

Can Islamist Movements Be Moderated Through Political Participation?

Written by Drishti Suri

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The question over the compatibility of democracy and Islamism has received much attention from academics. Scholars such as Omar Ashour talk about the 'de-radicalization' of Islamists as a result of structural constraints and incentives that political inclusion exposes them to (2009, 12). Bassam Tibi on the other hand argues that the basic ideology of Islamism, irrespective of the use of democratic rhetoric, is incompatible with democratic values of plurality and power-sharing (2009, 136). He hence denies any possibility of Islamist moderation and instead holds that an Islamist party that is genuinely committed to democracy is not actually Islamist at all.

This essay argues that whilst Islamist movements may be moderated, such moderation is not due to their inclusion. Rather, the internal power structures and dynamics of the group determine its responses to the political opportunities and obstacles it faces upon inclusion. Responding to political inclusion is hence not a linear process and can lead to both moderation and radicalization. To demonstrate the same, the essay is divided into two parts. The first part begins with discussing the inclusion-moderation theory, followed by a critique of the theory, pointing to its inherent assumptions and flaws within its generalization. The second part demonstrates the importance of internal dynamics and structures for moderation, and the comparative irrelevance of inclusion or exclusion in the political system, by analyzing the position of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in Algeria until its dissolution in February 1992.

It should be noted that 'moderation' is a highly contested term. Whilst some understand it to mean merely a commitment to non-violence, others extend it to include liberal views (Al-Anani, 2009). For the purpose of this essay, 'moderation' refers to tolerance for opposing views, respect for pluralism, and openness to cooperation (Schwedler, 2011, 352). It is also worth clarifying that the concept of Islamism has varying definitions and that this essay understands Islamism as a term used for highly diverse forms of political theory and practice that look to Islam for political, economic and social reform frameworks (Schwedler, 2011, 349; Mandaville, 2007, 74).

Inclusion-Moderation Theory

The inclusion-moderation theory draws from Samuel Huntington's 'participation/moderation trade-off' concept which holds that political participation creates incentives for groups to abandon radical goals and tactics for gaining political advantages (1996, 165). Political incentives are hence seen as leading to moderation of radical groups. Related to the idea, Omar Ashour argues that militant Islamist movements such as Al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya experience 'de-radicalization' upon political inclusion since they respond pragmatically to the opportunities and obstacles presented by the political structures. Such pragmatism, he argues, leads to their successful de-radicalization when they face state repression, have social interaction with the 'other', are offered selective inducements in exchange of behavioral or ideological changes, and have a charismatic leadership that is able to justify such de-radicalization (2007, 624-625).

The inclusion-moderation theory is hence based on the premise that political institutions and structures lead to changes in the behavior and/or ideology of the group as certain incentives are offered in favor of moderation and as interaction with different groups in a pluralist system leads to 'political learning' or internalization of the moderate positions that may have earlier been taken only for instrumental reasons (Schwedler, 2011, 361-365; Tomsa, 2012,

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487). Moreover, since the theory claims a direct link between political inclusion and moderation, it also holds that exclusion of Islamist movements from political participation and their repression leads to radicalization (Schwedler, 2006, 16).

Critique of the Theory

The first problem with the theory is definitional. Since there is no consensus on defining the term 'moderation', scholars analyzing the same case can reach a very different conclusion on whether the case proves the inclusion-moderation theory or not. For instance, Glenn Robinson (1997) and Jillian Schwedler (2006) in their analyses of the Islamic Action Front (IAF) of Jordan conclude that it satisfies the inclusion-moderation hypothesis. Janine Clarke (2006), on the other hand, held the IAF did not satisfy the inclusion-moderation hypothesis since their moderation was limited to areas not related to shari'a. This difference was due to the fact that Schwedler defined moderation as the transition to 'more open and tolerant' perspectives (2006, 3), whilst Clarke (2006) did not provide a clear definition of moderation. Definitional differences thus led them to different conclusions whilst analyzing the same group (Ashour, 2009, 18-19).

The second problem relates to the assumption inherent in the inclusion-moderation theory that transition is a linear process. As demonstrated above, the theory assumes a direct causal link between political inclusion and moderation of Islamist groups. However, as the analyses of groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in Egypt have shown, political inclusion does not necessarily lead to moderation. Sumita Pahwa (2016) in her study of the MB shows how they remained responsive to political incentives and opportunities. However, this did not mean a shift from religious to political goals which would have led to their acceptance of pluralism and multi-party politics (2016, 1079-1080).

