



*Department of Politics*

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## Is Political Islam Bound to Collide With Modern States?

The perception that a globalized Islamic resurgence is underway is nothing new. Despite the spectacular attacks on 9/11 and increasing collision of conservative Islamic values with modern, Western liberalization, which manifested in row over Danish Muhammed cartoon, the situation is in fact no novelty – Islamism has been gaining foothold for more than half a century by now<sup>1</sup>.

Yet, the threat of revolutionary Islamism to the modern states is real. Islamism believes that the current world, all the modernization and Westernization and secularization, to echo Sayyid Qutb, is in “*Age of Ignorance*”, and Muslims must rise up to bring an end to it, replacing the Ignorance with Islamic states promoting Islamic values, adhering to Sharia and Quranic texts as source of legality rather than “man-made laws”<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, the concept of revival of Islam as ultimate guidance in political as well as societal issues simply goes against the secularized polity of modernized governance. Nonetheless, it would be unwise to lump all Islamic movements into one single unit of Islamism, as they are portrayed in many forms. Let us examine their variations now.

### Who’s Who in Islamic Movements

Following Zubaida’s analysis, Islamic movements can be categorized into 3 following entities<sup>3</sup>, differentiated by each of the movement’s nature of activities and strategies:

1. **Conservative Islam:** the adherents of this movement focus mainly on societal issues such as promotion of traditional, Islamic values in society. The Conservatives are mostly clerics, businessmen, technocrats, and social service institutions. They are concerned with politics as much as their advocacy that Islamic values be institutionized in legal and governmental recognition. These Conservatives are also descendents of the early forms of Islamism in 1970s Egypt, following initiations by a prototype Islamic organization, the Muslim Brotherhood<sup>4</sup>.
2. **Radical Islam:** clandestine cells of terrorists and Jihadist fighters, they believe in violent “direct action” and have conducted acts of terrorism on their perceived enemies. They have not only targeted the West, but also governments in Arab world, whom they decried as un-Islamic tyrants. These extremists are relatively small in numbers.
3. **Political Islam:** born out of Leftist and Islamic rhetoric in the Cold War, Political Islam is a politicized form of Islam – that is, the effort to bring about socio-political transformation based on Islamic belief to the country through political activities. They are represented in many Islamic parties and organizations in Muslim nations.

Such distinction is not clear-cut, however, since they all operate on the same basic principle: the sanctity of Quran and other related holy texts as ideal way of life which should be implemented in the modern world. This is usually expressed, as symbolic rallying point perhaps, in promotions of sacred Sharia law to be practiced and recognized by national legal institution<sup>5</sup>. The point of distinction between 3 separate entities is, therefore, not to mark any major ideological difference, rather, to draw crude borderline between the tactics of direct violence employed by Jihad Islamists and communal social-implementation of religious ideology of the Conservatives from Political Islamists' choice of political participations. The point of this essay is to explore the possibility that Political Islam may be the least likely agent in Islamic movements to conflict with the concept of modern states, and should the hypothesis be proven to be a plausible one, then we may, in turn, explore the conditions in which Political Islam might be allowed to grow other than the other two, less friendly, options.

### **Islamism in Egypt**

When Qutb authored his *Signpost* in late 1950s, Egypt had been going through great social upheaval since the 19<sup>th</sup> century: the invasion of French armies, subsequent colonization of the British, emergence of Cold War with Egypt as a major leading power in Middle East<sup>6</sup>. Immediately following its independence in 1952, decades of 1950s – 1960s were era of de facto capitalization and modernization for Egyptian regime as typical Cold War nation outside the realm of Western stage: a massive bureaucratic state, focusing on expanding factory production, the so-called state's "official culture", and pursuit of its hegemony in Pan-Arabism<sup>7</sup>. Against this background was the authoritarian nature of Egypt's regime. Nasser quickly crushed the Muslim Brotherhood shortly after he came to power, sending its members to exile, prisons, and martyrdom, whereas political arena was not much less suppressed neither. This move would later prove erroneous<sup>8</sup>, as Muslim Brotherhood now antagonized itself with the Egyptian government and all that it stood for – leading Qutb to portray living under the regime as Age of Ignorance, basically rendering the conflicts into one dichotomy: pure form of Islam pitched against secularization, Westernization, and modernization adopted by the regime<sup>9</sup>.

