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## Religion And Politics In Arab Transitions – Analysis

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Written by: [FRIDE](#)

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By [Barah Mikail](#)

Islamist parties, excluded from the political sphere for much of the last decade, are now coming to the forefront of Arab politics. The electoral victories of Ennahda in Tunisia and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt suggest that the future of Arab politics will be dominated by decision-makers with faith-based political agendas. But the part that religion should play in the new political orders of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, and how its involvement might be shaped in law and practice, remains the subject of controversy and debate.

The role of religion in Arab politics will be determined by the people of the region. Religious parties and movements cannot be excluded from the political process. But the success of faith-based movements at the polls can exacerbate social tensions. Recent electoral results seem to indicate that strict secularism will not be an option for the new Arab states in the near future. It is yet to be seen which formula of faith-based politics emerging democracies will adopt, on the spectrum between Iranian-style theocracy or Turkish religion- inflected secularism.

The line between religion and ethnicity, culture and tradition is not always clear. It is important, however, to distinguish between religions, such as Islam and Christianity, and faith-based political ideologies, such as Islamism and fundamentalist Christianity. Whereas religion is a matter of personal identity, ideologies serve a political agenda. This policy brief will explore the role of religion and faith-based ideology in Arab transitions. And it will try to draw some lessons from other countries and regions on the different roles religion can play in a society's path towards democracy.



## RELIGION IN NORTH AFRICAN TRANSITIONS

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Long before the 'Arab Spring', religion was recognised as a major force in Arab politics. The electoral results of 2011 confirm that (relatively) free elections in the Arab world show strong public support for political Islam, as already seen in Algeria in 1990, Egypt in 2005 and the Palestinian territories in 2006.

In 2011, new Islamist parties emerged and previously established ones consolidated their positions. In Tunisia, Ennahda won the greatest number of parliamentary seats. In Egypt, the Muslim Brothers and several Salafist parties together accounted for two thirds of the Legislative Assembly. The role of Islamist forces in Yemen remains uncertain, but their influence in Libya is clear. In Jordan and Morocco, Islamist political actors are gaining in importance. The victory of Morocco's Justice and Development Party (PJD) in the country's 2011 elections led to the appointment of the country's first Islamist prime minister.

The fact that it has a Muslim majority does not mean that the Arab world must automatically embrace Islamist rule or reject secularism. Islamists are benefiting from their former exclusion and/or persecution by ousted leaders. The search for strong alternatives to the old regime has encouraged people to support faith-based parties. Islamist movements' history of opposition to and persecution by the recently toppled authoritarian regimes has given them credibility and legitimacy, which they used effectively during their electoral campaigns. Meanwhile, liberal and secular parties may have lost ground for not opposing the former leaders strongly enough.

For decades, leaders from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) controlled the religious sphere in their countries, either by influencing religious leaders, as in the case of al-Azhar in Egypt and the Muftis in Saudi Arabia and Syria, or by direct interference, as in Iraq under Saddam Hussein, as well as in Jordan, Algeria, Morocco and Libya. But efforts to eradicate religious-based political parties and the instrumentalisation of religion did not diminish religion's popular appeal. In the public imagination, religion became the trademark of movements that challenged authoritarian rulers, who persecuted them out of fear. These religious groups' defiant stance brought them a popularity that was further augmented by their charity and social work. Islamists presented their charity activities as filling the gaps left by the government's neglect. For them, this was evidence that religious movements were best able to provide relief for social and economic ills, as expressed in the Brotherhood slogan 'Al-Islam Houa al-Hall', 'Islam is the solution'. So, when the Arab Spring began to sweep through the region, Islamist parties could make a case that they were the only credible alternatives to authoritarian power. This image, combined with access to foreign funds mostly from Qatar and Saudi Arabia, gave the Islamists an advantage in the ensuing elections.

The current Islamist momentum does not necessarily mean that religious precepts are set to dominate the Arab world. In Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, tensions between secular and Islamist actors still exist. Many secularists and liberals doubt the Islamists' democratic commitment, while Islamist parties continue to try to reassure their domestic opponents and the international community of their democratic credentials. In Tunisia, Ennahda insists on a fundamental role for religious rules in the country, even as secular parties reject this direction. But parliamentary debates on the future Tunisian Constitution must begin before concrete issues are decided. In Egypt, too, efforts to draft a new framework for governance are under way. The Muslim Brothers control the parliamentary committees for external affairs (diplomacy, defence and energy) and Salafis are at the head of the committees for economy, education and religious affairs. This suggests that Egypt will most likely evolve towards more conservative rules and an Islamisation of social life. In Libya, the National Transitional Council (NTC) has insisted from the outset on the importance of Sharia for the country, which may give some indication of the influence Islamists are likely to have on Libya's future.

