

## Introduction

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On a December day in 2010, twenty-eight-year-old street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi set himself ablaze in a small Tunisian town. Earlier that day, local authorities had confiscated his fruit cart and publicly humiliated him. Soon, Bouazizi's act of desperation and search for dignity ignited protests in his hometown. The proverbial fire quickly spread to neighboring mining towns and shortly reached the coastal cities. Bouazizi's self-sacrifice ignited a revolution that toppled the autocratic regime in Tunisia in twenty-four days. This was just the beginning. The Tunisian uprising inspired millions in the region as they poured onto the streets of Cairo, Amman, Rabat, Sena, and Tripoli to demand jobs, freedom, and dignity. The people had revolted before with similar demands, but this time was different. This time they succeeded in overthrowing their long-time dictators in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Libya and gained concessions in Morocco and Jordan. Observers, hopeful, dubbed the revolutionary wave the "Arab Spring."

As the revolutionary dust settled, the reality of regime change hit many. Transitions required organized actors with resources and mobilizational capacity. Political parties sprouted up with the hope of translating the revolutionary momentum into democratic regimes. It soon became clear that the youthful revolutionaries were unorganized, divided, and without resources. The most organized actors with mobilizational capacity turned out to be Islamist movements.<sup>1</sup> They already had formed a formidable opposition under the former autocratic regimes. As these regimes fell one after another, Islamists made critical advances. With the fall of dictators, Islamists in exile returned, those in prison regained their freedom, and together they

<sup>1</sup> I adopt Hegghammer's definition of Islamism, which is "activism justified by primary reference to Islam" (see Hegghammer, "Should I Stay or Should I Go?"). Scholars often adopt "a call for application of Sharia rule" as the definitive criterion for Islamism (see Mandaville, *Islam and Politics*). I agree with Masoud (*Counting Islam*, 1) that this criterion is problematic since non-Islamist parties may call for sharia rule as well. It is also common that other Islamist parties do not explicitly call for sharia rule and yet still justify their activism by primary reference to Islam, as we observe in the case of Turkey.

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established legally recognized political parties. Their strong grassroots and wide membership delivered them victories in transitional elections.

Witnessing Islamists' ascent, analysts revisited the old debate on Islamism and democracy. For skeptics, Islamists posed a threat to democratic transitions; the Arab Spring, for them, was now an "Islamist Winter." They recycled the arguments of Bernard Lewis or Samuel Huntington, who expected Islamists to build autocratic regimes based on Islamic principles. In Lewis' words, "[f]or Islamists, democracy ... [was] a one-way road on which there [was] no return, no rejection of the sovereignty of God, as exercised through His chosen representatives. Their electoral policy has been classically summarized as 'One man (men only), one vote, once.'"<sup>2</sup> This skepticism stemmed from essentialism that treated Islam as an antidemocratic force.<sup>3</sup> Islamists who promised to apply Islamic principles to politics were inadvertently a threat to democracy.

Others contested the essentialist take and entertained the transformative impact of sociopolitical contexts on Islamist movements. For them, Islam lacked an unchanging political essence but offered a multiplicity of interpretations.<sup>4</sup> What Muslims make of Islam mattered more in discerning the relationship between Islamism and democracy. And these formulations were open to continuous change; Muslims articulated and rearticulated their political visions with rising opportunities and in interaction with their political rivals as well as their environments. Political institutions and opportunities, previous learning experiences, and the behavior of other political actors, all mattered.

In reality, Islamist movements have a track record of change under different contexts. The Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (Justice and Development Party, hereafter AKP) in Turkey was an excellent case in point. Having roots in Islamism dating back to the 1970s, the party came to power in 2002 with a promise of "moderation" and commitment to liberal democracy. Operating within a secular political framework, the

<sup>2</sup> Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam*, 111–12.

<sup>3</sup> Essentialists suggest that there is no separation of religion and politics in Islam, which also rejects any separation between private and public spheres, whereby the sole authority is vested in God. See Lewis, *The Shaping of the Modern Middle East*, 54–56; Kedourie, *Democracy and Arab Political Culture*, 5–6; Huntington, "Will More Countries Become Democratic?" 208. Huntington also suggested in his famous "clash of civilizations" thesis that Islamists would be the gravest threat not only to democracy in their own societies but also to Western civilization at the global level. See Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*.

<sup>4</sup> Anti-essentialists argued that understanding the relation between Islam, Islamists, and democracy requires a closer analysis of each and every society under scrutiny, for there is no one Islam but many tendencies and interpretations which may or may not be compatible with democratic values. See, for instance, Esposito and Voll, *Islam and Democracy*; Bayat, *Making Islam Democratic*.

party leaders took several democratizing steps to improve political rights and civil liberties in the country. For many, the AKP proved Islamists' democratic habituation. That is why many treated Turkey as a "model" for the transitioning countries in the Arab world.