Israeli victory over Arab armies in 1967 turned the tide against Egypt's ambitious and confident strides<sup>10</sup>. The regime chose further authoritative stances instead of liberalization to handle with the increasingly problematic economics in the country. High unemployment and decay of infrastructure among the poorer population were largely neglected by the government, allowing the Conservative Islamists to familiarize themselves with the mass by responding to their need such as healthcare, employment, religious education, whereas the Political Islamists were chiefly suppressed by the repressive state, denying them electoral participation<sup>11</sup>; the field was then left pretty much for Conservative and Radical Islamists to plough their seeds – but the Radical enjoyed relatively low support due to their rather violent and exclusive identity (warring against *all* Muslims who do not support their views<sup>12</sup>).

The Conservative Islamists were able to institute their own religious civil society and transform it into base of Islamization only because the Egyptian state failed to fulfill the popular needs in the first place, leaving the gap to be closed by Islamists<sup>13</sup>, and the state's oppression against Political Islamists simultaneously reinforced the civil society-wielding Conservatives Islamists as only option for dissidents against the state<sup>14</sup>. And indeed the Conservatives had secured their places among charity networks, businessmen, technocrats, and religious establishments. Though they were not the same force with Radical Islamists, the Conservatives share their pro-Sharia sentiment, and sometimes condoned the radicals' violence<sup>15</sup>. These Islamists had gained control in many provincial, communal levels, imposing Islamic values as governing morality. They are extremely authoritarian and intolerant in nature, reportedly coercing local population to acceptance of their rules.

Islamization of Egyptian society implemented by the Conservative forces even dwarfed the actual Islamization of Iranian Revolution itself<sup>16</sup>. It serves as reminder that state repression coupled with rise of Islamism could lead to disastrous results for modern states. The Islamists in Egypt were so powerful that they did not need to topple the regime, because by inward Islamization they had already achieved the hegemony of Islamic values in Egyptian society<sup>17</sup>.

### **Political Islam in Turkey and Indonesia**

On the other spectrum of Islamic movements, in Turkey and Indonesia, certainly Muslim-dominated nations, Political Islam appeared to be a preferred alternative. We will now explore why largely non-violent Political Islam prevailed over Radical Islamic terrorists and the grassroots, civil society-based Conservatives which do not garner the same massive supports as in Egypt or Algeria.

Turkey is a peculiar example. Though a majority of the population is Sunni Muslims, the mixture of nationalism, modernization, and secularism somehow managed to emerge as the governing ideology of Turkey's history of nation-state building due to the geopolitical position of Turkey itself: where the East meets West<sup>18</sup>. *Kemalism*, it was called, the principle based on nationalism, anti-Greece, and Islam identity, was recognized as the unique source of Turkey's *Islamic Nationalism* rarely experienced in any other part of Muslim world. The followers of this creed are mostly pockets of bourgeois citizens in cities such as Ankara and Istanbul, alongside ranks of Europeanized technocrats and the media<sup>19</sup>. They retained identity of Muslims, yet adopted secularism as the pillar of the state. In Egypt, their social status as technocrats and middle class citizens would have fallen into Kepel's category "Pious Middle Class and Intellectual"<sup>20</sup> of the Islamization movement.

Turkish Islamic Nationalism is the result of attempts by the Turkish regime to incorporate religion into the state – *Turkification*, as some would call – by series of policy such as replacing Arabic with Turkish language in religious rituals, and regulating religious foundations and charities. Parliamentary politics of Turkey used to be that of one-party rule, but eventually

Islamic parties that adhere less to Kemalist principles and even Islamic organizations were allowed to emerge. Geopolitics of Turkey also meant that a symbiotic growth of Ultra-nationalism and Radical Islam throughout the decades was due to the sense of danger posed by ring of Orthodox powers around Turkey: namely, Greece, Russia, and Serbia<sup>21</sup>. One example of this fear surfaced during 1994 election, in which Islamist Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi* – RP) claimed that Serbians hate Bosnians just because they are Muslims<sup>22</sup>. Additionally, religious establishments remain strong in Turkey, owning portions of schools, newspapers, and TV channels. Charities related to Islamic agenda also flourished alongside increasingly liberalized economics.

