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0521851130 - Faith in Moderation: Islamist Parties in Jordan and Yemen

Jillian Schwedler

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## I

## Moderation and the Dynamics of Political Change

Do Islamist political parties threaten emerging democratic processes?<sup>1</sup> According to some, these groups are uncommitted to democratic norms and seek to exploit electoral processes to achieve nondemocratic ends. Others argue that the inclusion of Islamists is necessary because they represent a significant segment of their societies and because excluding them is a surefire means of promoting radicalism rather than encouraging moderation. Embedded in this latter argument is the idea that those who are included will become more moderate and tolerant as they learn to engage in democratic processes. Theoretically, we know surprisingly little about how this process might actually unfold. On a practical level, the stakes of getting political inclusion right – of deciding whom to include and whom to exclude – are extraordinarily high, particularly when pluralist institutions and practices are not yet well established.

Yet the relationship between inclusion and moderation is more complicated than typically portrayed, and two distinct propositions – that exclusion increases radicalism, and inclusion increases moderation – are frequently conflated. Inclusion and exclusion are often posited as a continuum, with moderation greatest in democratic, pluralist, and politically inclusive societies, and radicalism greatest in exclusive, repressive, and authoritarian societies. If increased inclusion means decreased radicalism, then inclusion is certainly preferable on both normative and practical

<sup>1</sup> To be sure, *inclusion* and *exclusion* do not capture the whole range of options available to state actors. Repression, when severe and comprehensive, can effectively eliminate a movement as a viable political challenger, as was the case with Syria's harsh treatment of the Muslim Brotherhood, culminating in the 1982 Hamah massacre. Various forms of accommodation and co-optation are other options, examined in Chapter 2.

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grounds. But are these relations as strong as they are assumed to be? Even more, are the implied causal mechanisms for moderation and radicalization well established on their own, let alone as producing consistent effects with movement along a continuum?

I argue that the mechanisms that explain precisely how inclusion and exclusion produce moderation and radicalism, respectively, are poorly specified and should be unpacked and studied separately. This study explores one side of this puzzle, the implied causal relationship between inclusion and moderation, through a structured comparative study of two Islamist parties. Jordan's Islamic Action Front (*Jabhat al-Aml al-Islami*, or IAF) and the Yemeni Congregation for Reform (*Tajamma' al-Yamani li al-Islah*, commonly called the *Islah* or reform party)<sup>2</sup> both participate in pluralist political processes within otherwise nondemocratic contexts. Neither Jordan nor Yemen comes close to meeting the most basic requirements for a democracy, whether in terms of the Schumpeterian minimal procedural conception emphasizing competitive elections and representation (Schumpeter 1942; Przeworski 1991) or in terms of substantive definitions of democracy in which broad participation and egalitarian distributive arrangements are emphasized (Pateman 1970; Mouffe 1992; Benhabib 1996; Cammack 1997; Shapiro 1999; Young 2000). Yet both regimes have enacted limited political openings as part of their loud and oft-repeated declarations of commitment to democracy (*dimuqratiyyah*), including the introduction of pluralist political practices (*ta'addudiyyah*) within a multiparty system, the guarantee of basic human rights (*huquq al-insan*), and fairly regular elections for national and municipal assemblies. These concepts are often left poorly defined, though they are frequently invoked.

In this chapter, I first examine the debates that inform this comparative study, including approaches to democratic transitions, the distinction between moderates and radicals, and the hypothesis that political inclusion increases moderation. After unpacking what I term the *inclusion-moderation hypothesis* in some detail, I suggest a mechanism that explains why some strongly ideological groups may become more moderate as they engage in pluralist practices, while similar groups participating in comparable processes may not. Rejecting the view that countries like Jordan

<sup>2</sup> The English word *group* is often used for the Arabic *jama'a* (*tajamma'* is a related form), but *group* fails to capture the sense of a community congregating or gathering, that is, a community "assembled." In English, the word *congregation* best captures more dimensions of the Arabic term than does *group*.

