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▶ To cite this version:

Lahouari Addi. Islamicist Utopia and Democracy. The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 1992, N°524, pp.120-130. halshs-00398833

HAL Id: halshs-00398833
https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00398833

Submitted on 25 Jun 2009

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Islamicist Utopia and Democracy

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The Annals of the American Academy of Political And Social Science, november 1992

ABSTRACT:

This article addresses democratic construction in Islamic societies throughout the Algerian experience. Its main conclusions can be summarized as follows. First, in all Muslim societies, there exists an Islamicist Utopia that stands as an obstacle not only to democracy but also to political modernity. Until now, this Utopia has been contained only by repression that finally impedes the democratization. Second, Islam presents itself as a public religion that participates in the legitimization of political power. The democratic ideology, however, is compatible with religion to the extent that it is lived as a private concern. Finally, the Islamicist Utopia and the public aspect of Islam aim at maintaining society's communal structures. They refuse to make the singularity of the political arena independent and reject differentiation through politics within a society that claims to be fraternal.

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Texte intégral

In the years following the independence of much of the Third World in the 1950s and 1960s, political sociology examined developing polities through the concepts of nation building and state building. The object of this examination focused on the emergence of a political center or central power that structured. Its periphery in order to create a homogeneous nation and a developed economy. The accent was placed on the autonomy of central power vis-à-vis the exterior world and on its will and capacity to create a national society through the process of modernization and industrial development.

The record of the decades since independence, however, has shown that this approach overestimated the capacity of the political center to develop a modern economy and to begin the creation of a society, in the sense of Ferdinand Tönnies. Scholars realized that the central power, itself belonging to the historical reality it sought to transform, came to be governed by the dominant political logic. Setting itself up as a self-contained end, it created an obstacle to its proclaimed objectives. In the process, modernization called into question the dominant

ideological interests and social structures, and the central power followed its own interests and entered into the collective image in order to ensure its own survival.

The concepts of modernization and of nation building—after Apter and Abdelmalek—remained incomplete because they were developed separately from the question of power, which is the basic question of political science and therefore the essential element in political analysis. After noting that the political center is privatized, that is, considered to be a private patrimony and thus creating the notion of neopatrimonialism, political sociology leapt over the problem by focusing on the concept of democracy building. In order to understand what was going on, all that the analyst had to do was emerge from the neopatrimonial logic, face the question of pluralism, and introduce the laws of free competition and free enterprise. But the analyst forgot that neopatrimonialism was the political effect of a historic situation where the central power was privatized for ideopolitical reasons, making the central power the object of public competition. Deprivatizing it will be possible only if the ideopolitical factors lose their relevance and dominance.

Political citizenship and public religion

The example of Algeria shows that democratization was conceived as an operation to justify the disengagement of the state from the economy. But democratization is above all a political and ideological struggle; it implies the emergence of citizenship, with liberty. Without a central power to protect public liberty and the exercise of citizenship, there is no democracy. But in Algeria the team in power, delegitimized by the economic and social failures for which it was responsible, could not impose the authority of the state over the dominant ideological interests and the logic of the collective image that refused individual autonomy and its juridical political expression as a subject of law. The citizen is a legal subject of law who obeys civil laws born out of reasoned public debate. If the individual were to obey only other individuals, depend on the whim of the prince, submit to laws handed down from time immemorial, there would be no citizenship. The citizen is a free person vis-à-vis his or her peers, living and dead. This liberty is no caprice destined to diminish the citizen's human dignity, culture, religion, or history. Indeed, it permits the development, expansion, and liberation of all the potentialities within the human being.

In a society confronted with the process of modernization, the emergence of citizenship arouses suspicion among the religious. However, religious faith is true and sincere only when it is lived in a free social milieu. If the exterior appearances of faith were imposed by social constraint, there would be an unimaginable number of hypocrites among/sincere believers. Religious awareness will accept political citizenship only after historical experience shows that citizenship does not diminish religion in the strict sense. Social constraint does not come from religion, however; it is, rather, the effect of the public character of religion, manifested as a social fact of the group and not as a spirituality belonging to the private intimacy of the individual. Religion becomes a political order to which one aspires, a political order whose coming is resisted by immoral beings lacking respect for the word of God.