Drafting a new constitution gives new deputies the chance to determine the degree to which religion will affect their country's future political, legal and social system. New provisions will have to comply with international law as well as taking into account the rules of Islam. This should allow a break with former authoritarian laws while ensuring, as far as democratically possible, compliance with Islamic values. Achieving this balance will be a very tough



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challenge. Even under previous nominally secular regimes, some social issues were based on the rules of Islam, for example, inheritance, polygamy, family code and minority rights, with particular implications for women's rights. In the current debates, the most contentious issues include the right to sell and drink alcoholic beverages, women's wearing of the veil, suspension of activities during prayers, religious instruction and respecting freedom of belief.

Western partners typically view a strict separation between state and religion as a necessary prerequisite for a democratic political system. But this vision is not viable in the MENA context, where religion cannot at the moment be excluded from the public sphere. The divide between faith-based and secular political actors in the Middle East is an illusion. Progressive and nominally secular parties do not isolate themselves from religious beliefs. Any attempt to definitively exclude religion from public and political life would be met with harsh public criticism. Neither is secularism necessarily desirable for the region, since religion can serve as a powerful force for national cohesion, for example, in providing common ground between conservatives and liberals. This is due in part to the fact that, in Islamic belief, affiliation to the Islamic community (Umma) transcends any ties to a nation-state.

## RELIGION AND TRANSITION: INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCES

Past international experiences provide some lessons on how to balance the democratic rule of law with religious norms and traditions. They can also shed some light on the underlying pitfalls of this process. But drawing conclusions from past transition processes is risky, since countries in transition rarely undergo exactly analogous processes. So, while some common points can be identified, it is important to be aware of the specificity of each individual nation.

**Transition to democracy often leads to modernisation, but modernisation does not have to come through secularisation.** In former Yugoslavia, excluding religion from the political sphere did not lead people to abandon their religiously informed political views. When the Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia disintegrated, formerly coexisting communities found in religion a common marker to fuel their mutual animosity. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croats were automatically identified as Catholics, Orthodox as Serbs, and Muslims as Bosnians. Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore all went through transition processes without completely excluding religion from the political sphere. In Turkey, despite Atatürk's secular orientation, Islam remains a strong reference point both for the population and for the incumbent AK party.

**The degree of religiosity of a society will influence the role religion plays in a transition.** But a strong role for religion does not necessarily impede the consolidation of a democratic order. Authoritarian regimes abolished ideological trends informed by religion, but a healthy democracy allows for a wide range of views. In Indonesia, the post-Suharto period since 1998 has enabled greater tolerance of religious beliefs, including in politics, even though the situation remains fragile due to regular violence and the marginalisation of some religious communities. But pluralism, however imperfect, lets Indonesian political parties refer to religious beliefs. In South Africa, political parties take account of Christian (African Christian Democratic Party) and Muslim (al-Jama'ah) values in defining their programmes. In Poland, Catholicism plays an important role in society and the Catholic Church has popularity and prestige. Some political parties, such as the Catholic-National Movement and the National People's Movement, refer specifically to Christian values. A high degree of religiosity in some societies, for instance Mauritania and Pakistan, has enabled a greater number parties with platforms based on religion appear during transition. Even predominantly non-practicing societies, parties with religious perspectives can have some appeal (see for example the Albanian Christian Democratic Party, the Slovenian People's Party, or the Christian Democratic Union in Latvia). But the chances of success for such parties are higher in very religious and/or conservative countries. In Turkey, a politically secular country, it took eight decades before a religious-based party took power.

**Minorities' attempts to achieve political gains during transition processes may lead to segregation into religiously defined communities, including through**

**territorial fragmentation. This can increase the risk of sectarian tensions.** The risk of segregation is especially high when minorities and communities are based on religion (such as Shi'a groups in a mostly Sunni environment or Protestants in a Catholic environment), on language (like Berber languages and Arabic, or Flemish and French), or on ethnicity (Kurds in an Arab or Turkish environment, or Tutsis among Hutus). This situation has occurred in Iraq, where the transition process since 2003 has brought about a territorial separation between mostly Sunni Kurds and Sunni and Shi'a Arabs. In Turkey, Kurds are still fighting for their rights and have formed their own political parties. The Turkish State continues to refuse their demand for recognition of their distinctive ethnic identity. In Northern Ireland, tensions still exist between Catholics and Protestants. In Afghanistan, the current chaotic transition period has not allowed national ethnic and religious communities, like the Shi'a Hazaras and Sunni Pashtuns, to build shared perspectives. In Nigeria, violent confrontation between Christians and Sunni Muslims is common. The more a country opens itself to pluralism, the more its communities are likely to try to strengthen their positions. This can eventually result in animosity and mutual tension. So, to allow pluralism to succeed and avoid sectarian conflict, it is important that countries spend sufficient time on mutual confidence-building and take determined political steps to ensure peaceful coexistence.