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and Yemen are “stalled” along the road to democracy, I argue that in each country public political space has been significantly restructured to accommodate and even encourage pluralist practices, even though non-democratic regimes remain firmly in place and “elected” assemblies play no role in governance. Have the Islamist parties in these two cases become more moderate as a result of their participation in multiparty elections and their adoption of new practices? Both parties have changed, but not in similar let alone consistent ways. While Jordan’s IAF has become more moderate over time, Yemen’s Islah party has not. What explains this variation? Despite interesting cumulative effects, at a very minimum these changes cannot be characterized as movement along a single moderate-radical continuum. Even where the IAF has become more moderate on some issues, it retains conservative and sometimes even radical positions on other issues. Instead, I define *moderation* more narrowly as movement from a relatively closed and rigid worldview to one more open and tolerant of alternative perspectives. I examine multiple dimensions of change as each Islamist group begins to participate in an evolving field of pluralist political contestation and identify where moderation has occurred, where it has not, and why. Finally, I summarize my argument, explain my field research methodology, and outline the coming chapters.

## THE LIMITS OF TRANSITOLOGY

While critiques of the literature on transitions to democracy, or *transitology*, have been around for years (Collier and Collier 1991; Adler and Webster 1995; Bunce 1995, 2003; Cammack 1997; Tilly 2001; Carothers 2002), a broad and often explicit “stages of democratization” framework continues to flourish in academic scholarship as well as in the policy world. As McFaul notes (2002: 6), it is difficult to argue with the transitions literature because proponents of strategic theories of democratization do not recognize a single theory despite obligatory reference to Rustow (1970) and O’Donnell and Schmitter (1986). Rustow suggests a process-oriented model to understanding transitions to democracy, while O’Donnell and Schmitter focus on the dynamics of regimes that had begun to move away from authoritarian rule. In defending his early work against critics, O’Donnell argues that he never suggested that democratization unfolded in predictable stages or along a consistent path, or even that he envisioned democracy as an end point (1996, 2002: 7). Regardless, the “paths to democracy” framework continues to dominate many studies of democratic transitions (e.g., Diamond et al. 1988–90; Higley and

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Burton 1989; Przeworski 1991, 1993; Snyder 1992, 1998; Schmitter and Karl 1991, 1994; Mainwaring et al. 1993; Linz and Stepan 1996; Collier 1999; Diamond 1999, 2000; Eikert and Kubik 1999) and overwhelms policy debates.

The resilience of this framework has an obvious normative underpinning among academics as well as policy makers: the desire to see more states democratize. As Gendzier (1985), Cammack (1997), and Tilly (2001) argue, this commitment has led many scholars to fail to distinguish between *explanations* of democratization and *programs for the promotion* of democratization (e.g., O'Donnell et al. 1986; Diamond et al. 1988–90; Di Palma 1990; Linz and Stepan 1996; Diamond 1999). Others have explicitly viewed the generation of new policies as a direct measure of successful scholarly studies (e.g., Diamond 2000: 100–5; Nodia 2002: 18), even when these policies fail to produce the desired results. But if programs for the promotion of democratization have seen few successes, how have scholars fared in explaining actual processes of democratization? In fact, we do not have a model of predictable stages and identifiable processes replicated across cases.<sup>3</sup> Even more troubling is that few scholars explicitly acknowledge, as do Huntington (1991) and O'Donnell and Schmitter,<sup>4</sup> that they aim to guide political leaders in countries entering the early stages of transition. Yet the commitment to promoting democracy is near universal in the literature, leading scholars to focus on classifying various stages of transition and identifying obstacles that prevent this process from “moving forward.” Many transitologists focus disproportionate attention on the role of elite actors because they play a dominant role in initiating and guiding many transitions (e.g., Rustow 1970; Karl 1986, 1990, 1997; O'Donnell et al. 1986; Share 1987; Higley and Burton 1989; Di Palma 1990; Huntington 1991; Przeworski 1991, 1993; Rueschemeyer et al. 1992; Snyder 1992, 1998; Cohen 1994; Share and Mainwaring 1996; Bratton and van de Walle 1997; Munck and Leff 1997; Hellman 1998; Higley et al. 1998; Motyl 1998; Haraszi 1999; Colomer 2000; Kalyvas 2000; Whitehead 2001a, 2001b). Some scholars (Adler and Webster 1995; Bunce 1995; Collier 1999; Eikert and Kubik 1999;

