Islamic political parties have generated literature from political scientists, which mostly focuses on their acceptation or rejection of formal politics. The widely accepted ‘inclusion-moderation’ paradigm contends that unlike repression, the inclusion of Islamic political parties into political systems leads to a greater ideological tolerance among Islamist leaders (Schwedler, 2007). From this perspective, numerous scholars have focused on behavioural moderation, especially pragmatism within the parties’ platforms and searches for political alliances (Wickham, 2013). Others have explored the opportunity structures that facilitate the inclusion of Islamic parties into the political system, mostly examining institutional constraints and types of political culture. This literature shows that the more participatory Islamic parties become, the less they use religious themes. Repression by the state expands their constituency beyond religious themes to include all oppressed political actors in coalition building. On the other hand, competition with other religious parties tends to increase religious rhetoric. Literature also highlights a dilemma specific to Islamic parties; that is, more than others, they are characterised by their dual constituencies based on religious claims and social grievances.

The underlying assumption is that the differentiation of strategies among parties is correlated with the degree of democracy of a political system. In particular, authoritarian regimes by systematically repressing political opposition have contributed to the politicisation of mosques and other Islamic institutions as free speech spaces. This political pre-eminence has continued after political liberalisation and recognition of political parties. But why Islam and no other ‘secular’ alternatives? To respond to this question, it is necessary to take a closer look at the broader landscape of state–society relations. Moreover, state–Islam relations are crucial to the differentiation of the strategy of Islamic parties, which has to be addressed beyond the binary ‘coercion versus cooptation’ dilemma.

In almost all Muslim countries, the state has appropriated Islam by nationalising and transforming religious institutions into administrative elements, even in ‘secular’ countries such as Turkey (Nasr, 2001; Cesari, 2014). This nationalisation of Islam became a powerful tool for opposition groups to use the staying power of Islam in society for mobilisation, while other ideological unifications were banned. As a result, Islamist oppositional parties possess ideological coherence, legitimacy and potential for social mobilisation that are not accessible to other political forces, like for example communist parties that have been mercilessly crushed by authoritarian regimes. This is not to say, however, that secular political forces are non-existent in these countries. In fact, they have played a
significant role in the Arab Spring revolution, and they have influenced the strategy of Islamist forces in the unfolding transitions.

Most interestingly, secular influence does not come primarily from professional political parties but from civil society itself which played a decisive role in the Arab world, in the uprisings against the authoritarian regimes in 2011. Their focus has been on better living conditions, freedom of expression, labour rights and economic justice, as illustrated by the Egyptian ‘Tahririan’ Revolution and the April 6 Youth Movement, an ideological group that was born through Facebook for a strike in Mahalla on 6 April 2008 and known for being at the forefront of street politics without having any clear political propositions (Carr, 2012). It is, however, important to keep in mind that ‘secular’ in this context refers to the dismissal of what Bassam Tibi calls the Shari’atisation of politics (Tibi, 2013), which is the inscription in constitution and legislation of fixed (if not fossilised) Islamic prescription. But it does not mean systematic rejection of religious references in public life.

Once the political system starts to open, like in Malaysia or Indonesia, or even Morocco, the diversification of political offerings makes Islamic parties less central to political opposition and they lose their edge in voicing all grievances. This was the reason for the downfall of the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) in Egypt after the 2011 revolution and of the incapacity of Islamic parties in Indonesia to win elections. In a nutshell, a broader view of the status of Islam in society and national culture can explain the differentiation of strategies among parties as well as their probability to win elections. The problem is that the moderation–inclusion paradigm cannot provide such a broader view because it operates on the assumption of a dualist power structure, where Islamist movements are the reaction to the state ideology. Hence, it implicitly posits the existence of a rigid, stark opposition between the state and religious groups and takes for granted a clear division between what is Islamic (party) and what is secular (state), while in political reality Islamic parties and states straddle both. Consequently, to investigate normalisation processes, it is necessary to analyse the Islamic policies of states that directly impact the ideological and behavioural moderation and inclusion of these parties. In other words, political Islam, broadly defined as national political culture, is key to any political development. That is why the political influence of Islamic parties is in part explained by the framing and pruning of Islam by the authoritarian state. While the state has appropriated Islam through means of institutionalisation and nationalisation, the Islamist opposition groups have, in turn, been able to use the staying power of Islam on society to form their influential opposition to the point of becoming the main political force across countries.

