**Islam and democracy**

**Uneasy companions: political Islam in the Arab world**

“OF COURSE they say nice things these days,” says a Lebanese woman, a sophisticated Sunni Muslim in her 50s, gliding between English, French and Arabic. “They know who they’re talking to. But you cannot trust them—absolutely not.” Again and again, in secular and liberal circles in Beirut, Cairo, Rabat, Tunis and even Ramallah, the seat of the Palestinian Authority, you hear almost identical dark warnings against the Islamist movements that are gaining ground across the Arab world as dictators are toppled, tackled or forced into concessions.

Islamist spokesmen and leaders of the revived Islamist mainstream, in particular the Muslim Brotherhood and groups akin to it, are bending over backwards to give reassurances that they will promote a peaceful, pluralistic and tolerant version of Islam. The rights of women and religious and ethnic minorities will be respected, they say, and the people’s democratic verdict will be accepted if they lose elections.

Whatever their doubts, most democrats in the Arab world reckon that Islamists who say they will abide peacefully by the rules of the game must be allowed—indeed encouraged—to participate in mainstream politics: far better than forcing them into a violent, conspiratorial underground. All the same, the well of mistrust on both sides runs deep.

Many liberals still think the Islamists, however mild they sound today, are bent on taking over in the long run, would abandon democracy once they got into power and would use every sort of chicanery and violence to achieve their goal. Liberals who hate the dictatorship of Bashar Assad in Syria fear that Islamists will emerge as the chief opposition to him. And quite a few liberals still question the sincerity of the Turkish government, widely cited by Arab Islamists as a fine example of pious politicians who play by the rules of a modern democracy.

For their part the Islamists across the region, who have suffered decades of torture, prison and oppression under various secular-minded tyrants, are wary lest they be blocked from power, as they have been before, sometimes violently, especially if they become too popular too fast. Many of them remember the first round of a general election in Algeria in 1991 when their friends in the Islamic Salvation Front won hands down—and were then prevented by the army from taking power, prompting a bloody, decade-long civil war.

So what or whom should one believe? Amid the turmoil of the past six months, five things have become plain. First, the revolutions that have ousted dictators in Tunisia and Egypt and threaten to do the same in Libya and Syria have owed virtually nothing to political Islam and everything to the simple secular democratic demand of frustrated peoples that they be free to choose their own leaders.

Second, the extreme wing of political Islam, epitomised by al-Qaeda, has completely failed to benefit, except perhaps in the ungovernable badlands of Yemen. Third, however small Islam’s role in the revolutions, the political forces under its banner, especially the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the like-minded Nahda in Tunisia, are now set to emerge as the biggest parties after general elections due before the end of the year. Fourth, the Islamists will not on their own win outright majorities in the new parliaments. And therefore, fifth, the emerging mainstream Islamist groups all say they will seek to govern in coalitions with secular and other parties during the fragile transition from dictatorship to democracy.

“We won’t try to get a majority,” says Khairat el-Shater, a burly engineer who spent 12 years behind bars and is widely regarded as the organisational brains behind the Muslim Brothers in Egypt today. The Brotherhood has recently created a new party called Freedom and Justice to run for parliament. Mr Shater says it will contest no more than half of the seats for parliament and does not expect it to end up with more than a quarter of them.

Likewise, Nahda in Tunisia says it hopes to get a similar score. A recent opinion poll, necessarily rough and ready after decades when it was rash to air political preferences openly, put Nahda at 14%. But most Tunisians have apparently yet to make up their minds. No one really has a clue what the Islamists are likely to get in either country in their first completely free elections. Few people think they will exceed 25%. That, however, could be twice as much as any of the secular parties.

Both Nahda and Egypt’s Muslim Brothers, conscious of the fears they inspire, insist that they would not want to rule alone even if they did win majorities. They both also say that they will not present a candidate for the presidential contests.

The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, founded by Hassan al-Banna in 1928, is by far the beefiest and most influential of the Arab world’s modern mainstream Islamist movements. In the minds of liberals the Brotherhood has long been tainted with violence, even if it has not always been of its own making. In 1948 one of its members assassinated Egypt’s prime minister. Banna was himself shot dead in 1949. Sayyid Qutb, the Brothers’ most influential thinker, who was in prison from 1954 to 1964, drove the movement in a revolutionary direction, until he was hanged in 1966. Some of Qutb’s disciples went on to become still more radical—and violent. His brother, Muhammad, was an early mentor of Osama bin Laden, whose longtime deputy, now al-Qaeda’s leader, Ayman Zawahiri, an Egyptian doctor, was a Brother.

