

# The Rise of Political Islam: Factors and Issues

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## 1. Introduction

In the past 20 years or so, the rise of political Islam has drawn a great attention from mass media and academic societies. Even though it is variously dubbed, like Islamic fundamentalism, militant Islam, or political Islam, it all refers to the fact that a certain trend in Islamic movement has been increasingly concerned in politics and security matters in global dimension. According to Ankie Hoogvelt, the defining moment in this trend was no doubt the overthrow, in 1979, of the Shah's pro-western monarchy in Iran, and the establishment there of the modern world's first theocratic Islamic Republic.

Since then, the world has seen the ascendancy of a variety of new political Islamic groups in various parts of the Muslim world: Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Palestine, FIS in Algeria, Taleban in Afghanistan and NIF in Sudan, etc. Besides these new militant groups, other moderate Islamic groups, such as the long-lived Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, have been also expanding their influences newly through rather peaceful legal or popular movement approach.

Samuel Huntington describes this trend that the Islamic Resurgence is mainstream not extremist, pervasive not isolated. He contends that in the coming years "the great division among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural", and predicts that this resurgent Islam will be a major counterpart of what he calls as "Civilization Clashes" with the West. In the Western countries, it seems that the political Islam is especially associated with terrorism and consequently is regarded as a serious threat to the security of the people there.

The rise of political Islam can be ascribed to a lot of political, social and economic factors in domestic, regional and international arenas. The purpose of this essay is to look at the aspects of the rise of political Islam and to analyze some major factors to account for the phenomenon. And in so doing, it will also describe some issues ensuing from the rise of the political Islam.

## 2. Origin and Tenets of the Political Islam

Islam was a political religion from the very beginning. The Prophet Muhammad preached messages threatening the interests of the Establishment of Mecca at the time. So he came to fight holy wars with the ruling aristocracy, and finally won over them and setup a religious community, or Ummah. The Prophet himself was a political leader as well as a religious leader, and all his successors, or the Caliphs, took the same positions in the Islamic community. So Islam is essentially a religion that combines political and religious architecture in itself.

Then, how come we mention the Resurgence of political Islam? This has to do with the modern history of the Muslim world, which is characterized by the Western influences and Muslim responses. In 1924, the newly born Turkish Republic, a successor of the Ottoman Empire, abolished the Caliphate formally,

and adopted the policy of secularization. The Ottoman Empire was a universal state of the Muslim world at the time, but was demised in the wake of the First World War against the Western alliance. Almost all the leaders of Middle Eastern states, newly born in the territory of the former Ottoman Empire, have tried to modernize their countries by imitating the model of Western countries. They have tried to follow the secular state model, and have tried to confine Islam purely in the religious sphere.

This is the context in which recent Islamic movements connote political aspects, and thereby leading to the resurgence of political Islam. Political Islamic groups in these days defy the secularization policies of their governments, and advocate restoring the pure form of Islamic governance. They criticize their ruling elites as deviants from the pure path of Islam, and criticize the modernisation efforts as puppet mimicry of Western imperialism. Even further, they contend that such modernisation efforts lay the basis of social decay and economic retard of Muslim states in these days.

All the political Islamic groups nowadays in various Muslim countries share more or less similar basic ideas, even though their expression and means of applying those ideas in reality show many differences. These basic ideas are derived from the thoughts of some prominent Islamic figures in modern times, such as Hasan Al-Banna (1906-1949), Abdul Mawdudi (1903-1979), and Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966). They can be summarised as follows:

1. Islam constitutes an all-embracing ideology for individual and social life, for state and society.
2. The Quran, God's revelation, and the example (Sunnah) of the Prophet Muhammad are the foundations of Muslim life.
3. Islamic law (the Sharia, the "path" of God), based upon the Quran and the Prophet's model behavior, is the sacred blueprint for Muslim life.
4. Faithfulness to the Muslim's vocation to reestablish God's sovereignty through implementation of God's law will bring success, power, and wealth to the Islamic community (ummah) in this life as well as eternal reward in the next.
5. The weakness and subservience of Muslim societies must be due to the faithlessness of Muslims, who have strayed from God's divinely revealed path and instead followed the secular, materialistic ideologies and value of the West or of the West-capitalism and Marxism.
6. Restoration of Muslim pride, power, and rule (the past glory of Islamic empires and civilization) requires a return to Islam, the reimplementing of God's law and guidance for state and society.
7. Science and technology must be harnessed and used within Islamically oriented and guided context in order to avoid the Westernization and secularization of Muslim society".