As a result, the Islamist groups have major assets required for the emergence of a capable political opposition (Hafez, 2010, 103): (1) ideological coherence rooted in national identities and (2) legitimacy and credibility in terms of political mobilisation. However, these assets have been made fragile by their lack of (or mitigated) political success during the Arab Spring and by the rise of alternative forms of mobilisations. Finally, the acceptance of democracy by these parties continues to be questioned by analysts.

Islamism as a national or counter-national project

One of the major reasons for the political strength of Islamist groups is that they tap into a political repertoire already set up by the authoritarian regimes. As explained by abundant scholarly literature, Islamists do not reconnect with the Islamic tradition but with the political movements, mainly pan-Islamist and revivalist, including: Muslim Brothers (MB), the Deobandi, and the Jamaʿat Islamiyya, that were all generated by the encounters with Europe at the end of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War. However, the approach of Islamist
groups has evolved everywhere from a pan-Islamist to a national strategy with the goal to oppose the corruption and despotism of the nation-state (Pratt, 2007, 167). As a result, Islamist opposition groups have constructed political Islam as a national project to achieve social justice.

At the time of its inception at the end of the Ottoman Empire, pan-Islamism was opposed to nationalism, perceived as a Western concept. However, after decolonisation processes, the national framework became the ‘natural’ political space. Thus, Islamist oppositions gradually used Islam more as an alternative to the secular nationalism promoted by state elites and less as a way to promote a pan-Islamic Caliphate. In this sense, they have increasingly operated within the context of the newly defined national political community.

In Egypt, the MB believed that state policies were impure and that their movement held the key to the ‘true’ Islam and to the rightful authority. Hassan al-Banna (1906–1949) argued that the purest period of Islam, the ‘Golden Age’, happened when Muhammad and his successors, the Four Rightly-Guided Caliphs, ruled the political community. Thus, the MB’s ultimate political goal was to create an ‘Islamic Order’ or al-nizam al-islami, which has its foundation in Islamic principles. While al-Banna promoted the Islamic political order to come, his vision also translated into multiple social, economic, and cultural activities geared at improving the daily conditions of Egyptian people. Therefore, the political vision of the MB was progressively shaped by the national Egyptian framework and domestic politics.

After the death of al-Banna in 1949 and the Free Officers’ coup in 1952, the relationship between the MB and the state turned into mistrust. At first, the MB was allowed to exist as an organisation despite the prohibition of political parties in 1953. However, the MB’s refusal to grant legitimacy to a regime that did not implement sharia soon led to further political protests. In October 1954, a member of the MB attempted to assassinate President Nasser and the MB was subsequently outlawed, while its members were jailed or sentenced to death.

In the same vein, the turn towards radicalisation reinforced the nationalisation of the Islamist strategy by focusing the fight against the ‘unjust’ ruler. Sayyid Qutb’s (1906–1966) redefinition of jihad was instrumental in such an evolution. In Milestones (1964), Qutb argued that the Egyptian society was steeped in Jahiliyyah. While Jahiliyyah in the Islamic tradition refers to the pre-Islamic period, before the Prophet Muhammad’s revelation, Qutb gives the term a new political meaning. Because Egyptians do not live under sharia law, they experience in his view, a situation comparable to the pre-Islamic period, hence justifying the fight against the ruler, even if this ruler is a Muslim (Qutb, 2005, 23; Zollner, 2009, 86). Jihad against the rulers becomes a political and religious priority.

Qutb’s vision led to splits within the MB. Groups, such as Islamic Jihad and al-Takfir wal-Hijra, adopted his focus on jihad as the priority (Rubin, 2002, 56). In contrast, the mainstream MB operated under the guidance of Hasan al-Hudaybi (1891–1973), who in his book, du’aa la qada (Preachers, Not Judges), directly questions Qutb’s idea of jihad. He argued that the duty of all Muslims is ‘to enact all of God’s orders and statutes and to pave the way for the establishment of His religion’ (Johnston, 2007, 43). More specifically, under Hudaybi, the MB began to discuss (1) their involvement in Egyptian political life, (2) their compromise with the Egyptian state and (3) the acceptance of democratic rules.