But for the past three decades the Brothers and like-minded Islamists have generally adopted more peaceful methods, despite the battering they took under Hosni Mubarak (Egypt’s president from 1981 until February this year) and Tunisia’s long-serving leader, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali (1987 until January 2011). According to the Islamists, each of those leaders put 30,000 of their members in prison at one time or another. Many were tortured.

Nowadays they insist they do not thirst for revenge. On nearly all the key issues that so worry secular liberals, most of them now express mild views. Women should have full rights. Wearing the veil must be a voluntary matter. Alcohol should not be banned. Western tourists may wear bikinis on beaches set aside for them. Though Islam must be a main source of law and custom, the sharia should not be imposed, except in civil matters such as marriage and inheritance, where it already prevails. In Egypt the Brothers stress a need for equality for the Copts, the country’s Christian minority, variously estimated at between 7% and 10% of the population.

Even on Israel they tend to echo the latest policy of the more emollient of the leaders of Hamas, the Palestinian Islamist group that is a branch of the Muslim Brothers. The Egyptian Brothers say they will “respect the treaties” between Israel, Egypt and Jordan, where a party close to the Brothers coexists uneasily with the royal Hashemite rulers.

But still the fears among liberals continue. They note anxiously the advance across the region of a Salafist movement of puritanical zealots who supposedly want to imitate the ways of the *salaf*, the “predecessors” who accompanied the Prophet himself. In Egypt they have been responsible for burning churches and hounding Copts, and espouse an intolerant version of Islam that is often described as close to that of the Wahhabist Saudis. Leading Brothers do not condemn the Salafists, generally reckoned to account for 5% of potential voters, out of hand but say they believe that they can be drawn into the peaceful mainstream.

The Islamists are playing a cautious, long-term game. The economies of all the Arab countries affected by the awakening have been clobbered. All elected governments will have to take nasty decisions, almost certainly incurring unpopularity. The Islamists do not want to take power, alone; better to share the blame. Hence, also, the Egyptian Brothers’ recent unlikely alliance with the army, which oppressed them for so long. Mr Shater says he now trusts the generals, acknowledging, apparently with no qualms, that they are likely to retain political influence in the years ahead.

The doubts persist. “It is an 80-year project,” says a grandee of the liberal Wafd party, referring to the Brotherhood’s origins. “In the long run they want an Islamic state, a caliphate.”

But the Islamists cover a wide spectrum and no one can say for sure where Egypt’s Brothers or Nahda in Tunisia will end up on it. The head of a Tunisian think-tank, Fares Mabrouk, argues that Islamists must be allowed to take their place in the new democracies, despite the risk. “The problem of the Arab world is that we don’t yet know what democracy looks like.”

**Islam’s philosophical divide: Dreaming of a caliphate**

**Though conflict between God’s law and man’s continues to puzzle the Islamic world, Muslim thinkers have been imaginative in seeking reasonable compromise**

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THE statistics do not look very encouraging. Of the 50-plus countries where Muslims are in the majority, only two (Indonesia and Mali) enjoy political liberty as defined by Freedom House, a New York-based monitor of human rights and democracy. The Democracy Index, run by the Economist Intelligence Unit, adds Malaysia to that shortlist, rating the three countries as “flawed democracies”; other Muslim lands are put in a lower category.

With every year that has passed since al-Qaeda’s attacks on America in September 2001, it has become more fashionable to argue that something about Islam makes it hard to reconcile with full-blown liberal democracy—in the sense of a political system where all citizens have an equal right to vote, and are equal in other basic ways. And with equal vehemence, Muslims have retorted: there is nothing in their faith which precludes a liberal democracy, and much which works in its favour.

For the Islamosceptics, there are several lines of argument. First of all, they say, devout Muslims will always, in their hearts, see a global caliphate—a seat of religious-cum-political authority, holding sway over the whole Islamic world—as the ideal form of governance. If that is the case, liberal democracy, in which authority flows from the people regardless of faith, will always be regarded as a compromise at most.

