

Democratization, Inclusion and the Moderation of Islamist Parties

JILLIAN SCHWEDLER *ABSTRACT* Jillian Schwedler examines three questions about the political inclusion of Islamist groups in the Middle East. Using empirical evidence from studies of elections in the region, she discusses whether inclusion or exclusion is a better strategy for deflating radical challenges. She concludes that inclusion is far more likely to produce an overall moderate political sphere, though it is unlikely to eliminate all forms of radicalism.

KEYWORDS *Middle East; Hamas; Hizbullah; Muslim Brotherhood; elections; cooperation*

Introduction

Among the most abiding concerns about democratization is the question of political inclusion. For regimes that initiate democratic openings, however limited, the goal is usually to incorporate opposition movements into the system without losing control of that process. The regime sets the rules of the game, and its ultimate commitments often have less to do with advancing real democracy than they do with deflating challenges to the regime. At the same time, opposition groups recognize that most regimes have no intention of ceding power, so their decisions about whether to participate hinge on whether the potential gains of participation outweigh the costs. Democratic openings in much of the Middle East are characterized by these cat-and-mouse games, with Islamist groups playing the role of the most powerful opposition to existing regimes – even in the cases in which Islamists and regimes have a history of alliance and cooperation.

In such contests – and regardless of whether a regime is indeed committed to advancing democracy – the stakes of whom to include and whom to exclude are extraordinarily high. This is the paradox of democracy: the idea that democratic processes might empower non-democratic actors to reverse those openings – perhaps permanently. In terms of the real advancement of democracy, a recurring question about expanded political inclusion therefore concerns the possibility that elections could empower a group with no commitment to democratic norms. At the same time, opposition groups participate in elections in the hope to increase their political power while regimes seek to prevent precisely that outcome. The notion of ideological moderation underlies many of these debates because a wide range of theories argue or imply that inclusion may be a

way of moderating radical political actors, or at the very least elevating moderates and weakening radicals.

The effects of inclusion

Questions about the political inclusion of Islamist groups have been made explicitly (Norton, 1995) and implicitly (Anderson, 1997) for more than a decade. In recent years, a range of scholars working largely from a social movement perspective have expanded the discussion on the effects of inclusion and exclusion of diverse Islamist parties within a range of regime types (Hafez, 2003; Wickham, 2004; Caldwell, 2006; Clark, 2006; Schwedler, 2006). The term 'Islamist' refers to highly diverse groups that advocate social, political, and economic reform through the application of Islamic teachings. Most states in the Middle East have a range of organizations that fit these criteria, including charitable societies and legal or quasi-legal political parties, as well as underground movements that routinely employ political violence (often directed at non-democratic regimes), to name just a few. Because many of these groups are well established, having functioned both above and below ground for decades, one should not be surprised to see them quickly emerge as strong voices when non-democratic regimes initiate political openings. Indeed, many Islamist groups are 'the only game in town' precisely because authoritarian regimes have for decades quashed other oppositional voices.

Thus, questions of political inclusion have import for a wide variety of states, and Islamist groups as varied as Hamas, Hizbullah, and the various branches of the Muslim Brotherhood have emerged as strong contenders in local as well as national elections. Islamists have participated widely in pluralist and democratic elections – where incumbent regimes are typically the greatest obstacles to real democratic reforms – in states as diverse as Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Turkey, and Yemen. What have been the experiences of having included Islamist groups in participatory political processes? I examine three dimensions of inclusion: participation in elections, cooperation with

ideological rivals, and whether Islamists show signs of moderation – defined as increased tolerance and pluralist norms – as a result of their experiences of inclusion.

Elections

The empirical record on Islamist participation in elections is very clear: by far most Islamist parties win significant but not majority blocks in parliament the first time they field candidates. They typically win 20–40 per cent of the seats, an outcome that should be expected given their existing networks and often well-established presence in various communities nation-wide. Far more interesting, however, is that these parties fairly consistently lose seats in subsequent elections: the slogan 'Islam is the Solution' – under which many Islamist parties campaigned particularly in the 1990s – becomes empty rhetoric when party representatives are unable to effect significant change. Constituencies hold candidates responsible for delivering goods and services as well as policy reforms, and the ineffectiveness of many Islamist parliamentarians is recorded in subsequent polls when their parties typically lose seats.