According to Xiaodong Zhang, political Islamic movements in modern times can be grouped in three categories. The first is the radical fundamentalists. They launched a fierce war against established authority by terrorist means, such as kidnapping, assassination and bombing, etc. Their target included not only their own government authorities but also foreign travelers, aliens, journalists, and diplomats. In their opinion, the western influences backup their decadent governments, so there can be no reason to differentiate the two.

The second is the moderate fundamentalists. They prefer to go down to the poor, backward villages and streets and to mobilize the mass through mosques. In addition, they establish schools, hospitals, charities, and other social infrastructures to display and remodel Islamic spirit and morality. In practice, the moderate is so successful that somehow governmental functions have been replaced.

The third is the legal fundamentalists. They hope to get into the parliament and local government legally, and realize the social reform and Islamic ideal under the established system. In Algeria, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) would have come into power if the military had not canceled the elections in 1992. In Lebanon, Hezbollah, the Party of God, made a great success in the 1992 parliamentary elections.

This grouping shows well the aspects of political Islamic movements. However, in reality, it is not always that each group takes only one specific approach. Rather, all the groups take the three approaches together responding to the changes of situation in which they are located. So even the Hamas in Palestine, which has been notorious for their terrorism, admits a tactic of temporary armistice with enemies, while not giving up the holy war at all.

### **3. Factors affecting the Rise of Political Islam**

In the mean time, a lot of authors have tried to identify the factors that can explain the rise of political Islam. Bernard Lewis advocated the presence of an inherent disposition to militant opposition in Islam, and some scholars tried to link the resurgence of political Islam with this disposition. It seems true that such tradition from the past is certainly providing some important concepts in the formulation of political Islamic notions today. Such concepts like holy war (jihad) and advocating of the pure Islam certainly derive their justification from the religious and historical tradition.

However, it seems that the political Islam today is taking place in a quite different political and socio-economic context. It might be said that it is the direct product of recent historical development rather than the remote past. So in this sense, Nikki Keddie said that there was no connection between pre-colonial Islamic trends and the militant groups today.

Many scholars point to the fact that recent trends of world politics and economy, together with the failure of the Muslim states in socio-economic and political development are contributing to make the environment in which political Islam is nurtured. Ankie Hoogvelt put it simply like this:

"It is the failure of national developmental strategies in the neo-colonial period, coupled with the present episode of globalisation, that drives the contemporary Islamic crescent. Islamic resurgence is best understood as a politics of identity in response to exclusion, rather than as a subordinated incorporation."

Hilal Khashan contends that "Islamic fundamentalism is the product of cultural and intellectual stagnation, Western colonialism, and the failure of the secular nationalist model of government". And he further describes that "the failure of Arab ruling elites to modernize their countries created an institutional vacuum and enabled the radicals to present themselves as serious contenders for political authority".

Xiaodong Zhang asserts that "the emergence of Islamic fundamentalism is a direct response to the external pressure and internal crisis of Muslim society, and the change indicates that the pressure and crisis have become stronger than ever before. To some extent, it is a social movement of introspection and self-salvation."

