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The End of the Middle East's Islamist Spring Fever?

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INTRODUCTION

Morocco's ruling Islamist Party for Justice and Development faced a catastrophic defeat at the polls on September 8, 2021, losing nearly 90% of its seats in parliament—a stunning result by any measure. Although the results did not cause a major uproar, the election portends a major shift in politics across the region. Islamist parties have become politically vulnerable and are no longer impervious to electoral accountability.

In what is known as the Meridian House International speech, Ambassador Edward Djerejian, then assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern Affairs, famously cautioned against the pernicious combination of democratic politics and Islamist parties in the Middle East in the early 1990s. He argued that the U.S. government “believe[s] in the principle of ‘one person, one vote’” but opposes those who would use the democratic process to win power “only to destroy that very process in order to retain power.” The prospect of “one person, one vote, one time” was a major concern for U.S. policy toward the region.¹

And rightly so. As Francois Bourgat observed, Islamist parties represented generational frustration with post-independence secular regimes, and thus enjoyed broad popular support. As deeply anti-system parties, Islamist movements and parties challenged the very foundations of post-independence states across the region. Questions about policymaking and

governance took a back seat to concerns about the future of secular sociopolitical systems when Islamists won elections.

Indeed, concerns about Islamist parties so dominated the thinking in the Middle East and the United States that it dictated the nature of the countries' relations and explains, in part, the failure of democratic politics across the region. In *Of Empires and Citizens*, political scientist Amaney Jamal argues that limiting Islamist parties' strength and their potential rise to power was a key American interest in the region. Domestic calls for democracy had a chance of success only if they did not jeopardize ties to the U.S. And regimes across the region took notice.

In this regard, Islamist parties' emergence as the major winners in the fallout from the Arab Spring protests offered a chance to test this proposition about Islamist parties. It is no longer the case that Islamists are unable to assume power in the Middle East; they do. The real question now is, what happens when they have it? Developments across the region over the last decade mount a fundamental challenge to the validity of the “one person, one vote, one time” adage in the contemporary regional context.

A SHIFTING POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

The past decade shows a major shift in the political landscape for Islamists. Gone are the days when Islamists enjoyed unparalleled electoral support. Islamists now face electoral accountability, and it redefines in



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two ways their engagement with the political system: Islamists must be more sensitive to public opinion and they must deliver results to voters. If they fail—and they failed in Morocco—there are consequences. Islamist parties—not known for their policy prowess, as Olivier Roy noted—are finding themselves in a position to think long and hard about policymaking to address economic issues their societies face.

The PJD's electoral loss in Morocco shows how severe the pushback can be. The party came to power in November 2011, riding the high of the Arab Spring protests in Morocco, and promised prosperity and an improved economy. The party operated in a restricted political environment that limited its freedom to act in important ways. Policies that could hurt the king or his affiliates politically or economically were entirely out of the question. Nonetheless, the PJD failed to deliver tangible economic improvements for an entire decade. In fact, the Moroccan economy continuously underperformed throughout the 2010s. Widespread corruption, soaring youth unemployment, declining GDP, and a worsening trade balance have all contributed to an unfavorable perception of the PJD's performance in government.

In Tunisia, Ennahdha has similarly received a big share of the blame for the country's lackluster economy since 2011. Although Ennahdha did not assume a major role in governance, the party's participation in successive coalition governments in the post-revolutionary period won the party plenty of blame for Tunisia's economic woes in the eyes of the electorate. As time passed, Ennahdha gradually lost its popular appeal. Its vote share declined from 37% in 2011 to 19% in 2019 while its seat share in the country's parliament shrank from 41% to 24% in the same period.

In Turkey, the Justice Development Party (AKP) is a compelling case for why Islamists' performance in government matters and the kinds of constraints that devalue their electoral stock. Throughout the 2010s the party reaped the electoral benefits of its once successful economic policymaking. However, recent developments indicate that even a very

successful economic period, such as that enjoyed by the AKP, does not ensure perpetual electoral success for Islamists. The AKP has been losing electoral ground since the mid-2010s. At first, the party was forced to enter a coalition with the Nationalists to remain viable. It subsequently lost the two most important municipalities in Turkey, Istanbul and Ankara, which it had controlled since the mid-1990s. Current public opinion surveys paint a dire picture of a party on the verge of losing its plurality in the parliament. This turnaround in the AKP's electoral fortunes tracks the almost decade-long downward trend of the Turkish economy. There is a growing sense in recent years that the country's economic woes are rooted in the AKP government's economic policies and authoritarian leanings.

Even Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood's brief attempt at governance is instructive. The responsibility for its calamitous tenure between 2011 and 2013 was due to factors beyond the Brotherhood's control at least as much as it was due to the Brotherhood. However, public opinion placed the blame squarely on the Brotherhood, making it one of the key reasons the group found little support when the Egyptian military threatened, and later did, take over the government in the summer of 2013. The Brotherhood's pursuit of a more dominant presence within the state apparatus, focus on identity-based policies, and inability to take control of and stabilize the economy solidified the growing opposition to Brotherhood rule.

All of these cases clearly show that Islamist parties no longer enjoy the unqualified support of the region's voters and are more vulnerable to electoral demands and pressures than initially assumed. Years of ineffective governance led to poor election outcomes—an unfamiliar terrain for Islamists. But make no mistake, Islamists are still the best-organized political group in most of the region's countries. They are present across the region and constitute a formidable bloc. They enjoy and will continue enjoying strong electoral support for the foreseeable future. Yet the last decade has shown that

like secular parties, Islamist parties are subject to the ebb and flow of electoral politics. In other words, today Islamist parties are more in line with the norm than exceptions to it.

IMPLICATIONS

This tectonic shift in Islamist politics carries important implications insofar as U.S. and Western policies toward the Middle East are concerned. Regional democratization efforts have one less hurdle to overcome. Islamists should no longer serve as an outright excuse for trivializing democratization initiatives and perpetuating authoritarian rule. Evidence from the last few years indicates that voters across the Middle East are well-positioned to determine their interests, assess the performance of Islamist parties, and show them the way out if their time in power is unsatisfactory. Likewise, U.S. and Western policies toward the region should not predominantly focus on the threat to stability posed by Islamists. Instead, policies that can help establish robust economic infrastructures should be prioritized in order to attain long-term development and serve as the foundation for sustainable democratization efforts.

ENDNOTE

1. Edward Djerejian, "The U.S. and the Middle East in a Changing World—Address at Meridian House International," U.S. Department of State Dispatch, June 2, 1992.

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