This political order is not the coming of the kingdom of God on earth or the preparation of believing souls for eternal life. Islam does not permit this fundamentalism. The Islamicists are not fundamentalists, and, although they proclaim the contrary, they do not confuse the spiritual and the temporal. Their objective is to construct not a divine order but a human order that obeys the prescriptions of the sacred test. This objective, if realized, will not ensure the

individual's place in paradise but will permit better life on earth. Access to paradise is an individual and not a collective task.

This spiritual predisposition is shared by all believers in the land of Islam; in other words, Muslim societies are pregnant with a religious utopia from which they would like to draw political order. It is an Islamicist Utopia, which stands as an obstacle not only to democracy but also to political modernism in general—at least in the latter's Western formulation. This utopia, latent in all Muslim societies, is politically active in those countries where great expectations have been disappointed, where the conditions of daily life are at the limit of the tolerable, and where repression can go no further. These three conditions applied in Algeria under the rule of Chadli Bendjedid.

But the Islamicist Utopia is not an accident of circumstances; on the contrary, it belongs to the long term of history. The Islamic world held itself apart from the social debates that the Renaissance unleashed in Europe. Untouched by the dynamic of social criticism, it remained faithful to apologetic historiography. The Islamic renaissance, or Nahda, which took place in the second half of the nineteenth century beginning with Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, marks the beginning of the intellectual movement's attempt to integrate faith and reason. But, confronted with the expansion of colonialism, the Nahda fell back upon mythification of the past and apologetic discourse. Its last thinker, Rashid Keda, had Hasan al Banna, founder of the Muslim Brotherhood movement in Egypt, as a disciple. Thus colonization did not help matters, since modernism was delegitimized by the very fact that it had brought with it colonial domination. This explains why, with the exception of a few isolated Arab intellectuals, whose positions were suspect, the paradigms of the Enlightenment had such feeble echoes in Muslim societies. In the rare cultivated milieu of the national liberation movements, the question was put off until after independence, which was supposed to ignite the dynamic of modernism automatically.

Nevertheless, a few decades after independence, national disenchantment appeared. Modernity had not been ignited at the desired speed or in the desired conditions. During the first years of independence—the 1950s and the 1960s—popular Marxism, at least in the universities, opposed the influence of Hobbes, Rousseau, Kant, de Tocqueville, natural law, and political freedom. It delegitimized them, labeling them "ideologies in service to the bourgeoisie, which produce alienation and exploitation."The Islamicist Utopia became politically active, therefore, in a social and political context marked by a double disappointment: hopes invested in independence going unfulfilled and dissipation of the illusions of "developmentalisrn."

In this perspective, the system of education, in its legitimate task of teaching the past, reactivates the epic combat of Islam. In reaction against the West, the past is taught without any critical sense. Its specificity is emphasized to the detriment of universality. Historic events in the origins of modernity are minimized because they do not belong to the history of Islam. The discovery of America—why, in fact, did the Muslims not take part in it?—the Christian Reformation and the wars that followed it; the English, American, Russian, and French revolutions; the recomposition of national borders in Europe in the nineteenth century; the rise of Nazism in Germany—all these major events are considered foreign to the Muslim historical experience and therefore relegated to secondary importance. It is as if the Muslims did not consider themselves as taking part in the universalizing historical process and as if they sought to remake their history without drawing lessons from other people, especially people who set in march the process of modernity and the process of domination of which

Muslims—along with other people— have been the victim. From the point of view of Islamic sensitivity, there is no modern reading of the American Revolution, the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution, and Hitlerism. Obviously, this is not a task for high school teachers. It belongs to the university, which should produce historical works from which the public school system can draw its lessons. In the absence of such research, the educational system spreads myths that deform the perception of the contemporary historical process, a deformation that results in a loss of the sense of reality. The system of mass education spreads the myths that feed the Utopia, which is itself repressed when it expresses itself politically.

Muslim society is thus enclosed in a logic of ever-deepening repression. In this context, any opening to pluralism and democratization is condemned to failure, because the historical and ideological conditions for the privatization of public power have not been reached, Democratization threatens to change radically the verbal mode of legitimizing the neopatrimonial system. Historical legitimacy risks being replaced by religious legitimacy, but both put central authority above individuals and historical time; both refuse political citizenship and attack the dignity of individuals, making them administrative subjects who bow as the official vehicle passes by. Historical and religious legitimacy are the modality by which the dead exercise their dictatorship on the living. In the twentieth century there is only one legitimacy that conforms to the dignity of the free individual, electoral legitimacy. But electoral legitimacy is an inseparable part of democratic ideology, and the latter requires religion to lose the public character that predisposes it to be a basis of legitimacy and thus a political resource in the competition for power. Without democratic ideology, the political party presenting itself as most Muslim—or perceived as such—would be assured a crushing victory in democratic elections, and this would inaugurate the end of the democratic process.