Political party vs. social movement

Since its conception, the MB’s initial goal was to prepare Egyptians for the Islamic political order. For this reason, the emphasis was on education rather than partisan politics. After al-Banna’s death in 1950, the leadership went to Hassan al-Hudaybi, who combated the movement’s affiliation with violence and emphasised its social vocation (Johnston, 2007, 40; Mitchell, 1993, 204). Hudaybi
argued that only God could judge if society is in a state of *Jahiliyyah*, not man. The implications of this argument were that Hudaybi supported the Egyptian state, arguing, ‘God has delegated to the Muslim nations many aspects of their political, economic and social life … He has revealed to us that this delegation is for the application and realisation of purposes he has determined’ (Johnston, 2007, 47). Despite this conciliatory position, presidents Nasser in the mid-1960s, and Mubarak decades later, continued to implement strict crackdowns against all affiliated Islamist groups who posed a threat to the regime.

Nevertheless, the movement gradually became more integrated within the Egyptian political space, specifically when President Sadat (1970–1981) released political prisoners. In 1976, the latter allowed opposition parties to function (although he did not overturn the longstanding ban on the MB). Additionally, the Mubarak regime in the 1980s brought a new level of tolerance for the MB, by allowing the organisation to participate in the 1984 parliamentary elections in alliance with the Al-Wafd Party, gaining 58 seats (Johnston, 2007, 49).

Al-Hudaybi’s ideology resulted in the grounding of the MB’s programmes in multiple aspects of Egyptian society, such as social services and education. This emphasis on social activism led to debate and divisions within the MB when the time came to create a political party after the demise of the Mubarak regime in 2011. More specifically, the younger generation raised objections to the creation of the MB’s Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) for its loss of main social mission in favour of partisan activities (Cesari, 2014, 137).

**Compromise with the state**

One of the most significant examples of accommodation within the political system happened during the 2005 parliamentary elections in Egypt. In compliance with US President Bush’s Freedom Agenda, President Mubarak allowed the MB more space and freedom to conduct its electoral campaign as an independent unofficial group. The MB won 20 percent of the vote and proved to be a contending opposition group to the incumbent regime. In 2007, it established a platform which brought to the fore heated discussion about its position on citizenship rights based on gender and religion, the role of the official religious establishment, and its interpretation of sharia (Brown and Hamzawy, 2008).

After the 2011 revolution and the ousting of Mubarak, the attitude of compromise with the political system continued. When the protests against the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) turned violent in late November 2011, the MB refused to continue its participation in the demonstrations as it could compromise the first round of elections in which the FJP was poised to be victorious (Nisman, 2011). After its victory in the parliamentary elections, the FJP multiplied its appeasing gestures towards the SCAF and announced that it would not participate in anti-military rallies because the handover of power to civilians must occur in a stable environment (Zayan, 2011).

The same evolution towards conciliation took place in Tunisia. The MTI movement, created by Rached Ghannouchi in 1981 with a focus on Islamic education, became more politicised and radical over time, adopting the Jihad approach of Qutb. As a consequence, most leaders were jailed and Ghannouchi fled to London in 1989. From this date until his return to Tunisia in 2011, Ghannouchi’s thinking went under profound changes illustrated in its acceptation and promotion of state authority and elections. In particular, he addressed the idea of ‘Islamic democracy’ as a solution to Tunisia’s problems; ‘It was an intellectual necessity for the Islamic movement to offer clear answers to the challenges facing Islamic thought in a country such as Tunisia, which had become extremely Westernised. There was no other alternative’ (Hamdi, 1998, 102). His aspiration has since then been to rethink the possibilities of democracy in conciliation with Islamic principles.
From oppressed to rulers

Being the ‘oppressed’ meant that Islamists did not benefit from the nepotistic practices of the regimes and therefore gained an aura of purity and honesty, not to mention martyrdom, hence gaining unparalleled political legitimacy.

In both Tunisia and Egypt, Islamic political actors acquired legitimacy and credibility due to state oppression. The self-exile of Rached Ghannouchi also contributed to the party’s aura. He did not return to Tunisia until January 2011 when Ben Ali was ousted. No doubt, his return reignited the Ennahda movement and symbolised the New Tunisia; some members even suggested he should run in the upcoming elections (which he declined).