The key in the viewpoint of these scholars is that the failure of the ruling elites of Muslim world in modernization and certain trends of world politics and economy have caused the retrospective movement in the Islamic world. This view seems to account for the rise of political Islam more properly than pointing to the inherent militant nature of the Islam

Then, let us look at some major factors in concrete. After a half-century from the end of formal colonialism, the failure of the ruling elites of the Muslim world to develop and modernize their countries is quite clear in almost all aspects of political, economic and social spheres. Most of the Muslim countries are still very poor economically and are under dictatorial rule politically. Even worse, after the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, the Arabs lost every major military confrontation with Israel, leaving them only in frustration and humiliation. Hilal Khashan summarized this situation clearly:

"The Arabs' ineffective handling of the conflict with Israel jolted the masses who expected the use of a forthright military approach to recover Palestine. Instead of concentrating on Israel, Arab elites focused attention on other issues that included eliminating domestic opposition, violating the basic human rights of their populations, and involvement in inter-Arab disputes. The Arab leaders' record on the developmental front was equally dismal. Some regimes toyed with socialism and adopted the single-party apparatus to propel modernization. Others, such as the Gulf rentier states, adopted the welfare state approach. In the second, apparently more successful, approach, only a veneer of modernity was accomplished. Resources were squandered on weapons and grandiose projects of little economic utility. Corruption and nepotism prevailed, and the concept of the state, never fully understood in the modern Middle East as a guardian and representative of individual and community interests, soon lost its lustre."

And then, Hilal Khashan concludes that "It is in this atmosphere of ideological and developmental failure that radical Islamic groups emerged, who sought to transform the ailing political systems into ones of their own creation."

Oliver Roy shows why even well educated intellectuals join radical Islamic groups. He refers to these intellectuals as "lumpen intelligentsia." They are young people with school and even university education who cannot find positions or professions that corresponds to their expectations or visions of themselves, either in the saturated state administrative sector or in industry. Roy seems to underevaluate the motives of this group too much. However, despite this over-simplification, his analysis still provides an insight to understand an important aspect of political Islam.

Internationally, various authors also indicate a lot of factors. Among them, the impact of the Gulf War comes in the first place. The Gulf War, precipitated by Iraq's invasion of Kuwait on 2 August, 1990, was considered by a large portion of Muslims as a confrontation of Arab Muslims with the imperialist West. And since many Arab countries including Egypt and the GCC states stood on the Western alliance side, it showed explicitly to the Arab mass the decadence of the Arab ruling elites and their role as agencies of the Western imperialists.

With this, the impact of the Bosnia-Herzegovina War presented by Hilal Khashan seems to explain well the pathetic aspects of political Islam. Serb atrocities and ethnic cleansing of the Muslims did not seem to move Western governments to take sufficient action to deter the increasingly aggressive Serbs. As a result, the entrenched notion that the West is irreconcilably hostile towards Muslim world received a tremendous boost among Arab Muslims. Hence, combating them is not just to be tolerated, to be urged as well.

Besides these rather psychological factors, Ankie Hoogvelt tries to explain the factors in the context of the neo-colonialism and globalisation. Even though Hoogvelt's explanation on this aspect seems not quite clear, it seems certain that the recent trend of globalization and regionalization in the world economy, and relative marginalization of the Middle East Muslim states from this trend, are certainly boosting the

rise of political Islam.

The sources of funding and weaponry are also important factors, since they backup the political Islamic materially. Hilal Khashan's article seems to provide a significant insight on this matter. According to Khashan, the so-called "state sponsors" role such as Iran and Sudan, which is so frequently indicated by Western strategists and media, is in fact very limited. Sunni Muslims viewed sceptically the generous offers of material aid made by Iran's Shiite leadership. Except the case of Hezbollah, and to a lesser extent, the two Palestinian radical Islamic groups, Jihad and Hamas, Iran had little influence on militants in the Arab East. Iran's ability to influence these groups derived legitimacy to the extent that it concentrated on promoting anti-Israeli operations.

Radical Islamic groups, Khashan contends, receive, no doubt, limited logistic support from a few Middle Eastern countries. But there is a tendency to magnify unduly the implications of this aid on the rhythm of regional violence. On the contrary, Khashan argues, contributions from outside the Middle East seem to have more influence on the march of Islamic radicalism.