<sup>3</sup> Przeworski argues that even sophisticated statistical analyses “indicate that transitions to democracy are almost impossible to predict, even with the entire panopticum of observable factors, economic or cultural” (1998a: 137).

<sup>4</sup> “[W]e are providing a useful instrument – pieces of a map – for those who are today venturing, and who tomorrow will be venturing, on the uncertain path toward the construction of democratic forms of political organization” (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986: 5).

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Geddes 1999; Gill 2000; Wood 2000; Sanchez 2003) note that this has led to systematic overlooking of the role of nonelite actors, while others (Vitalis 1994; Cammack 1997) point out that most western-led pushes for democratization (including much academic scholarship) tend to prioritize the promotion of global capitalism and pro-Western regimes over democracy. More importantly, the majority of countries that had begun transitions seem to be moving less “toward” democracy than evolving into new forms of nondemocratic rule (Rose et al. 1998; Brumberg 2002; McFaul 2002: 214; Nodia 2002: 14–15). In fact, even major proponents of transitology admit that successful transitions have proved to be more the exception than the rule (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986: 3; Diamond 1999; Carothers 2002; McFaul 2002: 212–13; O'Donnell 2002: 7), raising questions about comparability across such a wide swath of “failed” cases.<sup>5</sup> Nondemocratic governance certainly warrants scholarly attention, but the focus on policy implications directs attention to getting countries “back on track” toward Fukuyama's liberal and democratic “end of history” (1992).

At the same time, scholars of Middle East politics have been frustrated that transitologists tend to systematically ignore cases from the Middle East, some of which have been no less promising in their early stages than those in other parts of the world.<sup>6</sup> Regimes increasingly adopted the rhetoric of democracy and initiated limited political openings in the 1980s and early 1990s, and regional experts adopted the vocabulary and assumptions of models that specify paths, obstacles, and necessary, but insufficient, conditions of democratization (e.g., Niblock and Murphy 1993; Crystal 1994; Salamé 1994; Waterbury 1994; Brynen et al. 1995; Norton 1995–6; Schwedler 1995; Esposito 1997; Ghadbian 1997; Quandt 1998; Mufti 1999; Bellin 2003). Eager to dispel lingering notions of

<sup>5</sup> Bunce argues that in Schmitter and Karl's call for scholars to apply transitions theory to postcommunist contexts (1991, 1994), they fail to consider the possibility that comparing cases from Latin America with postcommunist transitions may entail comparing apples and oranges. “The key question . . . is whether the differences constitute variations on a common process – that is, transitions from dictatorship to democracy – or altogether different processes – that is, democratization versus what could be termed postcommunism” (1995: 119). While she does not reject the potential for valuable comparative scholarship, her concern about applying “democratization” theories to inappropriate cases is well-founded.

<sup>6</sup> Among the large studies that ignore Middle East cases are O'Donnell et al. (1986), Diamond et al. (1988–90), Huntington (1991), and Linz and Stepan (1996). Michael Hudson notes that as he prepared his 1987 presidential address for the Middle East Studies Association on the question of democratization in the region, colleagues and students responded with incredulity at his choice of topic (1988: 157).