Islamists in the region also picked up the reference and tried to calm skeptics' fears by highlighting their resemblance to the AKP. Such assurances and their unmatched mobilizational capacity delivered electoral victories. Harakat al-Nahda (Renaissance Movement, hereafter Ennahda) in Tunisia and the Muslim Brotherhood's (Ikhwan al-Muslimeen) Hizb al-Hurriya wal-Adala (Freedom and Justice Party, hereafter FJP) in Egypt joined the AKP in Turkey as freely elected Islamist parties in power. Upon their wins, the party leaders promised to bring democracy to their countries.

A decade later, only Ennahda has fulfilled its promise. The party worked with other stakeholders to build the only democratic regime in the Arab world.<sup>5</sup> Surprisingly, the AKP, the "model" for the Arab world, took an authoritarian turn after 2011. In a few years, Turkey was no longer a democracy.<sup>6</sup> Egypt also reverted to authoritarian rule, albeit under different circumstances. The Brotherhood dominated the transition at the cost of alienating most Egyptians. Its exclusionary practices and ambiguous democratic platform created a perfect pretext for the military intervention of 2013. The movement has since fallen into disarray as Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, Egypt's new president, cut the democratic experience short.

What caused the different trajectories of these three Islamist parties in power? Why has Ennahda adhered to democratic principles while the AKP and the Muslim Brotherhood adopted hegemonic, majoritarian, and exclusionary politics? Is Islamism (and Islam) at odds with democracy as skeptics claim?

Islamists' track record in power seems to vindicate essentialists' claim about the anti-democratic tendencies of Islamism. I argue, however, that these assertions are not only misleading but also inaccurate. The Islamist experience in Turkey, Tunisia, and Egypt clearly shows that Islam's political manifestation is varied. The three countries prove that the relationship between Islamism and democracy is complex. Essentialists' reductionism fails to capture this complexity. How Islamists relate to democratic practices has changed over time as well as across and within different countries. Some Islamists have undermined democracy once in power, whereas others strengthened and nourished it.

<sup>5</sup> In the summer of 2021, President Kais Saied, elected as a political outsider in 2019, issued emergency measures and suspended parliament for an indefinite period. His power grab put the nascent Tunisian democracy to a test, which is still ongoing at the time of writing.

<sup>6</sup> Esen and Gumuscu, "Rising Competitive Authoritarianism in Turkey."

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A key finding of this book is that all three of these Islamist parties indeed internalized democratic procedures to a great extent, contrary to essentialists' claims. Both the AKP after 2011 and the Brotherhood in Egypt until 2013 showed clear commitment to electoral politics. Elections for Islamists were not a "one time, one man, one vote" affair as Lewis suggested. It was a clear political choice.

Equally crucial, some Islamists went beyond electoralism to commit to liberal democratic principles. These "liberal Islamists," as I call them, even after coming to power, have adhered to pluralism, institutional forbearance, and mutual tolerance in addition to electoral politics.

Islamism is therefore never monolithic. Instead, a central claim of this book is that mainstream Islamist parties include various groups that self-position along a spectrum of "electoralism" and "liberalism." This plurality of positions eschew essentialism and invites further analysis.

This book, relying on original research in three countries, explains why some Islamist parties commit to democracy while others undermine it. I trace these parties' democratic experience by unpacking intra-party dynamics, particularly the diverging perceptions of political power, democracy, and civil liberties. I find that Islamist parties are comprised of groups with different understandings of democracy. While most Islamists converge on the centrality of elections, they disagree on the norms underpinning electoral politics. *Electoralists* carry majoritarian and exclusionary tendencies, while *liberals* commit to pluralist and inclusionary politics.

Yet it is not the absence of liberals among Islamists that explains why some Islamist parties remain committed to democracy while others do not. Rather, the balance of power among factions determines the party's trajectory. Most mainstream Islamist parties, the focus of this book, host both groups and many fence-sitters within their organization. While liberals' dominance produces democratic commitments at the party level, their weakness can also determine the hegemonic posture of Islamist parties. To put it differently, wherever liberal Islamists dominate, they keep their parties committed to liberal democracy. Otherwise, electoralists inject majoritarian and exclusionary tendencies into their parties.