However, religious influence in Turkey never matched that of Islamization in Egypt. For one reason, secularism is too well entrenched in Turkish identity. The secularists in Turkey, composed of intelligentsia, middle class, urban and business elite, may not present unified, solid ideology alternative to their opponents' vivid vision of Islamic state, but their resistance to Islamization has been consistently ferocious<sup>23</sup>. But this is not the only bulwark against Radical or fundamental Islamism in Turkey: the real issue is Turkey's **electoral politics and pluralistic nature of Turkish society**.

*Electoral Politics:* Unlike Egypt, Islamic parties can participate in elections and politics in Turkey. The fact that Political Islamists are subject to electoral process meant that they cannot push radical issues; they have to fight secularists – vocal and traditional powers of Turkey – and appeal to the moderate, “mid-ground” voters at the same time<sup>24</sup>. This led to compromise in the Islamists' stance related to Islam-related issues. Even the RP cannot advocate concrete Islamic agenda or promote Sharia as the constitutional entity; such action would only face resistance in parliamentary grounds. Rather, Political Islamists resort to more general agenda such as “social justice”, “virtues”, and “Muslim identity”<sup>25</sup>. Whereas the restriction of Political Islam leads to rise in communalistic Islamization by increasingly radical and authoritarian Conservatives in Egypt, emphasis on electoral politics and Political Islam's participations reduces the chance of radical, extremist issue being put forth by the Islamists who had to contest with other ideas in electoral competition.

*Pluralistic Society:* Turkish society is far from monolithic<sup>26</sup>, with the adherents of “traditional” Kemalist elites mixing with younger generations in Political Islam and Sufi ritual followers and even Kurdish ethnies<sup>27</sup>. Although Turkey is also far from a democratic state, participations and presentations of each identity in the plural society are relatively visible compared to Egypt or Iran. Violent, radical Islamists are marginalized in Turkey whereas they may find structural support elsewhere in the Middle East. Turkish Islamic Conservatives secure control in provincial levels and some Islamic parties, establishing religious educations (like elsewhere in Muslim nations) and network of Muslim technocrats, government officials, and professionals. Trade unions are supported by different parties, with many small and medium sized businesses receiving support from RP. Intelligentsia also differ, some following Qutb's rhetoric of anti-modernization, anti-nationstate, and pro-Islamized society, while many others

aligned themselves with the secularist camp, yet cooperation between Leftists and Islamists against government's issues concerning human rights is known to happen occasionally<sup>28</sup>.

Political participation and pluralism in Turkish socio-politics appears to steer the nation away from the experience of Radical Islam and antagonism of "us VS them" in which the Egyptian state pitched itself against Conservative Islam. But is Turkey adequate evidence of conditions that promote Political Islam? Here we must look toward Indonesia as another example.

Indonesia is home to millions of Muslims, yet the Islamism failed to impose Sharia as national constitution ever since its independence in 1945. Their latest attempt in 2002 has failed as any other try, and currently only Aceh province featured Sharia as local laws<sup>29</sup>. This should come as a surprise for nation with around 90% population identified as Muslims<sup>30</sup> and Islamic societal background which features traditional, conservative Islamist parties in many parliamentary seats. However, once again, the wide spectrum of ideological stances and pluralism among Islamist parties in Indonesia easily prevent the rise of Radical Islamism and simultaneously preserve some principles of secular, modern states.

Indonesia, not dissimilar to Turkey, is known for its electoral competition of political parties which advocate different approach in secularism and Islamism. Nonetheless, the diversity in their ideology is remarkable. Let us examine the 1994 election in which PDIP, the secular party, won the majority. PDIP, though a nationalist secular party, is often coupled with Golkar Party, a Political Islam agent who supports secularism yet welcomes the preservation of Islamic identity. The two parties can be called *exclusive secularists* and *inclusive secularists* respectively<sup>31</sup>, responding to how much they are willing to include and incorporate Islamic value into the state. Golkar clashed with PDIP during the 2003 debate on National Education System Bill which called for religious study to be mandatory in all schools. The bill eventually passed, with Golkar's support<sup>32</sup>. Yet, in 2002, Golkar and other Political Islamic parties – PKB and PAN – voted *against* institutionalization of Sharia even though these parties were known to promote Islamic values<sup>33</sup>. PKB and PAN are both linked to religious organizations, but they refused to support Sharia as constitutional entity. In fact, even religious groups that supported PKB and PAN were different from each other, the former (NU) was based on rural, traditional followers whereas the latter (*Muhammadiyah*) relied more on urban modernist Muslims<sup>34</sup>.