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Middle Eastern exceptionalism, regional specialists published innumerable books and articles about how Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Tunisia, and Yemen “started down the road to” democracy, though like many incipient transitions in other regions, these “democratic openings” either “stalled” or had been “aborted” entirely.<sup>7</sup> Even democratic openings begun decades earlier, as in the cases of Lebanon and Turkey, were seen as stalled somewhere short of full democracy. Middle East scholars caught up to the work of transitologists and shared their focus on identifying the causes of these failed transitions.

As suggested in the preceding text, one limitation of the focus on transitions to democracy is that political change is assessed almost exclusively in terms of progress along a continuum,<sup>8</sup> with many processes characterized by stagnancy (in the case of stalled transitions) or a return to autocratic practices (in aborted and failed transitions). This focus often obscures the complex ways in which political institutions and practices are restructured *even in cases where political openings do not progress very far*. That is, even limited openings may produce considerable dynamic change in the public political space – the practices and locales of political struggle – and these multidimensional restructurings demand systematic analysis. Scholars should abandon the notion that the “space” between authoritarianism and democracy is characterized by a continuum of stages from primitive, traditional, or patriarchal systems of rule (authoritarianism) to modern, rational-legal systems of rule (democracy). Webs of possible political trajectories depend not only on elite-level decisions but also on popular mobilization, the particularities of each historical context, the discursive terms of political struggle, and regional and international factors. In their study of how scholars characterize these variations, Collier and Levitsky (1997) critique the often absurd ways in which ever new models are forced into a democratization framework: formal democracy, semi-democracy, electoral democracy, façade democracy, pseudodemocracy,

<sup>7</sup> Use of this language has the advantage of making Middle East politics comprehensible to nonregional specialists, particularly transitologists who see the world in terms of democracies, transitional states, and nondemocracies. In 2002 I wrote an article on the prospects for democracy in Yemen for *The Journal of Democracy*. I titled the piece “Yemen’s ‘Emerging Democracy,’” the language favored by Yemen’s nondemocratic regime, but with quotes around the words “emerging democracy” to denote irony. The journal’s editors renamed the article “Yemen’s Aborted Opening,” placing my analysis into a “stalled” democracy framework. See Schwedler (2002).

<sup>8</sup> See Linz and Stepan (1996) and Diamond (2000: 95). Freedom House also posits a continuum, as its annual review of freedom in the world rates countries on a variety of issues, but the result is a continuum from 7 (least free) to 1 (most free).

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weak democracy, partial democracy, illiberal democracy, and virtual democracy. As Carothers argues, “[b]y describing countries in the gray zone as types of democracies, analysts are in effect trying to apply the transition paradigm to the very countries whose political evolution is calling that paradigm into question” (2002: 10). Instead, scholars should let go of the “transitions” language and focus instead on comparative analysis of these new forms of “electoral” nondemocracies (10–14). Carothers’ model of dominant-power politics, for example, better describes many Middle Eastern regimes than the language of stalled democracy: “limited but still real political space, some political contestation by opposition groups, and at least most of the basic institutional forms of democracy. Yet one political grouping – whether it is a movement, a party, an extended family, or a single leader – dominates the system in such a way that there appears to be little prospect of alternation of power in the foreseeable future” (11–12). Recent writings about this “gray zone” have advanced new typologies of nondemocracy regimes and suggest that regimes reach new equilibriums that seem to be quite durable (Lust-Okar and Jamal 2002).