The electoral victory of the FJP or Ennahda turned Islamic groups into partisan groups and disabled them from claiming to represent aspirations of the entire population. This erosion of popularity was documented by media coverage and polling in the case of the FJP in Egypt, between the parliamentary elections of 2011 and the May 2012 presidential elections. A May 2012 Gallup poll indicated a significant decline in favourable opinion towards the FJP and the Salafis. The findings from University of Maryland polling during 4–10 May indicated that while the FJP won the largest block of votes, Morsi trailed in last place, garnering only 8 percent of support (Telhami, 2012). It is also noteworthy that 71 percent said that the MB’s decision to field its own presidential candidates after it said that it would not, was a mistake. These polls however were contradicted by the electoral results when Morsi won 51.7 percent of the vote. Ultimately, a question remains about the consequence of professional politics and electoral strategies on the legitimacy of once excluded political actors. The 2012 rift between the revolutionary groups at Tahrir Square and the FJP illustrated the new challenges for actors who have moved from prisons to the ruling seats. There is also the difficulty of addressing new forms of protest and political communication through social media that has become the privileged channel of mobilisation for urbanised youth. The April 6 Youth Movement clearly illustrates this new trend, as it gained political weight through protesting against the SCAF. Politically unaffiliated youth also played an integral role in enforcing government accountability through the online ‘Morsi Meter’ which tracked fulfilment of Morsi’s promises made to the Egyptian people.

On 23 October 2011, the first free election in the country’s history took place to elect the Tunisian constituent assembly. The Ennahda Party won 37.04 percent of the vote (more than the next four biggest vote-getters combined) and 89 of the 217 seats, making it by far the strongest party in the legislature. However, as the ruling party, Ennahda started to lose popularity because of its mediocre economic performance and, most importantly, for not monitoring radical Islamists (such as Ansar al-Sharia) who were feared for their attempts to Islamise the country, not to mention the 2012 ransacking of the American embassy and the assassination of two leftist politicians. As a consequence, Ennahda lost the 2014 parliamentary elections, making up 28 percent of the government, down from 40 percent in the previous coalition, with independents forming 48 percent of the new cabinet.

The Arab Spring has also highlighted the erosion of the mobilisation capacity of Islamic parties. Neither the MB nor Ennahda had a central role in the Tunisian and Tahririan protests that eventually brought down Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak respectively. But, the skills of the MB’s student wing probably influenced the successful tactics of some of the January 2011 protests in Tahrir Square. Generally, it can be argued that the success of mobilisation in Egypt was the result of several decades of youth experience with the MB, even if they were not officially affiliated with the movement.
Acceptance of democracy

Interestingly, the question about accepting the results of elections has become less acute both
with the evidence of electoral success and also with acceptance of electoral defeat as in the case
of Ennahda in 2014. At the same time, authoritarianism remains a possibility as attested by the
return of the military rule in Egypt in 2013, not to mention the authoritarian turn taken by
President Erdoğan in Turkey.2 In any case, the question of civil liberties and individual rights
has become central in the assessment of the democratic nature of Islamic parties.

The MB’s 2007 platform initially raised questions about its commitment to democracy
because of its proposal to create an Ulema Council and its ambiguous position on women and
(Christian) Copts. After the ousting of Mubarak, the platform of the FJP illustrated a greater
sense of compromise; there was no more mention of the Ulema Council that would supersede
the elected institutions, and Copts and women were acknowledged as full citizens. In the same
vein, FJP was officially declared a secular party and opened its membership to both Copts and
women. According to the party’s secretary general and co-founder Dr Sa’d Katatny, the FJP
had 8,821 founding members across Egypt’s 27 governorates and the electoral list for the first
parliamentary election included over 900 women and 93 Copts (Cesari, 2014, 176). While this
opening did not convince all women or Copts, the FJP was also the target of critiques by more
conservative religious voices, mostly the Salafis (Salafi in this context refers to groups or
individuals who follow the Wahhabi/Saudi doctrine of Islam).

More broadly, the uncertainty about the acceptance of democracy by the new regime arose
because of what was dubbed at the time the ‘Brotherisation’ of Egyptian politics, which refers to
the placement of members of the MB in key governmental positions. These ambiguities facili-
tated the military coup of July 2013 and the political demise of the MB. As a result, political
repression is, at the time of this writing, worse than under Hosni Mubarak and ironically by the
hand of general Sissi, who started his career as an ‘Islamist’ military officer.