This pattern reveals that Political Islam in Indonesia preferred expansion and preservation of Muslim identity by pushing their agenda through parliamentary debates and elections, rather than attempting to toppling the secular regime and replacing it with Islamic State, in which Sharia serves as ultimate legality. Very little legislation in Indonesia is based on Sharia<sup>35</sup>.

Plural and diverse, Indonesian electoral politics shaped Political Islam into institutionalized competition. Local level participation that focused less on national issues and more on local issues meant that grassroots voters were granted access to voice their political

demands – dismantling possibilities of non-state Conservatives or Radical Islamists gaining footholds in popular level as happened in Egypt and Algeria. The reliance on majority of votes also meant that issues concerning implementation of Islamic state may not be advanced by any Political Islamists in the near future, as the action would tilt them away from moderate, “neither” type of voters. Furthermore, Indonesians appeared to be very vague about their stances on Islamic state. 2002 survey<sup>36</sup> saw 67% of the interviewees agreeing that Islamic government is best for Indonesia, but only 9.9% of the responses wanted daily prayer enforced!

### **Coexistence of Political Islam and Modern State?**

If this trend of **electoral politics** and **pluralism** in Indonesia persists as it does in Turkey, it is likely that Political Islam will continually play major roles in Indonesian socio-political scenes, with more enactment of “Islam-friendly” laws and policies<sup>37</sup> (similar to the 2003 National Education bill) that might send ripple to the majority *exclusive-secular* camp, but, at least, neither Radical Islamists or Conservative communal authoritarians – the threat to nearly all doctrines of modern states – are likely to squeeze themselves into the scene. Pluralistic and diversified Political Islam in Indonesia, as well as in Turkey, may preserve the principles of modern states amidst the surge of Islamism after all.

Of course, the question remains: how much can Political Islam compromise to authoritarian, illiberal, and religious-motivated demands and still avoid conflicts with secular, modernized, and liberal traits of modern states? Will Political Islam eventually turn out to be merely another instrument of Islamization-from-within strategy? The questions are worth monitoring, but Political Islam in Indonesia and Turkey, for instance, appear to coexist with modern, (relatively) secular state, and we must admit that they are friendlier to modernity than other alternatives – as the case in Egypt shows.

Optimism may be found in World Value Survey (200-2006) which reveals that population in Islamic world is likely to support democracy, contrary to stereotypical belief that all Muslims adhere only to violent, radical Islamists<sup>38</sup>. A recent Pew survey in 2010 pointed out that many Muslim described the ongoing situation as struggle between fundamentalists and modernizers – majority of these responses identified themselves as modernizers in Turkey and Lebanon<sup>39</sup>. Arab Barometer survey, conducted in 2006, revealed that 86% surveyed agreed that democracy is the best form of government. Although some other results can be discouraging (25% of responses in Jordan said unelected leader is preferable, and as much as 56% of responses from all countries say Islam should have role in politics), it can be easily explained by structural contexts of the respective nations: fear of unrest in transition period generates high preference for strong, undemocratic leaders, and bad image of suppressive secular regime like Egypt may force Muslims in Middle East to rely more on familiar “Islamic democracy”<sup>40</sup>. The result of Arab Barometer survey demonstrates that innate anti-democracy, anti-modernization sentiment of Islam is false, as they are fostered by context of their national politics<sup>41</sup>.

Furthermore, it might give some hope that Political Islam with electoral politics and pluralism could be ideal methods of democratization in these Muslim-dominant states.

If Political Islam were to be seen as favorable option for Muslim-dominated nations, then electoral politics and pluralism are necessary, since Political Islam appear to emerge only through open and fair political participation, institutionalization of electoral politics as sources of powers, and tolerant, diverse competitions of ideas, whereas denial of those features would only favor the rise of more radical forms of Islamization, as we have seen in case for Egypt.

