Islamists and the Politics of the Arab Uprisings: Governance, Pluralisation and Contention

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he picture in the MENA region continues to be in near-constant flux at both the international and the domestic level. Although the democratic spark that appeared light the fire of the early days of the uprisings in 2011 has been largely snuffed out by the subsequent authoritarian atmosphere, one should not ignore the fact that the uprisings also gave rise to demands for change, one which is surely not limited by the perception of political elites on how one can be politically active in a democratic environment.

In light of the situation much of the region is facing today, the book deals with the question of what has been “the regional and domestic impact of the Arab uprisings and their aftermath on Islamist political and social organizations, their behaviour, programmatic development/outlook and their interaction with other domestic and transnational forces?” Islamists and the Politics of the Arab Uprisings: Governance, Pluralisation and Contention addresses this question by focusing on Islamist actors who have taken part in the events since the 2011 uprisings and how they have been influenced by these events in terms of their activism, politics, and institutional outlook. One of the main building blocks of this book is the acknowledgement that the uprisings, albeit being only a single phase in the long history of social and political transformation in the region, influenced how Islamists develop strategies, shape their ideologies, and form their organizations. This has created a necessity for novel analytical approaches to better understand the plurality in Islamist actors’ reactions. Kraetzschmar and Rivetti’s edited volume contributes to this monumental task by following the development of Islamist activism in the aftermath of 2010-11 uprisings. In the process, it dealt with various facets of political Islam in a dynamic socio-political environment without being tempted by simplistic generalizations.

This voluminous book with its 21 chapters authored by distinguished scholars, provides a strong comparative study of how Islamist actors/movements have been influenced by the uprisings. The authors present country-based case studies that contains broad range of selections from Asia (Iran), North Africa (i.e. Morocco and Tunisia), the Middle East (i.e. Egypt and Iraq), and the Arabian Peninsula (i.e. Qatar and Yemen). Each chapter provides carefully examined analysis in a way that rejects “exceptionalist” understandings, which portray Islamist actors as so unique that they cannot be compared with other non-Islamist political actors. As opposed to this exceptionalism, which has dominated scholarship from the 1960-70s, the authors give serious consideration to Islamism’s significant socio-political power and the consideration of religion as a basis for shaping policy alternatives. The authors’ ultimate goal is to facilitate a conversation with the literature that deals with non-Islamist political and social actors in the context of change by showing that both Islamist and non-Islamist actors have gone through similar patterns of transformations.

As a means of mitigating the difficulty of systematically dealing with such a dynamic topic with varying cases, the chapters have been divided into four thematic sections. The first section deals with Islamist parties’ relation with power – how they evolve from being in opposition to being in power – and the political and economic challenges they face. Tadros, for instance, focuses on Morsi’s year-long presidency and his challenges in terms of merging his ideological stance and the necessity for compromise and inclusivity in the post-uprising period in Egypt. Tønnessen examines the nature of ‘rebel governance’ by Daesh in Iraq and Syria, and argues that not only its ideology but also its competition with other so-called Salafi-Jihadi insurgent groups and non-state actors stimulates its desire to be a state. This is because, for Daesh, being a state and establishing the Caliphate bring more political and religious authority. The last chapter of this section concerns Turkey, and examines how the neo-liberal economic policies of the Erdoğan government has contributed to the emergence of an Islamic left, which has rooted its criticism of those policies in Islamic principles.

In the second section, the theme is centred on the relationship between Islamist actors and secular parties as well as the intensification of competition and conflict among Islamists themselves. For instance, Masbah argues that the Moroccan PJD (Party of Justice and Development) has managed to stay in power and preserve its internal unity mainly because of its pragmatism and strategic moves rather than ideology. The PJD has overcome the challenges brought by the Palace, which relied on technocrats and the formation of the PAM (Party of Authenticity and Modernity), through establishing alliances with
secular parties and benefiting from the opportunity of holding office to bolster its capabilities. However, moderate Islamists and Salafis in both Egypt and Bahrain have lived a reverse destiny. While Zollner shows that in the cases of Egypt, the Sisi-led military coup of 2013 and redesigning the political system under his rule has caused a quick reversion in the political fate of moderate Islamist and Salafi parties, Valeri shows that the regime in Bahrain has brutally broken down the mainstream Islamist political movements, and successfully presented the protests as if they were sectarian in nature. Furthermore, problematizing the fixed ideological indicators (i.e. Islamist and secular) in MENA politics, the last two chapters on Tunisia and Egypt demonstrate that such labelling disregards ideological flexibility and common policy choices between allegedly secular and Islamist parties especially issues related to the role of religion in politics.

The third section deals with the increasing number of Islamist actors in the aftermath of the uprisings and the intensification of rivalry among them in terms electoral and ideological influence. Utilizing single-country case studies, the first two chapters examine Tunisian Islamism and Egyptian Salafism respectively. These chapters demonstrate that the plurality of Islamist actors involved in national politics intensifies the rivalry not only between Salafis and moderate Islamists, but also among Salafi groups themselves. The next two chapters examine the evolution of political Islam at both local and regional level. Al-Marashi, for instance, shows that although there has been a growing Shia solidarity at the regional level during the initial period of the Syrian civil war and the rise of Daesh in the region, the relation among Shia groups within the local context of Iraq is characterized more by conflict among actors and the pursuit of short sighted interests.

The final section is centred on the rise of sectarian politics and conflict in the region following the uprisings. The chapters in this section problematize the reductionist depiction of sectarianism and seek to draw out a more fruitful understanding of enduring conflicts. Admitting the performative impact of the sectarian discourse, the chapters in this section approach this complex issue through a detailed study of history and comprehensive analyses of identity politics in Yemen, Syria, and Iraq.