Political modernity and public religion

It is necessary to show how political modernity is incompatible with the public character of religion and how modernity is built on the depoliticization of religion. But the notion of depoliticizing religion has a precise content, for the idea that religion must be separated from politics proceeds from a voluntarist, naive, and even religiously hostile vision. Clearly, every social act and collective or public manifestation contains a political dimension. Islam, like any other religion, contains a political dynamic that is impossible to deny. In Christianity, the church does not permit a believer outside the ecclesiastical hierarchy to speak to others in the name of religion. To the contrary, in Islam, the political aspect is limited to no institution, thus permitting any believer to claim religious authority and use it for temporal purposes over other individuals. For reasons deriving from the structure of its dogma, the political character of Islam is obvious. In addition, this character is emphasized by the recent history of Muslim societies struggling against colonial domination, during which Islam was mobilized as a political resource and a factor of identity—so much as to become a constructive element in national ideology and a constituent of nationality. Consequently, it is no longer possible to call for the separation of religion and politics.

But modernity does not require the separation of religion and politics or the marginalization of religion as a precondition. Nobody has the right to prevent the mosque from condemning corruption and arbitrariness or emphasizing the duty to assist widows and orphans. It is even desirable for the mosque to have moral authority in society, in order to appeal to the preservation of human values—fraternity, solidarity, and justice—that accompany the divine message and to denounce flagrant restrictions on human rights and social inequalities. But for

the mosque to incarnate this moral authority, it must remain outside of the competition for power. That is, modernity and, more particularly, democratic ideology are incompatible with religion's having a partisan character.

Indeed, under modernity and democratic ideology, public debate about individual autonomy, political citizenship, juridical equality, and political liberty would be considered to be undermined were a party to claim divine authority in making its argument. Democracy means free elections and alternance in power, but it is also the public exercise of reason, as Habermas would say, on all issues concerning the individual and his or her relations with the community. Political parties that compete in elections try to convince their voters on the basis of supposedly rational argumentation. Of course, these parties defend the ideological interests of the group. But these interests, frequently not perceived as such, are theoretically rationalized in order to be presented as in the common interest of all members of society. Political debate, public in its essence, has the purpose of making group interests and political programs attractive from the point of view of a broad rationality. The voter is supposed to choose, according to reason, the program most satisfactory to his or her own interests and vision of things. Without open public debate, without reference to the rationality of social choice, there can be no democracy.

If religion as such intervenes in the debate, that is to say, if the protagonists claim divine authority, there will no longer be debate or democracy. For citizens, most of whom are believers, cannot opt against the religious prescriptions for society. Once there is a religious party in the electoral competition or a party presenting itself as such, there can be no free national choice on the part of any voter who cannot imagine voting against the divine message. Human nature being what it is, there might even be voters who would vote for religious parties in order to assuage their conscience or to atone for bad behavior in the past (or in the future).

It is not the purpose of the electoral act to be transformed into a religious rite. It is not Islam as a text that transforms the electoral act into a rite; it is the culture of the believer, his or her capacity or incapacity to separate the sacred from the profane. In a society where the level of political culture is low, the theological content of the sacred text is altered. In such a case, the finality of the profane act is transformed; the profane becomes sacralized and the sacred profaned.

There is no contradiction, of course, between textual Islam—the Quran and the *sunna*—and modernism. The contradiction is with the way Islam is lived and practiced today. But a religion's public character is not inevitable or inherent; it is a product of history. Without succumbing to the illusion of hindsight, it can be said that the public character of Islam results from the medieval interpretation of the religion, an interpretation that remains active and formally rejects the notion of political sovereignty—only God is sovereign. It rejects, consequently, the logic of juridical positivism; it rejects political freedom, the abyss of the civil state founded on the Hobbesian-Rousseauistic notion of social contract; in short, as Charles Butterworth notes in his article in this volume, it rejects the modern construction of political life.

The Islamicist Utopia is not, however, merely a relic from the past. On the contrary, it expresses, in a contradictory manner, a desire to join with modernism, while at the same time assuring the survival of community values. The Islamicist utopia seeks to construct a City where values of solidarity, equality, and justice will dominate, with respect for the word of

God. That is, its goal is a City regulated not by politics— which showcase the ugliness of humankind—but by morality. Political parties are not the expression of preexisting divergences; in its view, they are the cause of these divergences. For the militant of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), for example, the so-called Berberist parties create the linguistic issues that serve as their stock in trade. Banning those parties, therefore, would be enough to make the issues go away. The same goes for all other parties that seek to divide the national community.