**Religious issues are often closely linked with power politics. Various actors use religion to enhance their own political power.** In the 1980s in Latin America, the Catholic Church played a key role in transitions from authoritarian regimes to democracy. The Church initially supported the National Reorganisation Process in Argentina (1976-1983). It kept its distance from Pinochet's rule in Chile, but stayed closer to popular movements for change in El Salvador. National churches even mediated between conflict actors in Argentina, Chile, El Salvador and Guatemala. In Turkey, the ascendancy of the Gülen movement, an influential Sufi Islamic brotherhood, shows religion as a powerful prop for the political ambitions of theologians.

Some conservative governments provide financial support to religious institutions in order to enhance their countries' influence through these groups' proselytising activities. Evangelical organisations in Latin America have converted 30 per cent of Guatemalans, 20 per cent of Brazilians and 10 per cent of Venezuela's inhabitants to Evangelical Protestantism. Many of these groups receive funds from the US and other governments. Saudi Arabia funds Islamic religious centres and mosques around the world, for example in Argentina, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Kosovo. Iran is said to be developing its influence through financing Shi'a-related initiatives in, for instance, Senegal, Iraq and Afghanistan.

**Cultural and religious determinism is a myth.** Prosperity and strong religiosity are not incompatible, and no religion or belief is more favourable to peaceful transition to democracy than another. Genuine democratisation does not unavoidably mean the triumph of secularism. Similarly, theories that consider Islam as by nature incompatible with progress, pluralism and democracy are mistaken. Political parties that base their programmes on religious considerations are not opposed to wealth, prosperity, the free market or liberalism. Christian Democrats in Chile, Germany, Ireland, Poland and Spain as well as Islamic parties in Indonesia, Malaysia and Turkey generally promote healthy economic perspectives and growth. With globalisation, economies have become interconnected and countries have had to minimise the impact religious considerations have on their political and economic decisions. Some predominantly Christian Western European countries like Greece, Portugal and Spain and some Eastern European countries, such as Poland and the Czech Republic, performed well during and after their transition periods. Other similarly religious European societies, such as Albania, Bulgaria and Romania, encountered more difficulties. Israel's economy does well, independently of religious considerations. In the Muslim world, the economies of Bangladesh, Egypt and Tunisia are struggling, whereas Indonesia and Malaysia are thriving. In Christian Brazil, Shinto/Buddhist Japan and Muslim Singapore, transition and modernity have succeeded without any direct link to the country's majority religion.

## CONCLUSION

Religion has a big part to play in the MENA region. Religious leaders and influences

dominate in Tunisia and Egypt, and the same thing could occur in Libya and Yemen. Elections in Morocco have confirmed the ascendancy of Islamist leadership in that country. Lebanon may stand as an exception, even though religion is a strong referent for its 18 coexisting communities. For now, Western- style secularism is not a realistic option in these countries. Integrating religious principles into a genuinely democratic order will be among the greatest challenges for these societies in the decades to come.

This does not mean, however, that religion will remain the dominant political factor in the long run. Religious parties have benefited from their status as strong alternatives to former regimes, but without the contrast of the authoritarian regimes they have replaced, they will be judged on their results. If they succeed in charting a better path for their countries, they may hold power for years. But if they fail, they will be held accountable. The next round of elections in the young Arab democracies will be a strong indicator of the likely longevity of the Islamist political current. The funds that the international community makes available to countries in transition may also determine the success of the currently emerging Islamist rulers. And it could affect their policies, depending on whether the international community insists on conditionality in return for its aid.

The objectives and ideological and political influences of these parties may cause them to adopt any of a range of political models, from the so-called ‘Turkish model’, where religious freedom is guaranteed even though a religious party is in power, to a theocratic model such as that of Iran. That said, in the decades since the Iranian Revolution, societies have evolved considerably, and so has Islamist ideology itself. Popular demands for change have been based on standards that include the recognition of religious and political pluralism. An increasing majority of the population in many Arab countries is young, and few of these young people seem eager to merge politics and religion at an institutional level. So, evolution towards a Saudi or Iranian model is possible, but rigid theocratic structures seem unlikely to prevail in the long term.

The most urgent challenge for the MENA region is building new and modern states that guarantee citizenship and human rights, including freedom of belief. To ensure the success of this endeavour, the new leaders need to aim for transparent and fair parliamentary debates. And they must heed the international community’s advice and recommendations on peaceful transition and good governance, the maintenance of free and open democratic processes and the improvement of economic conditions.

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