

Book Reviews

Temptations of Power: Islamists & Illiberal Democracy in a New Middle East. By Shadi Hamid. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 280. ISBN 978-0-19931405-8.

Reviewer: Elfatih A. Abdelsalam, Department of Political Science, International Islamic University Malaysia. E-mail: elfatih@iium.edu.my

In 1989, Francis Fukuyama famously announced the “end of history.” The Berlin Wall had fallen; liberal democracy had won. But what of ‘illiberal’ democracy – the idea that popular majorities, working through the democratic process, might reject gender equality, religious freedom, and other norms that Western democracies take for granted? Nowhere has such considerations become more relevant than in the Middle East, where the uprisings of 2011 swept the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups to power.

In *Temptations of Power*, Shadi Hamid advances a new understanding of how Islamist movements change over time. He puts forward the bold thesis that repression had “forced” Islamists to moderate their politics, work in coalitions, de-emphasize Islamic law, and set aside the dream of an Islamic state. However, democratic openings in the 1980s – and again during the Arab Spring – pushed Islamists back toward their original conservatism. With the uprisings of 2011, Islamists found themselves in an enviable position, but one for which they were unprepared. Groups like the Brotherhood combine the features of both political parties and religious movements, leading to an inherent tension they have struggled to resolve. However pragmatic they may be, their ultimate goal remains the Islamization of society.

This book is informed by hundreds of hours of interviews, discussions, and informed conversations with mainstream Islamists as well as Salafis across the region, primarily in Egypt and Jordan, as well as in Tunisia. The author makes extensive references to these

interviews, which are often candid and revealing, offering an account of events that provides new perspectives to Western and Arab observers alike. It seems that the author has chosen to focus on these interviews because he is interested not only in whether Islamist groups change in perspective but also in the how and the why. For this reason, he focused his attention on leaders as well as activists who were privy to decision-making (p. 35). In Egypt, for instance, the author met up with many Brotherhood leaders who could have, at any moment, been whisked away to prison.

In Jordan, the situation was not quite as dire. Still, Brotherhood leaders there felt under-appreciated and, this too led to its own kind of 'openness'. The Jordanian movement housed two competing factions, dubbed the "hawkes" and "doves". Unlike the Brotherhood in Egypt, which placed a priority on closing ranks, Jordan's Islamists were a more raucous bunch, and did not seem particularly interested in pretending otherwise.

Tunisian Islamists, like all Islamists, have an "Islamic project", but their project looks different from that of their Egyptian and Jordanian counterparts. This is partly because the society of which they are a component has diverged so significantly from regional norms. What Tunisia has that most others in the region do not have are strong, vibrant – and unabashedly secular – civil society organisations, media outlets, and opposition parties. Even the most mild, symbolic sort of "Islamisation" will face considerable resistance at every turn. Tunisia was deeply affected by the French notion that religion should be entirely separate from politics (in sharp contrast to the Anglo-Saxon model). The important point here is that context and constraints matter. Tunisia was one of the environments most inhospitable to Islamists. Due to that, Tunisian Ennahda has long been regarded as one of the most "moderate" Islamist movements in the region (p. 34).

As long as the battle over the role of religion in public life continues, Islamist parties in countries as diverse as Egypt, Tunisia, and Jordan will remain an important force whether in the ranks of opposition or the halls of power. But what are the key factors driving their evolution? A timely and provocative reassessment, Hamid's account serves as an essential compass for those trying to understand where the region's varied Islamist groups come from and where they might be headed.

Who are the Islamists? What are the boundaries of their politics? And what decides whether they should be moderate or become extreme? These are questions of great import which this book addresses with clarity and erudition. Hamid advances a bold, counter intuitive thesis about the Muslim Brotherhood's trajectory: that political repression before the Arab Spring forced moderation and that electoral victory in its aftermath brought on illiberalism and failure. Even those who disagree will have to take on Hamid's arguments about the centrality of ideology.

This book takes both a chronological and thematic approach to the topic at hand. In the first part of the book, Hamid discusses the behaviour of Islamist groups in opposition as they faced intensifying repression. He surveys how the Islamists' experiences under autocracy shaped their behaviour, and what that tells us about how they perceive and respond to various political pressures and threats. Here he has chosen to focus on Egypt and Jordan, two countries that in the pre – 2011 period experienced both significant political openings as well as sharp increases in repression.

The book then moves to another shock – the 2011 uprisings. In Egypt, Hamid notes a striking shift from one of the worst periods of anti-Islamist repression to an unprecedented democratic opening, where the Muslim Brotherhood found itself free to operate as never before. The pre – and post – revolution contrasts arise even starker in the case of Tunisia's Islamists. In Egypt as well as in most other Arab countries, the repression was bad, to be sure, but it was never total. In Tunisia, the Ben Ali regime had eliminated its Islamist opposition in the early 1990s, to the extent that Ennahada ceased to exist in any real sense. After Ben Ali's fall, Tunisia's Islamists, quite literally, had to start from scratch.

Foreign policy experts have long had a blind spot regarding political Islam, failing to understand or appreciate the complex interplay between a deeply rooted vision of a power society and the competing demands of democratic legitimacy and constitutional liberalism. *Temptations of Power* leaves us no excuse for continued ignorance. It is a nuanced, carefully researched, and engaging analysis that draws on history, culture, political theory, and theology to illuminate contemporary politics across the Middle East and North Africa. This book is a welcome contribution to the debate on the past, present, and future of Islamism across the Middle East.