Economic battles and the ideological divergences that traverse Muslim societies would not exist except for the fact that humans have turned aside from the work of God. Let us come back to it, and we will once again become brothers, united by the love of God. The interest of the individual as well as the cupidity of the haves would stimulate the productivity of the workers, which would increase the riches to be shared. The Islamicist Utopia is rooted in this ethical-religious anthropological optimism and therefore refuses to establish social relations on a juridicalpolitical basis that implies the Kantian categories of civil law, rights and their subject, and individual will. To reorganize society on the basis of the anthropological pessimism of Hobbes, Spinoza, Kant, or Carl Schmitt would, for the Muslim consciousness, be a leap into the great unknown. The Islamicist Utopia exists only because the categories of political modernism have not been reworked in the mold of Arab-Islamic culture. But such a creation of modernism by way of Arab-Islamic culture is theoretically possible, for there is no reason—everything else kept the same—why democracy should be inherently Western and absolutism inherently Muslim.

Thus the Muslim world is now in the throes of a debate it missed in the wake of its decadence. But now it is not the venerated thinkers who are forcing the debate. It is being forced by the streets, violently, murderously. As in the past, the thinkers of al-Azhar continue to ponder the immutable rules of grammar and the placement of punctuation marks in the sacred texts, bypassing the fundamental questions. In Algeria, it is the FIS—the street—that poses, unwittingly, the essential questions about the reconstruction of political life in the context of local culture. The Algerian democratic experience would have shown that as long as the Islamicist Utopia remained popular, as long as it remained anchored in the collective imagination, it would constitute an obstacle to the influx of modern political categories without which democracy is impossible. This is why the democratic experience in Algeria would have been decisive for the whole Muslim world. Either it would have succeeded, and the Muslim world would have profited; or it would have failed, and the Muslim world would have returned either to the wasting of the oil patrimony in unproductive consumption or to international beggary.

Fraternal society as a refusal of change

The interruption of the electoral process—and probably of democracy building—in Algeria at best restores the situation before October 1988, when the country went out into the streets to protest government inefficiency. One may ask whether the defense of immediate interests and the fear of eventual sanctions against the ruling elite or the fear of political anarchy by themselves explain this interruption. There may well be deeper reasons related to the very perception of politics revealing fears of radical breaks with the past and historic changes. This does not mean that the arrival of the FIS to power would provoke a historic change in the FIS's view of itself as the single party of all Algerians; rather, it is itself the refusal to change from the single-party system of the National Liberation Front (FLN). But from the formal

point of view, by coming to power neither by riot nor by coup d'etat, the FIS would inaugurate a new period of political history for the country, a period that would have its own dynamic in the recomposition of political forces.

But the incumbent leaders did not have the imagination and the courage to enter into the movement of change. In this perspective, the banning of the FIS blocks change; for the FIS, as an organized movement, serves as a magnet for the ideology of the fraternal society. This magnet allows the protagonists to define themselves in relation to each other. Banning the FIS means that the ideology it bears will continue to dominate the entire political space and to be present in all of the political groups. For the FIS, far from being a party, is a sentiment, a prepolitical culture.

From this point of view, all Algerians are members of the FIS to the extent that we all swim in its prepolitical culture. The sense of historical perspective suggests that this prepolitical culture will crystallize itself into a movement expressing a Utopian sentiment, even if this movement takes power by democratic rules. Then, upon confronting the contradictions of social life, it will be repulsed to the point of losing any political meaning. It is through political competition, public debate, freedom of expression, and the practice of political citizenship that a large part of the electorate will come to realize that the FIS is only a sentiment and not a management tool of modern political life and social contradictions.

Electoral competition forces the actors to situate themselves politically in the logic of alternance, in a political space defined by ideological rivalries. Political programs are not merely a trick to conquer and occupy central power. Any attempt to recover the adversary becomes futile, because political adversaries clash and publicly declare themselves to be irreconcilable. The bitterness of their struggle does not affect civil peace, however, because the struggle is regulated by democratic institutions and sanctioned by universal suffrage within the framework of an alternance accepted by all. This political game supposes above all that the society is permeated by irreducible political cleavages and that these cleavages are interiorized by the actors. Such a political game also presupposes that the historical subjects of political modernity are in place and that they have a more or less clear awareness of theoretical categories through which they perceive and practice politics. That leading figures of the FLN easily join the FIS or that leaders of the FIS easily participate in power only shows that the actors do not obey a rationality of political modernity that presupposes the insurmountable ideological and political contradictions compatible only in democratic institutions and in alternance in state power.