American CIA provided various material aids for the Islamic militants in Afghanistan in the wake of the Cold War with the Soviets. Even in these days, a lot of assistance for the Islamic groups comes from Western countries. According to a report by an Arab magazine, at least fifty radical Islamic leaders sought and obtained political asylum in Europe, twelve in England alone. However, Khashan concludes that the most important source of weapon supplies to Islamic militants is probably local.

#### **4. Some Issues ensuing from the rise of political Islam**

The resurgence of political Islam today raises several important issues internationally and domestically. Firstly, it poses a serious political threat to their governments and the West by a combination of their propaganda and violent measures. Terrorism and security matters are considered in this context. Even further, some Western scholars like Samuel Huntington consider it a just a prelude to a massive "Civilization Clashes" with the West. Secondly, it brings about a serious socio-cultural repression domestically by their dogmatic interpretation of religion and violence on their opponents.

Let us look at these issues one by one. Political Islam rejects the legitimacy of their governments and completely refuses the West. And some of the militant groups launch violent attacks on not only government agencies but also civilian facilities. Most of the Muslim countries and the West are collaborating in crashing these militant groups. However, some Western scholars perceive this problem in more serious context.

As stated earlier in this essay, Samuel Huntington presented that the resurgent Islam is just a signal to the coming of "Civilization Clashes." Many Western politicians and scholars seem to share a similar view with Huntington on this issue. One of them wrote "The war between Communism and the West is about to be replaced by a war between the West and Muslims."

Huntington's perception is more drastic and deeply rooted in history. He says, "The underlying problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam, a different civilization whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power." He asserts that fourteen hundred years of history demonstrates this. Islam is the only civilization which has put the survival of the West in doubt, and it has done at least twice. Consequently, if following Huntington's argument, the West should contain not only Islamic fundamentalism but also the Islam

itself.

Many authors have criticised Huntington's dangerous notion, which can provoke unnecessary global conflict in this age of so-called globalisation. Xiaodong Zhang seems to describe properly these critics' view. He put it this way:

"Anyway, the Islamic threat is exaggerated unlimitedly. On the one hand, most rulers in the Middle Eastern states have been trying to utilise the Islamic threat for asking the financial and military aids from the West, and controlling the power and society. On the other hand, some people in the West want to find a new enemy to replace the former Soviet Union and communism, and to provide the basis for their own domestic and diplomatic policies."

Zhang admits that Islamic fundamentalism threatens the Middle Eastern states. However, he points to the fact the power of militant Islamic groups in reality is too weak to confront the West. They are scattered, and have neither unified organisation, nor common programme. More often, they are in a state of mutual conflict and accusation. Hilal Khashan adds to this point by describing that "Apart from regional realities, differences in religious interpretation and involvement in local politics impede the ability of transnational fundamentalist groups to work closely together. The bloody confrontations among Afghanistan's fundamentalist groups illustrates the point."

Zhang also adds some criticism on "Civilization Clashes" views by stating different aspects. A civilisation can threaten other civilisation only out of ethnocentrism and culture-centurism, or forcing one culture on another. He seems to try to explain that such is not the reality of Islam today. Generally speaking, the Islamic world is on the defence rather than on the offence against other civilisations.

Samuel Huntington puts special emphasis on the meaning of terrorism. He tries to persuade that terrorism is not just a bypassing phenomenon, but an important strategic tool by which Islamic world challenges the West. He says, after the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the Islamic world has literally waged a "quasi war" against the West. Many more Westerners have been killed in this quasi war through terrorism than were killed in the real war in the Gulf. So, he says, a quasi war is a still a war.

Huntington's notion that Islamic world is waging a quasi war seems to be based on the asserted "state-sponsored terrorism" by some Muslim countries against the West. However, it is sure that the terrorist attacks are launched by extremist fundamental groups, who are mostly not welcomed even in their countries. On the contrary, it is still disputable whether these activities are sponsored by certain states. So Huntington's notion of quasi war seems to exaggerate the meaning of terrorism.