It is true that the dream of a caliphate is held dear by several categories of Muslim. They include followers of al-Qaeda, bent on war with the “Jews and crusaders” of the Western world; many supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood, who believe in active participation in politics but still see Islamic governance as a long-term goal; and Hizb ut-Tahrir (Party of Liberation) which, in places that range from British universities to Uzbek slums, propagates the idea that secular elections are sacrilege.

But is the caliphate a religious doctrine—something central to Islam—or just a detail, however important, of history? In all readings of Islam, especially the ones that now dominate in the Middle East, there is huge reverence for the first four caliphs who succeeded Muhammad as leaders of the emerging Muslim community. All subsequent Muslim empires had caliphs and the abolition of the last caliphate—by Turkey’s new rulers in 1924—sent shock waves through the world of Islam.

But as Mustafa Akyol, a Turkish writer, notes in a new book, “Islam Without Extremes”, the appointment of the first four caliphs is ultimately seen—at least in Sunni Islam—as a political decision, albeit a very wise one, and not a theological one. Though Mr Akyol empathises with global Islam’s dismay over the caliphate’s abolition 13 centuries later, that too, he says, is a political matter, not a theological one. Even in Shia Islam, where succession to Muhammad is seen as a sacred mandate, the authority handed down was spiritual, not temporal; in that sense the power now held by Iran’s clergy is an anomaly.

A second line of argument about Islam and democracy concerns law. More than most other religions, the founding texts of Islam include very specific injunctions about crime, punishment and family law. By modern standards these commands are anything but liberal. The Koran mandates flogging for unlawful sex, and a strongly held tradition ascribes to Muhammad the view that adulterers should be stoned to death. Over inheritance, the Koran is also specific—a daughter is entitled to have half as much as a son—and the various legal schools of Islam are even more so, setting out with absolute precision the entitlement of each distant relative.

In most understandings of liberal democracy, penal and civil codes are a matter for the people’s freely elected representatives to decide, within the confines of a humanly drafted constitution. How can that possibly be reconciled with the notion that such questions have been settled for ever by divine revelation?



Contemporary Muslims acknowledge that the issue is a tricky one. If the Koran is a revelation of God, then its prescriptions cannot simply be dismissed as irrelevant or outdated. Some believers (see chart) would still like to apply Islamic penalties to the letter. But a distinction can be made between commands that were given in a certain context, and those which hold good for all time. And modern Muslims, including rather conservative ones, have been quite imaginative in rereading some of Islam’s legal and penal traditions.

Tariq Ramadan, an influential figure among Western Muslims, has suggested that it may sometimes be right for families to opt out of Koranic rules on inheritance—unless men are prepared to shoulder all the obligations that go with their privileged rights. Maulana Maudoodi, the father of Pakistani Islamism, said amputation should not be practised on those who are driven to steal by poverty or famine; in other words, a just society was more important than harsh punishment.

Beyond the legal details, some still see a deeper problem, concerning the very nature of political authority, and the ability of different ideas on this subject to coexist. John Rawls, an American theorist of liberal democracy, showed how people who differ over metaphysics—say Catholics and atheists—can coexist politically on the basis of a deep compromise, on certain conditions. They must believe in reason, and see the political system as reasonable in their own terms.

Mohammad Fadel, an Egyptian-born political scientist at the University of Toronto, has argued that Islam—even in conservative readings—can find a happy place in a Rawls-style democracy. In medieval times, he recalls, Islamic thought divided between the Mutazilites, who stressed human reason, and the ultimately victorious Asharites who thought that God alone could adjudicate right and wrong. But even within the latter school, there is some place for human reason—enough to make it possible for conservative Muslims to live quite comfortably in a Rawlsian world.

That will only happen if Muslims want it to and see an interest in doing so. Will they? Vali Nasr, an American political scientist, thinks Western Islam-watchers put too much stress on philosophy and not enough on social and economic factors. In his view, wherever the middle class is strong (as in Turkey), it will re-emphasise the moral rules of Islam—over honest trading, say—and downgrade Islam’s real or imagined prescriptions for politics and law. In many Muslim countries that moment still seems a long way off.