In stark contrast to the FJP, Ennahda succeeded in providing evidence for its support of
democracy. It meant creating alliances with ‘secular’ political forces, and multiplying efforts not
to alienate key segments of the population, including women. All these factors created the
conditions for a successful democratic transition in Tunisia. First, there was sufficient agreement
about political procedures among the different protagonists to produce an elected government.
Second, a free and popular vote in 2011 made possible a change of government. Third, the
transition government de facto had the authority to generate new policies. Fourth, the executive,
legislative and judicial powers did not share power with other bodies de jure (e.g. the military,
such as in Egypt). Nevertheless, the assassination of the left-wing politician, Chokri Belaid, in
February 2013 opened a serious crisis that endangered the consensus among the different pro-
tagons when liberals and secularists accused the Islamists of having amassed too much power.
The failure of the then prime minister, Hamadi Jebali, to form a coalition government in
response to this political crisis (partly due to his plans not having the backing of his Ennahda
party) caused him to resign, and Mehdi Jomaa was named as the interim prime minister ahead
of the 2014 elections as a result of an agreement between Ennahda and its opponents. The 2014
elections saw the defeat of Ennahda to the secularist party, Nidaa Tounes. This defeat was a
strong indicator of the acceptation of electoral outcome by the Islamist party which con-
gratulated its opponent on its victory (Amara and Markey, 2014). After two rounds, Nidaa
Tounes’ candidate, Essebsi, also won the presidential elections that were held a month later and
for which Ennahda had agreed not to put forward a candidate (Amara, 2014).

Besides elections results, Ennahda contributed actively to the adoption of the first con-
stitution in a Muslim majority country that guarantees equality between men and women,
freedom of expression, freedom of conscience, freedom of thought, the right of association, and the right to difference and political pluralism. Ennahda has particularly been adamant in its reassurance to women that the Family Code will not be changed. At the same time, tensions have arisen between secular and more conservative segments of the Islamic party on the advancement of women’s rights, especially in the light of existing indecency laws. Although the Tunisian Penal Code provides various punishments for rape, including death and life imprisonment, it doesn’t actually protect victims of rape because there are ways for the perpetrators to evade punishment, for instance by marrying the victim, which also means that there is no legal protection of spousal rape. Moreover, non-Muslim women who are married to Muslim Tunisian men suffer legal disadvantages, such as the inability to inherit from her Muslim husband (nor can he from her) and the inability of her children to inherit from her. In order to remove these inequalities, President Essebsi declared on Tunisia’s Women’s Day in 2018 that legislative changes would be introduced to make inheritance law equal for men and women. His position was supported by Ennahda but sparked protests from the most conservative part of the Islamic groups since the legislation would be in their eyes anti-Islamic. Another component of Ghannouchi’s vision of Islamic democracy is the status of non-Muslims in Tunisian society. Although Jews and Christians in Tunisia were wary of the political leadership of the Islamic party, Ghannouchi tried to reassure them. There are however signs of intolerance in civil society and on the political right of Ennahda.

Unsecular democracies

As attested by the Tunisian debates on law and constitution, state–Islam regulations will be crucial to further democratic development. In this regard, surveys (Cesari and Fox, 2016; Cesari, 2018) show that some forms of governmental involvement in religion (e.g. recognition of religious holidays) are more compatible than others (e.g. legal privilege to one religion over others) with democracy. In this sense, the compatibility between Islam and democracy is indirectly related to the non-democratic forms of state regulations of Islam and other religions. That is why recognition of freedom of religious affiliations and practices is critical to the democratisation process, while removing culturally, historically and nationally dominant forms of Islam is the main challenge.