But Bunce’s critique of the transitions literature is more devastating than Carothers’s. She argues that more is at stake than simply characterizing the type of regime accurately. “What is open for negotiation is not just the character of the regime but also the very nature of the state itself, not just citizenship but also identity, not just economic liberalization but also the foundation of a capitalist economy . . . not just amendment of the existing class structure but the creation of a new class system, not just a shift in the balance of interests . . . but something much more fundamental: the very creation of a range of new interests . . . not just modification of the state’s foreign policies, but also a profound redefinition of the roles of the state in the international system” (1995: 121). In this regard, transitologists and gray-zone scholars alike have focused disproportionate attention on changes in regime and elite-level politics, to the neglect of changes in the broader public political space. While façade democracies should be subject to critique, even specious reforms typically include an expansion of political space in which diverse political groups can establish parties and put forth political agendas for public debate. These new modes of participation, though falling far short of democracy, nevertheless reshape both the political space and the routine practices of political actors. Therefore, scholars need to think systematically about the precise ways in which institutions and practices have changed in the face of the strategic deployment of limited “democratic” reforms by nondemocratic regimes.



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### Moderates and Radicals

With a growing body of scholarship critiquing the emphasis of elite actors, the once-common language characterizing key political actors as moderates, soft-liners, or reformers, on the one hand, and radicals, hard-liners, or stand-patters (those unwilling to undertake reforms), on the other hand, has almost disappeared among scholars of democratic transitions (e.g., Diamond 1999; Geddes 1999; Gill 2000; Angell 2001; Whitehead 2001a; Nodia 2002; O'Donnell 2002) although they continue to play prominent roles for scholars who still strive to “refine” the original transitions paradigm (Linz and Stepan 1996; Snyder 1998; McFaul 2002) or theorize the persistence of neopatrimonial regimes in the face of pressures for transition (Brownlee 2002). In the fields of Middle East and Islamic studies, however, the notions of “moderate” and “radical” are still used fairly consistently with respect to Islamist groups: moderates seek gradual reform within the existing system, while radicals seek revolutionary change often through the use of violence (Burgat 1993; Hadar 1993; Krämer 1994, 1995a, 1995b; Roy 1994; Abed-Kotob 1995; Guazzone 1995; Norton 1995; Schwedler 1995, 1998; Tal 1995; ‘Ali 1996; Esposito and Voll 1996; Halliday 1996; Burgat and Dowell 1997; Esposito 1997; Ismail 1998; Kurzman 1998; Boulby 1999; Moussalli 1999, 2001; Hefner 2000; Kalyvas 2000; Kepel 2002; Hafez 2003; International Crisis Group 2003; Wedeen 2003; Wickham 2004; Lust-Okar 2005; Nasr 2005). While a few scholars view all Islamists as engaged in a common political project (the Islamization of all dimensions of state, society, and economy), the majority use the term *Islamist*<sup>9</sup> to describe diverse groups and practices rather than as a single category of analysis. That is, they recognize that the term *Islamist* captures, at most, a shared commitment to the implementation of Islamic Law (*shari'ah*) in all spheres,<sup>10</sup> but not the significant variation in tactics, strategies, or even specific objectives. Those who still favor the moderate-radical distinction argue that the terms usefully capture variation in strategies and tactics toward existing regimes: moderates work within the constraints of the existing political institutions and practices, while radicals seek to overthrow the system entirely, perhaps (though not necessarily) through the use of violence. In many ways, these labels capture a distinction between the political strategies of Islamist groups. In Jordan, Indonesia, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Pakistan, and

<sup>9</sup> The term *Islamicist* is sometimes used rather than *Islamist*, but the object is the same. See, for example, Wedeen (2003).

<sup>10</sup> The project emphasizing Islamic law is largely the domain of Sunni Islamists.



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Yemen, Islamist political parties operate legally and peacefully, contesting elections, publishing newspapers, and participating in municipal councils and parliaments. In Egypt, Tunisia, and Turkey, religious parties are formally illegal, but known Islamists participate openly either as independent candidates, in alliance with legal political parties, or as a party that does not put forth an explicitly religious agenda. All of these groups can be fairly labeled moderate with respect to political participation. To be sure, our understanding of legal Islamist political parties is little advanced when we lump them in the same category with violent underground organizations such as al-Qa'ida, Islamic Jihad, or certain Salafi groups, or even with aboveground groups such as the Islamic Resistance Movement (HAMAS) in Palestine and Hizb Allah in Lebanon, which both defend the use of violence in certain circumstances while adopting pluralist practices when engaging other domestic political actors (Robinson 2004; Clark 2005b). And as the International Crisis Group notes, the notion of moderates and radicals usually boils down to “distinguishing between those with whom Western governments feel they can ‘do business’ (the moderates) and those with whom they cannot or will not” (International Crisis Group 2005b: 2).

