberation and identified deliberative excellence as the excellence associated with politics: statecraft.[79] As contemporary Islamists consider the challenges that democratization is likely to pose to political order and religious doctrine alike, therefore, they will find a rich resource in the attention the *falasifah* devoted to democracy as a problem and to statecraft as a solution.

Endnotes

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68. IAF Secretary General Zaki Bani-Rsheid, interview with author, Amman, 21 March 2006.
69. Atif al-Jolani, editor of the pro-IAF newspaper *Al-Sabil*, interview with author, Amman, 19 March 2006.
70. See, for example, the denunciations of the Muslim Brotherhood by the leader of Al-Qa`ida in Iraq, Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi (www.cpa-iraq.org/transcripts/20040212_zarqawi_full.html) and the description by three other Iraqi radical groups of democracy as a "Greek word meaning the rule of the people, which means that the people do what they see fit." (www.aliraqi.org/forums/archive/index.php/t-40741. html; Associated Press, 31 December 2004). On the backlash against al-Zarqawi's brand of violence, see Fawaz A. Gerges, *Journey of the Jihadist: Inside Muslim Militancy* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2006), 256-61.
71. Mark Tessler, "Islam and Democracy in the Middle East: The Impact of Religious Orientations on Attitudes toward Democracy in Four Arab Countries," *Comparative Politics* 34, no. 3 (April 2002): 337-54; Mark Tessler and Eleanor Gao (p. 87), "Gauging Arab Support for Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 16, no. 3 (July 2005): 83-97; Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, *Islamic Extremism: Common Concern for Muslim and Western Publics* (Washington, DC: 2005), 33.
72. Atif al-Jolani, interview with author, Amman, 19 March 2006.
73. Thus Schwedler's *Faith in Moderation* finds that whereas political inclusion promoted ideological moderation in Jordan's IAF, it did not have the same effect on its Yemeni counterpart. For other examples of inter-Arab variation in

the strategies of regimes and oppositions, see Ellen Lust-Okar and Amaney Ahmad Jamal, "Rulers and Rules: Reassessing the Influence of Regime Type on Electoral Law Formation," *Comparative Political Studies* 35, no. 3 (April 2002): 337-66; Ellen Lust-Okar, *Structuring Conflict in the Arab World: Incumbents, Opponents, and Institutions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

74. Tessler and Gao, "Gauging Arab Support," 91.
75. Zogby International, *Six Arab Nation Survey Report* (Washington, DC: 2005), 8.
76. Zaki Bani-Rsheid, interview with author, Amman, 21 March 2006.
77. The Tunisian Islamist leader Rashid Ghannoushi observed in 1988: "What concerns the young people of today? … The position of the Mutazilites … on the attributes of God … whether the Quran is pre-existent or created? Was Islam revealed for this kind of useless, sterile argument? I wonder how our students feel studying "Islamic philosophy" when it offers them a bunch of dead issues having nothing to do with the problems of today. … I propose that these shrouds be returned to their graves, that these false problems be buried and that we deal with our problems – economics, politics, sexual license." Quoted in Esposito, *Islamic Threat*, 165.
78. Elizabeth Rubin, "The Jihadi Who Kept Asking Why," *New York Times Magazine*, 7 March 2004.
79. See Mahdi, *Alfarabi*, 183; Galston, *Politics and Excellence*, 69, 77, 111; Colmo, *Breaking with Athens*, 5, 162-63.