Consequently, accepting democracy does not lead automatically to ideological liberalism when it comes to women rights, religious minorities’ rights and freedom of speech. Such a distinction between procedural and substantial democracy poses a challenge to the ‘inclusion–moderation paradigm’ based on division between ‘secular’ political system and religious parties. One can argue that greater inclusion of religious parties into the political system leads indeed to greater moderation. The evolution of the Salafis in Egypt portrays such a case: from being anti-system, from 2011 they accepted the concept of the nation state and the legitimacy of electoral rules. But such moderation has limits on questions of civil rights, therefore showing that the alternative for religious parties is not between being anti-system or pro-system. There can be acceptance of the political system and at the same time promotion of unsecular politics, defined by Kalyvas (2003) as political contexts in which religious ideas and symbols are used as the main mode of mobilisation by at least one major political party. I would add that unsecular politics is not limited to political parties but can also be inscribed in the constitution and in the law when religious principles are utilised as sources of legislation or define the boundaries of the public space. In such circumstances, unsecular politics defines the whole political system, as in Egypt in particular or in most of Muslim-majority countries in general. In other words, when the rule of
law and the allocation of public resources differentiate between religions, unsecular politics is shared by both political system and Islamic parties and cannot be explained solely by the inclusion-moderation paradigm.

**Muslim democracy: an oxymoron?**

The response to the question above is not a straight yes or no. First and foremost, the combination of any religious prescriptions with secular principles of democracy is a challenge for individual rights. Even in Western secular democracies, we can see that some of these religious prescriptions on abortion, contraception or sexuality can for some citizens conflict with the indiscriminate tenets of secular law. In this respect, disputes over the role of Islamic parties and their legitimacy across countries stem from disagreements on how much of these principles can and should be implemented in secular laws, and whether these rules should be applied to all citizens, believers or not. In these conditions, the question is instead: which dimension of political Islam influences which domain of democracy? Most scholars agree that nowadays there is no clear-cut distinction between democracy and non-democracy and that most regimes fall in between these two opposite and can be described as hybrid (Levitsky and Way, 2002). Being hybrid means that they lack one or more of the following features that define democracy:

1. free and fair elections;
2. separation of powers;
3. rule of law and independence of the judiciary; and
4. civil liberties.

Political experiences in Egypt and Tunisia show that most of the Islamic movements have come to terms with elections and operate within the framework of the nation-state. Rather, it is the recognition of separation of power and judicial independence that is more ambiguous. This is attested by the praetorian role of religious authority in the Islamic Republic of Iran, along with the turn to authoritarianism observed in the last five years in Turkey under the AKP rule. The exception is Tunisia since the Jasmine Revolution, where the majority Islamic party has complied with the four major features of democratisation mentioned above.

In the case of Muslim democracies like Senegal, where elections and separation of power do exist, the most controversial aspects concern the limits imposed on freedom of speech and sexual orientations by Islamic prescriptions. Some refer to this situation as illiberal democracy. Nonetheless, such a qualification is confusing because it implies that these limitations come primarily from Islamic actors, when, in fact, the so-called liberal or secular actors also implement them.

As noted above, although individual rights are acknowledged (e.g. voting, freedom of press), rights of the self are limited when it comes to blasphemy, sexual orientations or gender relations, because they are seen as an impingement on the morality of the political community. This tension between ‘self and community’ is a challenge even in well-established democracies. Many analysts have pointed out that the polarisation of the political debate in the 2016 American presidential elections reflects the social, economic and cultural divides that plague the country. In other words, Trump voters largely come from Middle America, left behind by the growth of the service-based economy, and whose lifestyle is scorned and frowned upon (often called ‘white trash’ or ‘redneck’). We can go one step further and argue that this political split also derives from the tension between the validation of the self and the interests of the community, especially when religion is at stake.

In the case of Muslim states, not all countries are characterised by the same level of tension between self and community, nor do they address it the same way. Nonetheless, it is evident that
the self remains limited by the fate and boundaries of the religious community, which overlap with
the boundaries of the national and/or political community. For this reason, political Islam is much
broader in scope than Islamic political parties. In fact, it is a foundational element of modern politi-
cal identities framed by the nation-state (Cesari, 2018). The distinction between political Islam as
culture and Islamism as ideology can help solve the riddle (Williams, 1996).