Of course, there are exceptions to this trend, but the most notable (in Palestine and Lebanon) emerge in extraordinary political contexts. In most states, political openings are initiated by a ruling regime – whether a monarchy as in Morocco and Jordan or a republic as in Egypt and Yemen – that is facing pressures to open up the system (often to distract their citizens or subjects from dismal economic conditions and/or to curry favour with western donors). Lebanon's Hizbullah fairs well at the polls in part because it provided considerable services to the South of the country during the long civil war (when the state was without a functioning government), and in part because of its steadfast opposition to continued Israeli occupation of Lebanese lands. Hizbullah has never won a majority block in part because Lebanon's parliamentary seats are allocated along confessional lines – the assembly is equally divided between Muslim and Christian seats, and even the Muslim seats are subdivided in ways that

Development 50(1): Dialogue

would prevent the emergence of a large Hizbullah block. Even so, Hizbullah's popularity has never been attributable exclusively to popular support for its domestic policies or programmes.

In Palestine, the Hamas victory of February 2006 also took place under exceptional circumstances. The vote was more of a rejection of Fatah than an expression of support for Hamas. Palestinians live under a highly repressive military occupation, and without a functioning state of their own. In this context, the success of Hamas at the polls should not be read as a sign of overwhelming support among Palestinians for an Islamist agenda, and even less as evidence that Islamist groups elsewhere may soon sweep their own polls.

Jordan provides a case that is much more typical. In 1989, members of the Muslim Brotherhood participated in Jordan's first full elections for its National Assembly since the suspension of the constitution and the imposition of martial law in 1967. Although at the time political parties remained illegal and thus Islamist candidates were all officially independents, Muslim Brotherhood members won 22 of 80 seats (27.5 per cent of the assembly). Combined with twelve seats won by independent Islamists, the Muslim Brotherhood-dominated block controlled 40 per cent of the seats. During the next round of elections in 1993, their share decreased to 17 seats. They led a boycott (with leftist and liberal parties) of the 1997 elections, but in 2003 they again won 17 seats, though the assembly had been expanded to 110 seats. Yemen's Islamist Islah party has fared similarly, with an initial impressive showing in 1993 (winning the second largest block with 62 of 301 seats) but winning fewer and fewer seats in subsequent contests.

Of course, the full story for the declining parliamentary seats for Islamists in both Jordan and Yemen has to do with how regimes manipulate the electoral system and sometimes even the polling itself to produce the desired results. But the broad trend to note about the inclusion of Islamists in electoral processes is that there appears to be little evidence that they will enjoy the huge victories that would be necessary for them to overturn the democratic processes – assuming that would

even be their objective (and the evidence here is also thin).

Cooperation

One of the most important effects of political inclusion is that it creates strong incentives for various groups to cooperate with each other, even if at the pure tactical level. In this regard, the political openings of much of the Middle East in the early 1990s – all of which have since seen significant reversals – have led to expanded instances of cooperation between Islamists and their historic ideological rivals, notably communists, socialists, and liberals (Schwedler and Clark, 2006). In Egypt, the middle-generation of Islamists in the Muslim Brotherhood have increasingly sought to cooperate with their generational cohort within other political trends, and those alliances have produced considerable political impact in such instances as turning out large crowds for protests against Mubarak's regime. Similarly in Jordan, members of the Muslim Brotherhood and the closely associated Islamic Action Front party have since the early 1990s begun to coordinate and cooperate with their former political rivals. In addition to parliamentary cooperation, these groups work together primarily around issues such as mounting demonstrations against the US war in Iraq and filing lawsuits against increased restrictions on freedoms of expression.

As Clark (2006) argues, cooperation does not emerge around 'red-line' issues for Islamists, particularly those for which they believe Islamic law offers no ambiguity (such as the participation of women). In the early 1990s, for example, Hamas cooperated with the Marxist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and Hizbullah has shown willingness to cooperate with a wide range of groups, including the rival Shi'i group, Amal, as well as various Sunni Muslim and Christian groups.¹ However, even though cooperation is limited to issues of common purpose, the trend toward such engagement and coordination marks an extraordinary development in the political practices of Islamist groups. Although political inclusion cannot be expected to always lead to such behaviour, it is responsible for creating the

incentives for Islamists to even consider cooperating with other groups. In this regard, increased cooperation is an important effect of inclusion.