Finally, a special attention should be given on the aspects of socio-cultural repression posed by militant Islamic groups in their countries. An incident that shows this aspect clearly is the stabbing of a Nobel-laureate Egyptian novelist Naguib Mahfouz on 14 October 1994. He was stabbed in the neck by an Islamic extremist outside his home. Radical Islamists had accused Mahfouz of apostasy and blasphemy. Some Egyptian intellectuals planned a march on the street to protest against the Islamists, only to cancel it due to security concerns.

Fauzi M. Najjar describes this incident and raises the issue of socio-cultural repression posed by radical Islamists. He analyses Mahfouz's attitude toward Islam through examining various work and speeches of Mahfouz and shows that it is not much of an infidel's as is accused by the radical Islamists. Najjar says that Mahfouz's attitude toward religion is evasive and ambiguous, due in part to his allusive style, and to the fact that his novels are wrapped in symbolism and allegory. And he describes Mahfouz that "as a

Muslim, raised in a religiously-oriented family and society, he certainly identifies with his own culture."

According to Najjar, most Muslims have no quarrel with this attitude. In their insistence on a narrow and strict application of Islamic law, the extremists go too far, posing a threat to intellectual integrity and creativity. Najjar describes this kind of socio-cultural threat succinctly in the following sentences. This seems to imply a serious retreat from a healthy civil society.

"In recent years, Egypt and the rest of the Muslim world have been deluged with a large number of religious booklets and tapes, containing extremist fundamentalist ideas and teachings, dealing with restrictions on women, rejection of Western civilization, and the denunciation of the arts as products of infidelity. The woman is to stay at home. Her face is a blemish ('awra) even in a picture or on a TV screen, and her voice is also a blemish, even if she is reciting the Quran. The cinema, TV, theatre and the camera are haram. All arts are haram: music is from the devil, and singing is a kind of effeminacy (takhannuth), acting, painting and photography are acts of kufr. The booklets are magnificently produced, and are distributed free or for a nominal price. They are written by authors who have no claim to religious knowledge; they are mediocrities, compared with men of religious learning."

## **5. Prospects and Conclusion**

Political Islam today is constantly on the upward trend. Due to the inability of the ruling elites of the Muslim states to cope with their economic and social problems, frustrated intellectuals and young students come to sympathise more and more with the anti-government slogans of the radical Islamic groups. Massive urban migration enhances this trend. Poor masses uprooted from their hometown find social shelters in big cities in charity organisations and mosques run by these radical Islamists. Rapid increase of population and the high composition rate of young people exacerbate this situation.

With this internal situation, external conditions are also working in the direction to grow the political Islam. Marginalization of the Middle Eastern economy from the globalisation is seen to be continuing, and the Arab-Israeli conflicts are not expected to cease in the foreseeable future. So considering all these factors, the trend of growing political Islam is expected to keep its momentum at least in the near future.

However, be it militant or moderate, the growth of political Islam will surely accompany a serious political instability in the Muslim countries. The governments will try to crush militant political Islamist groups. And even in the case of moderate or legal Islamic groups approach to power through legitimate means, the West dominated international community will not accept it and will try to intervene. This case is well presented in Algeria, where the fundamentalists who won in the election is now waging a cruel civil war with the military government backed by Western assistance.

Political Islam is, in one sense, a spontaneous response of the Muslim masses to strive against the grim prospect of their life. As long as the Muslim states are faltering to give confidence to their people on the future of their life, the political Islam will continue to grow. Without significant breakthrough from the economic stagnation and social disruption, it will be very difficult to reverse this trend.

However, if this trend looks undesirable, the Muslim states and the international community should concentrate their every effort to improve the political and socio-economic environment in which political Islam is nurtured. If they only attempt to crush and suppress it, their efforts will not bear any fruits in the long run. As Hilal Khashan pointed out, crushing one militant group may lead to the rise of several others. Giving hope to the frustrated Muslims in their real life will be the only effective prescription to

halt the rise of political Islam.

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