

Introduction

When the Algerian military staged a “constitutional coup d’état” in mid-January 1992 to abort the anticipated electoral victory of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS)—an Islamist political movement seeking to end the thirty-year rule of the National Liberation Front (FLN), which has ruled Algeria since its independence from France—it sparked a new, urgent round of questioning about the nature and effect of Islamic political action in general, its relationship to challenges of democratization in the Muslim world, and its significance for United States interests.¹

For the first time, a political party predicated on a return to the essential tenets of Islam seemed about to win power through the ballot box. An Islamic political movement had been successful not through violence or terrorism, but by playing by the rules of the democratic game. The FIS campaign for an Islamic state and society in Algeria, and its criticism of the moribund FLN regime, contained a traditional fundamentalist Islamic religious message and a demand for democratization with greater popular participation in the governance of society. Yet these concepts are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and most leaders of the FIS have stated that the two—in their minds, at least—are indeed compatible.

Events in Algeria raised basic questions about democratization because of the potential for allegedly nondemocratic parties, such

as the FIS, to use democratic means to introduce a new authoritarianism. Questions were also raised about the alternative outcome of a regime crushing a popular, “democratic” challenge for political power in order to defeat fundamentalism. Indeed, within two months after the coup, the FIS was banned, party leaders were detained, and the movement went underground. How the FIS would have governed in practice is an unanswered question over which there is great controversy. The only certainties in the Algerian experience are that its citizens, alienated by a moribund political system, deepening corruption, and economic malaise, turned to the mosque in search of new meaning, identity, and an outlet for their political frustrations; and that those in Algeria and elsewhere who support Islamic political activism have been reinforced in their belief that it is the means to secular as well as religious salvation.

Coincidental in time to these events in Algeria were several other developments that added to the concern and debate over the potential political impact of Islam, recalling the near-hysteria the same issue had evoked in 1978 and 1979, when Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s Islamic revolution seized power in Iran and pro-Islamist, antiwestern demonstrations swept the Middle East. These individual developments, and the general political environment of the Middle East, were much exacerbated as a result of the conditions generated by the U.S.-led confrontation with Iraq’s President Saddam Hussein. These developments include the following:

- Tunisia, like Algeria, is under heavy Islamist pressure and has similarly repressed Islamist political activities;
- a radical Islamic regime, allied with the military, controls the Sudan and actively collaborates with Islamist groups in other countries as well as with the government of Iran;
- the Muslim Brotherhood has large representation in Jordan’s parliament and has participated in the political system in Egypt (despite being denied legal representation by the Egyptian government), while some extremist Islamist groups in Egypt have resorted to violence and terrorism;

- radical Islamic elements have a hold on part of the Palestinian movement;
- Iranian-backed Islamic groups militarily challenge Israeli-backed Lebanese militia and Israeli forces in southern Lebanon; and
- Iran has positioned itself as the champion of revolutionary Islam, and of opposition to the West, Israel, and the Middle East peace process.

There are also fears that the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran could set the pattern for the newly independent states of the former USSR, with Muslims forming the majority of their populations, as well as for Islamist movements in other Muslim states. Secular Arab regimes and even Saudi Arabia, as well as Israel, feel seriously threatened by the new wave of Islamist political activism. Yet, as in Algeria, the Islamists loudly proclaim practical political objectives, including dedication to democracy, calls for an end to authoritarian and corrupt regimes, and demand for popular political participation, as well as stressing the traditional religious and cultural values of Islam as the answer to today's troubled, insecure world.

To investigate these issues, the Institute symposium moved from general discussion to particular cases, from theoretical considerations to practical politics, in an attempt to assess the problems and the opportunities that the growth of Islamic political activism might pose for political development in the Muslim world. The central question was posed by Ambassador Samuel Lewis, president of the United States Institute of Peace, at the outset of the symposium: "How, and if and when, can pluralism and democratic institutions survive compatibly with the rising tide of Islamic 'fundamentalism,' as it is popularly denominated?"

This report summarizes and reviews the symposium proceedings in four chapters.

Chapter 1 is a broad comparative overview that analyzes the admixture of religion and politics generally as well as the global wave of democratization in the late twentieth century and its

contagious effect throughout the Middle East, and presents an overview of Islamic political action.

Chapter 2 considers Islam and democracy from a theoretical perspective, focusing on whether Islam (and its various interpretations) is compatible with democracy as broadly understood, especially with respect to political pluralism, tolerance, and human rights.

Chapter 3 analyzes specific country cases to understand how Islamist political movements have mobilized elements of society to seek political power, how Islamic regimes wield political power, and the ways in which established secular regimes have reacted to the Islamic resurgence and revival.

Chapter 4 considers three alternative scenarios for the future development of Islamist movements in the contemporary Arab world and offers some general points of conclusion.

Perhaps the most important point of agreement among all participants in the symposium is that, as the pan-Arabist, Arab nationalist, and socialist ideologies that captured the imagination of mass society in the Arab world lose their mass appeal, Islam is reemerging as a guiding political ideology. In a region experiencing difficult economic conditions and the impact of "modernity," a continuing legacy of autocracy and corruption, and the resulting social dislocation and despair, Islam promises renewed meaning and identity. Islam also promises a satisfying indigenous response to widely held feelings of cultural, political, and military humiliation blamed on the West (and Israel), even while adopting and adapting the western-inspired appeal of democracy.

The popular slogan used by the Islamists, "Islam is the solution," reflects the strong appeal of the new populist, political Islam throughout the region. Populist, political Islam is expected to persist as a powerful movement and to seriously challenge incumbent regimes, at least until the underlying social and political causes of its appeal are addressed satisfactorily by these regimes or until Islamist movements actually come to power and demonstrate how capable they are of fulfilling their promises. Neither eventu-

ality could realistically be expected in the near future. Repression is unable to put an end to the movements. Fundamentalist political groups—Islamists—were for many years considered radical fringe elements bent almost exclusively on violence and terrorism; now, according to the symposium participants, the groups have in some instances entered the mainstream of political and social life despite opposition by established regimes.