Nevertheless, a central point of contention concerning the inclusion of groups like Hamas and Hizbullah is whether they will become more moderate over time as they participate in pluralist if not fully democratic processes.

Moderation

The question of moderation is thus the most important issue at stake in the inclusion of ideological groups such as Islamist groups. If ideological groups are those that hold a relatively closed worldview that precludes the legitimacy of alternative views, the core question is whether inclusion is a mechanism that can create or at least encourage ideological moderation. Much of scholarly literature outside of Middle East studies posits some version of the inclusion–moderation hypothesis – the idea that increased political inclusion is a mechanism that produces moderation. As I argue in my book, *Faith in Moderation* (2006), the idea that political inclusion leads to moderation now has emerged as *the* issue at stake in debates about Islamist political participation. But what is moderation, and what are the precise mechanisms by which inclusion is said to produce ideological moderation?

In broad terms, moderation entails a process of change that might be described as movement along a continuum from radical to moderate, whereby a move away from more exclusionary practices (of the sort that view all alternative perspectives as illegitimate and thus dangerous) equates to an increase in moderation. Participation in elections or democratic processes alone is insufficient as an indicator of moderation, and it cannot address the possibility that a group may adopt moderate behaviour for strategic purposes while harbouring a more radical political agenda.

The vast majority of the literature that deals with the inclusion–moderation nexus emphasizes the ways in which structural openings and constraints provide incentives for previously excluded groups to enter the system and ‘play by the rules of the game.’² This process is captured in the idea

of a ‘participation/moderation tradeoff’, a sort of ‘democratic bargain’ (Huntington, 1991: 169) in which opposition groups become eligible to take advantage of political openings only once they have ‘modified their demands and moderated their tactics’ (165). This process typically involves

their agreeing to abandon violence and any commitment to revolution, to accept existing basic social, economic, and political institutions, ... and to work through elections and parliamentary procedures in order to achieve power and put through their policies (170).

Challenges

The challenge concerning whether inclusion produces or encourages moderation is in distinguishing between actors who are acting *as if* they have become more moderate and those whose ideological commitments have substantively changed.³ Given that one can never know ‘what is in the heart’ of another, can we know with confidence whether a group has become more moderate, and particularly whether that moderation is a result of political inclusion? I argue that the incentive structure of inclusive political institutions and processes are necessary but insufficient to produce ideological moderation. Here several issues are at play.

First, we should recognize that many of the more ‘moderate’ Islamists have always been moderate. Processes of political inclusion provide them with visibility and incentives to mobilize a following for their perspectives, but this may not signal ideological change. As a political strategy, one would certainly want to encourage inclusion as a means of elevating moderate actors on the political scene, and to deny radicals a large support base by provide alternative voices working within the system. Thus regardless of whether groups become *more* moderate as a result of inclusion, the encouragement of inclusion may discourage radicalism in a way that produces an overall political *effect* of more moderation. This insight is relevant to thinking about cases such as that of the Wasat party in Egypt, a moderate group that includes former members of the Muslim Brotherhood who allied with other actors to form a centrist Islamist

Development 50(1): Dialogue

party (though it has yet to be granted a licence to operate legally). The group may not have become more moderate over time so much as distancing itself from groups that hold less moderate views than its organizers. Similarly, we see many Islamists participating in elections and pluralist democratic processes that were never really radical in the first place, not to mention that they were never really opponents of the regime. This is the case of Jordan and Yemen, where Islamist party leaders have long been closely allied with each ruling regime. While we should not mistake the moderate behaviour of these groups as having mechanistically resulted from inclusions – particularly to the extent that they were never radical in the first place – we can nonetheless trace empirically the ways in which they are engaging in more pluralist and inclusive practices of the sort that we would recognize as moderate.