Liberal Islamists within each movement have gained prominence in all three countries, yet only in Tunisia – and briefly in Turkey – could they successfully transform the Islamist movement into a democratic force. In Egypt, liberal Islamists tried and failed to induce a similar transformation in the Brotherhood and remained marginal within mainstream Islamism. What are the reasons behind this disparity? Why have liberal Islamists in Tunisia succeeded in carrying out a large-scale democratization which led to the marginalization of electoralists while their Egyptian counterparts failed and became marginalized themselves? Why did

liberal Islamists in Turkey succeed initially only to lose their position to electoralists later? These questions are the focus of this book.

I argue that power distribution among different factions determines the course of an Islamist party. The key to power balances, in turn, lies in organizational resources. When a faction commands key resources, it can build a tight incentive structure, which is required to form a dominant alliance within the party. Selective and collective incentives offered to members cultivate loyalties and convert fence-sitters and even some rivals into allies. Extra-party resources often fortify organizational resources and build a virtuous cycle of dominance for the ruling alliance. I trace the internal struggle over organizational resources in all three parties and explain why and how liberals prevailed in Ennahda but not in the AKP or the Muslim Brotherhood.

This approach advances our understanding of Islamist party behavior in key respects. Existing accounts focus on the transformative impact of external factors on either individual Islamists or the entire party organization as a group. Scholars have done brilliant work in unpacking the origins of democratic commitments, both electoral and liberal, among Islamists, as I discuss in Chapter 1. They have studied the impact of external factors such as inclusion and exclusion on Islamists' democratic attitudes. In certain cases, these studies documented how "inclusion" in formal politics allowed Islamists to spread their message to wider audiences, win the hearts and minds of Muslims, and obtain power. Thus, electoral politics became a protective shield against state repression, a means to capture power, establish a more Islamic society, *and* maintain legitimacy. Such internalization, scholars posit, stems from strategic calculations.

Sustained political participation, some scholars have also argued, taught Islamists, at least some of them, the value of democratic politics beyond its immediate benefits. Sometimes it was the transformative impact of political learning and political socialization with ideological rivals, while at other times it was Islamists' common experience with the political other under repression or living in exile in democratic countries that altered their political preferences. Regardless of the trigger, they came to internalize democratic norms and principles at a deeper ideological level and appreciate the democratic system and its inherent qualities. Hence, my terminology: "liberal Islamists."

These accounts offer compelling explanations of individuals' ideological transformation induced by inclusion and/or exclusion. However, they fail to explain why some Islamists commit to democratic norms as a result of such experiences, while others do not. They also suffer from the problem of indeterminacy. As a result, ideological

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change remains a puzzle, often overdetermined and hard to theorize. In addition, with their focus on individuals' experiences, these accounts also fail to overcome the aggregation problem: how members' personal experiences translate to the party level. The question of why some Islamist parties adhere to democratic principles while others adopt hegemonic, majoritarian, and exclusionary politics once in power remains unanswered.

More recently, scholarly attention has focused on the impact of external factors on party behavior. Accordingly, the military, secular civil society, popular protests, regional developments, or international pressures have explained the actions of Islamist parties. The stronger the pressure from outsiders, the greater the incentives for Islamists to commit to democracy.

Often absent in these accounts is the divergence of responses to such external stimulus among Islamists. After their rise to power, different Islamists approached crises and constraints in distinct ways. When faced with similar challenges, some Islamists recognized incentives for collaboration and engagement, while others within the same party perceived threats. They disagreed, for instance, on what political protests signified; or they estimated their party's social support and political power differently; or they read regional developments in a very different light. Interestingly, all factions operated within the same context and faced similar constraints and incentives. Yet their perceptions of their political rivals and what the best course of action was in a specific context diverged markedly.

Such accounts oftentimes retrospectively rationalize party behavior instead of explaining how parties formulate their strategies. This hindsight bias obscures internal struggles over party behavior and strategy and explains away the entire causal mechanism behind party behavior. These explanations assume that parties are monolithic and unitary, and that they formulate the most rational strategy under given circumstances. Such assumptions are faulty. All political parties, including Islamists, host a diversity of opinions and preferences.

I argue that party behavior in a particular instance is not the *only* rational choice the actors could make under given circumstances but a product of internal coalition-building efforts of different factions. This implies that a party's response to the exact same stimulus can be completely different according to different factions.

A more rigorous analysis, thus, requires a closer look at intraparty politics. We need to move beyond the individual level to unpack power dynamics within political parties, often treated as unitary actors. Political factions offer an analytically useful level of analysis that both supercedes the individual level and addresses the issue of aggregation. Indeed,

factions form major sources of party change,<sup>7</sup> taking primacy over external factors such as electoral defeats, social dynamics, or economic crises. In other words, the impact of such external factors should be placed within the broader framework of intraparty politics.