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<sup>1</sup> Esposito, John L., Islamic Threat. Oxford : Oxford UP, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Kepel, Gilles, Roots of Radical Islam. London : Saqi, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Zubaida, Sami, "Trajectories of Political Islam: Egypt, Iran and Turkey" The Political Quarterly Volume 71, Issue Supplement s1 (August 2000)

<sup>4</sup> Kepel, Gilles, "Trail of Political Islam" (2002) [http://www.opendemocracy.net/faith-europe\\_islam/article\\_421.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/faith-europe_islam/article_421.jsp)

<sup>5</sup> Habeck, Mary R., Knowing the enemy: jihadist ideology and the War on Terror. New Haven, CT : Yale University Press, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Kepel, Gilles, "Islamists Versus State in Egypt and Algeria" Daedalus, Vol. 124, No. 3, The Quest for World Order (Summer, 1995)

<sup>7</sup> Zubaida, Sami, "Islam and Nationalism: Continues and Contradiction" Nations and Nationalism v.10 No. 2 (Oct., 2004)

<sup>8</sup> Berman, Sheri, "Islamism, Revolution, Civil Society" Perspectives on Politics, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Jun., 2003)

<sup>9</sup> Sami Zubaida, "Trajectories of Political Islam"

<sup>10</sup> Asef Bayat, "Revolution without Movement, Movement without Revolution: Comparing Islamic Activism in Iran and Egypt" Comparative Studies in Society and History, Vol. 40, No. 1 (Jan., 1998)

<sup>11</sup> Esposito, John L., Islamic Threat

<sup>12</sup> Habeck, Mary R., Knowing the Enemy

<sup>13</sup> Berman, Sheri, "Islamism, Revolution, Civil Society"

<sup>14</sup> Kepel, Gilles, "Islamists Versus State"

<sup>15</sup> Zubaida, Sami, "Trajectories of Political Islam"

<sup>16</sup> Berman, Sheri, "Islamism, Revolution, Civil Society"

<sup>17</sup> Zubaida, Sami, "Trajectories of Political Islam"

<sup>18</sup> Zubaida, Sami, "Islamism and Nationalism"

<sup>19</sup> Zubaida, Sami, "Turkish Islam and National Identity" Middle East Report, No. 199 (Apr. - Jun., 1996)

<sup>20</sup> Kepel, Gilles, "Trail of Political Islam"

<sup>21</sup> Zubaida, Sami, "Turkish Islam and National Identity"

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- <sup>22</sup> Zubaida, Sami, *Ibid.*
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>25</sup> Zubaida, Sami, "Trajectories of Political Islam"
- <sup>26</sup> Zina Onis, "The Political Economy of Islamic Resurgence in Turkey: The Rise of the Welfare Party in Perspective" *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (Sep., 1997)
- <sup>27</sup> Zubaida, Sami, Turkish Islam and National Identity
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>29</sup> <http://www.voanews.com/english/news/Acehs-Sharia-Law-Still-Controversial-in-Indonesia-80257482.html>
- <sup>30</sup> <http://pewforum.org/newassets/images/reports/Muslimpopulation/Muslimpopulation.pdf>
- <sup>31</sup> Anies Rasyid Baswedan, Political Islam in Indonesia: Present and Future Trajectory *Asian Survey*, Vol. 44, No. 5 (Sep. - Oct., 2004)
- <sup>32</sup> Anies Rasyid Baswedan, *Ibid.*
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>35</sup> Saiful Mujani and R. William Liddle, "Muslim Indonesia's Secular Democracy" *Asian Survey*, Vol. 49, No. 4 (Jul. - Aug., 2009)
- <sup>36</sup> Anies Rasyid Baswedan, "Political Islam in Indonesia"
- <sup>37</sup> Anies Rasyid Baswedan, *Ibid.*
- <sup>38</sup> Tessler, M., and A. Jamal. "Attitudes in the Arab World". *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Jan., 2008)
- <sup>39</sup> <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1814/muslim-public-opinion-hamas-hezbollah-al-qaeda-islam-role-in-politics-democracy>
- <sup>40</sup> Tessler, M., and A. Jamal. "Attitudes in the Arab World".
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*