Islam as culture refers to a set of taken-for-granted assumptions shared by a group about one’s
duty to God and to society. The political influence of such a standpoint is effective without the
active awareness of those experiencing it and it does not systematically translate into political
parties or competition for power. In the case of Muslim countries, the modern political cosmol-
ogy brought by the nation-state has deeply altered the status of Islam vis-à-vis political power.
The nation-state has created an alignment between belonging to Islam, national membership and
political power in ways unknown in premodern Muslim empires. As such, this configuration
creates a connection between Islam and citizenship by establishing Islam as the parameter of public
morality for Muslim and non-Muslims, believers and non-believers alike. Take for example, the
current (2018) absurd use in Egyptian political rhetoric of the term ‘Islamic sharia’ by all prota-
gonists from secular to Islamic, usually to discuss part of state law that specifically deals with Islam.
If the sharia has to be qualified as Islamic it means that it is first secular state law or the law of the
land. Political Islam as culture is the bedrock on which political actors can ideologically compete
through partisan divisions, including Islamic parties, which explains why these parties can lose (as
in Indonesia) without endangering political Islam as culture.

The ingrained conviction that the nation and Islam are intertwined, and that politics must
follow some rules inspired by Islam, is shared by a majority of citizens across the secular/relig-
ious divide. A study published by the Pew Research Center in 2013 reveals that 74 percent of
Egyptians agree that sharia should be made the official law, with 74 percent believing that it
should apply to both Muslims and non-Muslims (note that in historical Caliphates, sharia was
applied only to Muslims) (Wormald, 2013). While most respondents accept Islamic prescriptions
in civil law, they do not agree about the expansion of sharia to other domains like criminal law.
This disagreement is revelatory of the gap between Islam as political culture and Islam as
ideology: Islam as culture is a moral feature of political life, while Islam as an ideology results in
political tensions and competition among different groups who want to either keep the status
quo, remove Islamic legal prescriptions or expand them. For example, as previously discussed,
Ennahda in Tunisia has been very keen to remove sharia from the new constitution and has
renounced legal sanctions based on Islamic law, like blasphemy or even female inheritance. On
the other hand, Islamic groups on the right of Ennahda are opposing these changes. All political
actors agree that Islam is a key feature of the national community and the state, hence revealing
the Islamic dimension of their political culture.

Political Islam is also a resource for the state to shape and control the citizenry. In What is
Political Islam? (2018), I have shown that across Muslim countries state policies are very active in
defining right and wrong in religious matters. Most states, to varying degrees, have utilised
Islamic references to forge the public morality of the national community, and to define who is
a good and who is a bad citizen.

Conclusion

Could Islamic political cultures evolve towards more inclusive forms of civil religion in the
future? Judging by the polls mentioned above, a significant majority of Muslim citizens would
think so. More generally, it seems that the more independent the religion is from the state, the
higher the probability for a more inclusive, pluralist approach to civil society. Nonetheless, the
current regional and international contexts, along with high concerns about security, tend to push all states and even citizens in the opposite direction: towards more control and regulation of religion.

Notes

1 For example in Tunisia, since the Jasmine Revolution, the most prominent secular parties include: the Democratic Modernist Pole (PDM), Ettakatol (the Democratic Forum for Work and Liberties), the Democratic Progressive Party (PDP) and the Congress for the Republic (CPR), each of which holds a varying stance on references to Islam in the constitution, but all stress the freedom of religion.

2 Authoritarianism in Turkey has been brought about by a series of institutional changes introduced by Erdoğan, during both his time as prime minister and president. These changes include the trying of Erdoğan’s opponents in courts and the manipulation of the legal system to jail journalists and force changes in ownership in the media industry in order to exert control over the press. In 2015, Erdoğan ‘debased Turkey’s electoral laws to ensure the passage of a referendum on constitutional amendments’ which granted extraordinary powers to the presidency (Cook 2016, 2018). The scale of these actions intensified after the attempted military coup of July 2016, since when Erdoğan has governed under a state of emergency. Erdoğan’s victory in the 2018 presidential and parliamentary elections has afforded him new powers to vastly extend his authoritarian rule. After a controversial referendum in 2017 which had the support of 51 percent of voters, the post of prime minister was abolished and parliament was weakened. In addition, the president was given the power to intervene in the country’s legal system, impose a state of emergency, and directly appoint top officials, such as ministers and vice-presidents. The new system, which Erdoğan justified as empowering him to strengthen Turkey’s weak economy and to defeat Kurdish rebels, was widely criticised for its lack of checks and balances, leading to opposition presidential candidate, Muharrem Ince, describing Turkey as entering a dangerous period of ‘one-man rule’.

3 The Majallah Code, adopted in 1956 under Bourguiba, grants equality of husband and wife in matters of marriage and divorce and has been further liberalised since then.

References