Yet because all Islamists are seen as ideological actors – as embracing an ideological position that might potentially clash with the basic norms and practices of democratic governance – their participation in these pluralist (if not democratic) political processes creates no small amount of anxiety for a range of actors. Domestic regimes, capitalist economic elites, foreign donors, and secular opposition groups all express concern about the possibility of even moderate Islamists coming to power. Skeptics of Islamists’ commitment to democracy often cite some Islamists’ efforts to strictly impose *shari’ah*, introduce gender segregation, and place limits on acceptable forms of speech. Others point to anti-Semitism among many Islamist groups and the extent to which even some moderates defend the use of political violence under certain circumstances. Committed democrats, critics argue, should reject violence at all times. Furthermore, many “moderate” Islamists have launched harsh campaigns of intimidation and even physical attack against secular intellectuals, threatening their jobs, their marriages, and sometimes their lives. Still, most scholars and, increasingly, even U.S. government officials insist that the distinction between moderates and radicals provides a valuable means of understanding differences in the practices as well as the political agendas of various Islamist groups.

A few scholars have in recent years put forth alternative typologies. A report of the International Crisis Group, argues that the idea of Islamism

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as “Islam in political mode” is problematic because, first, “it presupposed that Islam per se is not political, whereas insofar as Islam is inherently interested in matters of governance, in fact it is. Secondly, it presupposes that all forms of Islamism are equally political, whereas in fact, there are significant distinctions in this regard between those forms that privilege political activism, missionary activity, or violence.” The report proposes instead the notion of Islamic activism, divided into three types: political, missionary, and *jihadi* (International Crisis Group 2005b: 1, fn. 1). Alternatively, Zubaida (1993, 2001) and Ismail (1998, 2001) argue for adding to moderates and radicals a third category, conservatives, to signify groups such as the Islamic scholars of al-Azhar, who have a symbiotic relationship with the Egyptian state that often clashes not only with Egypt’s radicals (such as Islamic Jihad) but also with its moderates (the Muslim Brotherhood).

Each of these alternatives, while improving on earlier models, continues to label groups wholesale and focus the debate on whether a particular group is best characterized as moderate, radical, conservative, *jihadi*, and so on. But like the binary moderate-radical categorization, applying labels to groups or movements tends to ignore variation in position across a range of issues and obscure internal party divisions. In my study with Janine Astrid Clark of women’s activism within Islamist parties (2003), we illustrate the limitations of attempting to label particular groups, factions, or individuals. Looking at a spectrum of positions that various Islamists take on a range of issues, we argue that the terms *moderate* and *radical* might be applied to *some positions* on a particular issue, but hold little analytic value as wholesale *categories* of political actors. An individual Islamist, for example, may hold moderate views with respect to participation in pluralist elections, but not concerning the right of women to participate. Or, he or she<sup>11</sup> may hold moderate views about economic reform, but radical views about adherence to religious texts. As an alternative, we advocate the use of categories of analysis that capture positions on precise issues. For example, terms such as *accommodationist* and *nonaccommodationist* may be used with respect to political participation, while the terms *contextualist* and *legalist* may be used to capture how closely an actor adheres to literal readings of religious texts. These differences are stark among various actors and even more complex within and between

<sup>11</sup> Although the overwhelming majority of Islamist leaders are male, Islamist movements are not without female activists, though they have received little systematic attention from scholars. See Clark and Schwedler (2003) and Taraki (2003).