The refusal of political differentiation is founded on political fraternalism that the interruption of the electoral process destroys. Because it does not conceive of a national collectivity that is irreconcilably divided, fraternalism raises the possibility of recovering the adversary of the moment, allying with him if he is intransigent or sharing power if he is sufficiently strong. One must not believe that political fraternalism is justified by a fear of recourse to physical coercion. To the contrary, to the extent that fraternalism denies the political character of social contradictions, it offers no institutional means of resolution and therefore opens the possibility of bloody riots. In a fraternal society, central power is not the subject of political competition; it is the expression of a momentary relation of force. Maintaining oneself in power or conquering it supposes the use of physical force and violence. Violence is a banal means of political regulation in a fraternal society, as differentiated from a democratic society where parties declare themselves irreconcilable political adversaries without destroying civil peace and citizens' lives, whatever their political opinions.

On the day after the elections of 26 December 1991, Algeria was confronted with the choice of opting either for the fraternal society that had prevailed to this point, with its ideological handicaps and its political lethargy, or for a democratic society, with its competition and implacable logic. It chose fraternal society twice. The first time, it gave the majority to the FIS, which is an expression par excellence of fraternal society; the second time, it stopped the electoral process. Henceforth the great party of fraternal society will have to be reconstructed on the remains of the FLN and the debris of the FIS. The result, necessarily a single party, will have to reproduce the past and put central authority above political competition. Obviously, this does not prevent absolutism, corruption, or— even less—bloody repression of the riots that will arise within the logic of fraternal society.

What to do? There are two possible choices. The first one is to modernize the economy so that the Islamicist utopia cannot be joined to the social discontent that gives it its imprint. For Algeria, this choice will require a radical shuffling of the team in power and financial resources to the tune of $50 billion, earmarked for restructuring the economy. A different team in power—vested with a vision of the future, developing the economy, and releasing a dynamic of accumulation—would have enough authority to effect the necessary ruptures and to transform the education system. The social base of the Islamicist Utopia would leave it a minority opinion expressed by a few firebrands whose startling actions would be human interest stories without any impact on the democratic functioning of political society.

The second choice would be to permit the democratic process to bring about its own termination, by carrying the Islamicists to power. For a utopia, there is no antidote like reality. Utopia is an attempt to replace the real with the imaginary. As long as it is expressed by an opposition party, it can be pertinent and efficacious. But once the party comes to power, it becomes reduced to reflecting reality—the harsh reality of concrete causality and human vice. History is the unhappy experiment. It has never followed the wise counsels of the Platonic sage. Westerners did not construct modernism and democracy with an ear to Hobbes, Rousseau, or Kant. Only after having suffered the tragic excesses of absolute power and tyranny, only after being instructed by Robespierre and Napoleon, did the consciousness of common interest prevail. The thinkers were not convoked until afterward, to provide the ideological justification for the new political order. That justification was traced back to Greek antiquity and primitive Christianity. Why could it not be found in the Islamic heritage as well?

It is clear that preference for the first or the second of these choices depends on the position of the chooser. If I, for example, were a Western politician, I would do anything to prevent the Islamicists from acceding to power, because that would provoke regional instability and threaten Western interests. For, after all, in the Islamicist discourse, the Evil Empire is the now-Christian, now atheist materialist West. If I were an army officer or a high bureaucrat, implicated in the past mismanagement of the state, I would mount a coup d'etat to prevent the Islamicists' accession. For, drunk with hatred for those whom they consider to be the enemies of God, would they not wish to throw some heads to the mob?

But I am neither a Western politician nor an officer of the Algerian army. I am an academic-Platonist, and the object of my reflection is the Islamicist utopia and its rootedness in society. As long as this utopia remains active, Algeria will twiddle its thumbs at the doorway of modernism. The Muslim consciousness will not awaken to modernism until after the clash between the Islamicist Utopia and the political realities of human anthropology occurs. At

what price? one might ask. To this I would be inclined to answer, "I am neither an officer of the Algerian army nor a Western politician."