Secondly, the empirical challenge of discerning when a group is acting as a ‘wolf in sheep’s clothing’ is not as hopeless as it might seem. Wickham (2004) rightly notes, any moderate rhetoric or behaviour can be dismissed as strategically motivated (224). But I argue that we can identify change in policies that might fairly be considered ideological moderation if we look to internal party debates and documents rather than relying on public statements alone. Given the extent to which democracy has become the dominant language for political legitimacy on a global scale, we should not be surprised to see virtually every political movement, party, and regime – save perhaps the Taliban and al-Qaeda – making at least *some* claims of commitment to democratic norms and practices. Our problem is to determine when groups have made substantive commitments. In this regard, looking at internal debates reflects the issues with which a group is struggling to grapple substantively. If an Islamist party struggles with how – indeed, whether – it can justify particular dimensions of democratic participation in terms of its broader ideological commitments, we can confidently say that it has evolved ideologically when internal policy commitments have shifted toward more inclusivity and tolerance of alternative views.

This process unfolded with the Islamic Action Front in Jordan in the 1990s. The Muslim Brotherhood leaders within the party first struggled with whether participation in democratic institutions could be justified on Islamic grounds, and they decided it could be justified with reference to notions such as *shura* (consultation) and *ijma* (consensus). But that decision led the newly established (in 1992) Islamic Action Front face questions of cooperation with ideological rivals, such as communists and socialists. The justification for democratic participation rendered the acceptance of other actors as legitimate; did this mean that leftist ideologies were legitimate? Again the party debated the issue internally, and the consensus was that cooperation was acceptable as long as the leftists themselves were good Muslims and their leftist views were only political orientations. Red-line issues continued to emerge, but cooperation with former rivals was substantively justified as a result of the group’s early internal debates about the legitimacy of democracy. Over time, series of internal debates may – but will not necessarily – lead to fundamental shifts in ideological commitments in ways that can be recognized and indeed measured as increased moderation. Inclusion was essential to provide the changing political logic that led Islamists like the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan to debate whether they could justify participating in the new pluralist processes. But the internal debates themselves were key to the production of more moderate positions. In cases such as Yemen, no similar internal debates led to substantive shifts in ideological commitment that were shared across the party leadership, let alone its membership.⁴

Conclusion

Political inclusion can be expected to have many effects on ideological actors such as Islamist groups, but none of them guarantee moderation. Nonetheless, the logic of cooperation and moderation is compelling within inclusive political systems, just as the logic for extremism is present in contexts of extreme political repression. Inclusion

is clearly far more likely to produce an overall moderate political sphere, though it is unlikely to eliminate all forms of radicalism. It will, however, deny radicals portions of their support base

and thus produce an overall effect of moderation even if no political groups have substantively changed their normative commitments.

Notes

- 1 I am grateful to Janine Clark for sharing insights from her recent research on Hizbullah's cooperation with other Lebanese groups.
- 2 For a review of the inclusion–moderation hypothesis a wide range of scholarly literatures, see Schwedler (2006: 11–18).
- 3 I borrow this phrase from Wedeen (1999), although her concern with Syrians acting *as if* they adore the Syrian president Hafez al-Asad is very different from the analysis here.
- 4 This section draws on the analysis of Schwedler (2006).

References

- Anderson, Lisa (1997) 'Fulfilling Prophecies: State policy and Islamist radicalism', in John Esposito (ed.) *Political Islam: Revolution, Radicalism, or Reform*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers: 17–31.
- Caldwell, Christopher (2006) 'After Londonistan', *The New York Times Magazine*, 25 June.
- Clark, Janine A. (2006) 'The Conditions of Islamist Moderation: Unpacking cross-ideological cooperation in Jordan', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (November), 38(4): 539–560.
- Hafez, Mohammed (2003) *Why Muslims Rebel: Repression and resistance in the Islamic world*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner.
- Huntington, Samuel P. (1991) *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Norton, Augustus R. (1995) 'The Challenge of Inclusion in the Middle East', *Current History* 94(January): 1–6.
- Schwedler, Jillian (2006) *Faith in Moderation: Islamist parties in Jordan and Yemen*, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Schwedler, Jillian and Janine A. Clark (2006) 'Islamist-Leftist Cooperation in the Arab World', *ISIM Review* 18(Autumn): 10–11.
- Wedeen, Lisa (1999) *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wickham, Carrie R. (2004) 'The Path to Moderation: Strategy and learning in the formation of Egypt's Wasat Party', *Comparative Politics* 36(2) (January): 205–228.