In this book, I analyze intraparty politics to identify Islamist groups with diverging democratic attitudes. By focusing on factions, I explain how individual preferences (and political attitudes) aggregate within party organizations while discerning how intraparty dynamics mediate the impact of external factors on party behavior. This approach allows us to overcome the weaknesses of existing accounts, as I discuss in the next chapter. Building on the studies of Islamist change at the individual level, in Chapter 2 I offer a theory of aggregation using factions as the major unit of analysis.

My aim is not to offer a theory of ideological moderation for individual Islamists. Instead, I study the aggregation of preferences with changing incentive structures within a party, as factions try to build larger coalitions. This book thus explains why *some* parties adhere to democratic norms, while others choose not to. In contrast to answers that foreground the transformative effect of external factors on Islamists, I argue that intraparty struggles take primacy in shaping Islamist party trajectories.

### Islamism and Democracy

The question of democracy gained urgency among Islamists with the emergence of political opportunities often through regime-induced political openings: in the 1950s in Turkey and in the 1970s and 1980s for most of the Arab world. Mainstream Islamist movements, the focus of this book, responded by forming parties seeking the integration of Islam, politics, and society.<sup>8</sup>

These Islamist parties are ideological parties<sup>9</sup> that seek to reform the political system in line with their political vision.<sup>10</sup> As such, they belong to the family of political parties motivated by a distinct worldview, that is, Catholics, socialists, communists and so on. Like any other ideological party, they come in different shades as their political programs, objectives, and methods diverge significantly. This is particularly the case when it comes to their relationship with democracy. They often partake in electoral politics to fulfill different aims. For some the aim

<sup>7</sup> DiSalvo, *Engines of Change*.

<sup>8</sup> In some cases, Islamists were not allowed to form parties, so they ran as independents or formed alliances with existing parties.

<sup>9</sup> Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems*.

<sup>10</sup> Note that these parties do not include mainstream parties that instrumentalize Islam to gain votes or stay in power such as United Malays National Organisation in Malaysia, center-right parties in Turkey, and the National Democratic Party in Egypt, among others.

is to capture the state; for others democracy is an end in itself. These political attitudes do not originate from what essentialists imagine as a singular Islam but arise from different interpretations of Islam that inform actors' preferences along with broader political, social, and economic contexts. That is why no two "Islamisms" are alike.<sup>11</sup>

When given the option to participate in elections, at first many Islamists were ambivalent, but later they embraced electoral politics following sustained political activism in the 1970s and 1980s. Many Islamists treated elections as another way of winning the hearts and minds of Muslims. The National Salvation and Welfare Parties in Turkey, the Islamic Action Front in Jordan, the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria, the Islah Party in Yemen, Hamas in Palestine, Hadas in Kuwait, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, among others, participated in elections and won seats in parliament or municipal governments.<sup>12</sup>

Once several Islamist parties embraced political participation in different countries, they also emerged as the strongest opposition to the authoritarian practices of existing regimes. In the face of repression, they took up the mantle of democratic reforms and human rights against authoritarian infringements. They thus started to speak the language of civil liberties and political rights. Skeptics believed that this was dissimulation, a claim hard to test until Islamists gained political power.

Momentous events like the Arab uprisings created the conditions for Islamists' recent surge, allowing analysts to assess the extent of Islamist change and incumbency's effects on their democratic attitudes. Islamists' rise to power, however, occurred amid revolutionary upheaval, which generated institutional flux, whereby institutional incentives were uncertain or nonexistent. More importantly, Islamist parties are hardly fringe parties that need to move to the center to win elections. In point of fact, these parties had built strong social movements and enjoyed certain advantages over their weak secular rivals. As a result, Islamist parties often – and certainly in the three cases studied in this book – emerged as a dominant political force in their societies.

Despite such uncertainty and their capacity to redesign institutions, I find that Islamist parties in all three cases showed high level of commitment to electoral politics even when institutional incentives to do so

<sup>11</sup> Tezcür, *Muslim Reformers in Iran and Turkey*. Also see Yadav, "Understanding 'What Islamists Want'"; Schwedler, "Can Islamists Become Moderates?" Ashour, *The Deradicalization of Jihadists*; Ayoob and Lussier, *The Many Faces of Political Islam*.

<sup>12</sup> Turkish Islamism enjoyed greater rights and freedoms due to country's democratic institutions, although they could never explicitly call for an Islamic system due to restrictions imposed on political parties by the secular constitution.



remained weak. Skeptics' fear of "one man, one vote, one time" turned out to be misplaced. Both strategic and ideological factors, I argue, effected this outcome.

For some Islamists, elections were a strategic means to come into and remain in power with a strong popular mandate. Such mandate allowed these parties to capture the state and Islamize their societies. Elections also offered an ideological and institutional solution to a puzzle Islamists grappled with for a long time. Islamist movements, often seeking the Islamization of social and political life, rarely offered an alternative to the institutions of the modern nation-state. Islamist ideologues and activists such as Sayyid Abul A'la Maududi or Hassan al-Banna kept postponing questions of an Islamic model of governance to an indeterminate future. The only specifics they offered pertained to the ideal ruler: a virtuous, pious man who would govern the society in an Islamic fashion with the help of virtuous civil servants.<sup>13</sup> This ambiguity was partly due to the silence of the Qur'an and the Sunna (Prophet Muhammad's example) on governance/political systems and was partly a result of Islamists' dialectical relationship with their political contexts.<sup>14</sup>

This institutional and theoretical underdevelopment was key in Islamists' adaptation to their local circumstances, as it allowed for their internalization of democratic procedures, as they had been fixated on individual virtue rather than institutional development as a crucial pillar of an Islamic polity and had no answer to the question of selection of the "rightful rulers." Democracy, at least its procedural aspects, offered the best available solution to one of the critical issues for mainstream Islamist parties. So in contrast to scholars who argue that Islamism is inherently authoritarian, I assert that these Islamist parties are committed to elections as an indispensable mechanism for selecting decision-makers. As such, democracy filled a major vacuum in the Islamist political imaginary. Yet what they gathered from "democracy" differed markedly.

The experience of Islamist parties in power soon proved the limits of their democratic habituation. Indeed, several Islamists reversed their

<sup>13</sup> Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam*; for examples see Maududi, *The Political Theory of Islam*; Kısakürek, *Ideology Örgüsü*.

<sup>14</sup> For instance, for Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the emphasis was on "social Islam" and not the establishment of an Islamic state. Islamization of the state would come through "greater attention to religion and spirituality across all sectors of all public life, [hiring] more graduates of religious schools, and encouraging greater religiosity in the part of the populace." In the late 1930s, Banna issued open calls to the palace to initiate Islamizing reforms. His successors translated this vision into full implementation of the sharia only after Anwar Sadat changed the Egyptian constitution in 1974, stating that the source of legislation in Egypt is the sharia (Mandaville, *Islam and Politics*, 77–79).

earlier commitment to civil liberties and democratic norms such as pluralism and mutual tolerance after coming to power yet without foregoing their commitment to *electoralism* (echoing right-wing populists elsewhere). Other Islamists, in contrast, experienced substantial ideological change through inclusion in or exclusion from the political system. After coming to power, they remained unwaveringly committed to democratic norms such as pluralism, mutual tolerance, and institutional forbearance.

### **The Outcome of Interest: Islamist Parties’ Democratic Commitments**

This book focuses on Islamists’ democratic commitments. The outcome of interest is therefore democratization, and not “moderation.” The latter is often used by scholars but also widely criticized for its ambiguity.<sup>15</sup> Democratization is a much clearer and more analytically useful alternative, since it can be tracked in a more systematic fashion.

There is no singular definition or understanding of democracy. Since democracy can be perceived in different ways, democratization may also occur in different degrees. In its minimalist conceptualization, offered by Schumpeter, democracy is “the institutional arrangements for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote.”<sup>16</sup> Schumpeterian democracy rings a majoritarian tune, and those who subscribe to it may focus more on its procedural aspects than its normative requirements. As such, democracy may quickly devolve into an instrument of amassing power, rather than being an end in itself, as recently seen in many democracies and hybrid regimes.

In contrast, a thicker understanding of democracy would recognize the centrality of certain principles, including pluralism, regular give-and-take, and mutual compromise. As Levitsky and Ziblatt specify, there are two crucial norms that form the basis of democracy: institutional forbearance

<sup>15</sup> Scholars often use the concept of “moderation” to define Islamists’ ideological change. The theories of moderation of Islamists do not necessarily define moderation as democratization (except Wickham, who sets a higher bar for moderation – i.e., liberal and democratic commitments). Some define it as a change in worldview which falls short of democratic politics. Regardless, the concept of “moderation” is quite problematic, as several scholars have already pointed out. Parties hold different positions on a variety of issues; Islamists are no exception. The concept appears more confusing than clarifying. For a thorough critique of the concept, see Schwedler, “Can Islamists Become Moderates?” Brown, *When Victory Is Not an Option*; Wickham, *The Muslim Brotherhood*; Künkler and Brocker, “Religious Parties”; Netterstrøm, “The Islamists’ Compromise in Tunisia.”

<sup>16</sup> Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, 269.