Linked to the causal relationship forged by inclusion-moderation theory is also the assumption that being pragmatic actors, Islamists would react to political inclusion in a specific way – i.e. through behavioral and ideological transformations in favor of tolerance, pluralism, and cooperation. However, such a view is based on the assumption that there is only one pragmatic response. It hence overlooks the role played by the political context and the internal structures and dynamics of the group in deciding what is or is not a pragmatic response.

The fallacies in the theory's assumptions and generalizations also become evident when one considers the fact that there exist theories such as the exclusion-moderation hypothesis and that scholars propounding both inclusion-moderation and exclusion-moderation refer to very specific case studies to support their arguments. For instance, scholars such as Francesco Cavatorta and Fabio Merone (2013) point to the Tunisian Ennahda party to demonstrate how exclusion, and not inclusion, can lead to moderation. Yet the fact that both sides are able to bring up cases to support their positions demonstrates that Islamists that are included/excluded can both be moderate and that their moderation is not linked to their inclusion/exclusion but rather to the choices that they make based on the specific context and their internal structures and dynamics. This essay, therefore, advocates being cautious to the creation of such causal links and generalizations to understand Islamist parties. Islamism is a modern, urban political phenomenon (Mandaville, 2007, 108-109) which is anything but monolithic (Ayoob, 2011, 14-15). Thus, as the next section will demonstrate, Islamist moderation must be explained by looking at its specific local context and its internal structures and dynamics rather than generalized theories that are sought to be applied to multiple settings.

The Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria

Having set out what the inclusion-moderation theory holds and its flaws, this section will discuss the transitions within the FIS in Algeria. The section will first discuss its origins and conception to understand its internal structure and dynamics. This will be followed by a discussion on its stance before the Civil War when it was included in the political system, as well as when it began to be repressed right before the outbreak of the Civil War. It will be argued that the FIS, contrary to the view in most scholarship, held a moderate position both during its inclusion and subsequent exclusion. This would be used to demonstrate that moderation and radicalization in Islamist parties are a result of the pragmatic choices made within the influence of its internal structures and dynamics and not a result of mere inclusion or exclusion.

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The Emergence of the FIS (1988-1990)

The emergence of the FIS can be traced back to the riots that erupted across Algeria in October 1988. With the collapse of oil prices in 1985-86, Algeria plunged into an economic crisis that heightened the already brewing discontentment among the masses (Willis, 1996, 108). This growing dissatisfaction with and alienation from the regime eventually culminated in the riots of October 1988 which received a bloody response from the army. The riots finally ended with the regime being forced to undertake political reforms. What is important to note about these political reforms, however, is the fact that they were announced after President Chadli's meetings and continued negotiations with Abassi Madani and Ali Belhadj – two Islamist leaders who later co-founded the FIS (ibid, 111-112).

The FIS, thus, emerged out of widespread political, economic and social discontentment among the Algerian society and was legally recognized as a political party on 16 September 1989. With Madani as its President and Belhadj as its Vice-President, the FIS was run by a majlis shura of over 35 members whose consent was essential for any major decisions (ibid, 149). The majlis shura, moreover, was not a homogenous bloc and had members from a variety of different socio-economic backgrounds. It comprised of members with Salafist leanings as well as Djazairists who had more nationalistic and moderate tendencies (Quandt, 1998, 115). This meant that there existed a continuous internal debate within the FIS over its course of action and decisions were made only after consensus had been reached in the majlis shura (ibid), thus giving the internal structure and dynamic a great influence in decision-making.

It is important to keep this internal structure and dynamic of the FIS in mind as it ensured that the FIS was not overtaken completely by any one group and ensured a willingness to compromise not just with diverse views within the FIS but also with other political actors throughout its existence. Such willingness to compromise and negotiate was evident during its formative years as shown in the context of the October 1988 riots and continued during the phase of both, its inclusion and exclusion, as will be discussed below. It is argued that it was such an internal structure and dynamic that allowed the FIS to move towards greater moderation, and not its inclusion into or exclusion from the political sphere.

Phase I – Inclusion

The phase of inclusion for the FIS demonstrates how the FIS constantly moderated its position and continued to do so even when the political structure itself was changed to its disadvantage before the national elections of 1991. It thus continued its moderation even when the political system did not provide it with the incentives that the inclusion-moderation theory argues lead to moderation.

Similar to the negotiations that Madani and Belhadj held with President Chadli even before the official recognition of the FIS, negotiations between the FIS and the regime continued. As early as January 1990, Madani and President Chadli had a meeting wherein discussions were carried out on the continuation of the reform programme and implicit support was given to President Chadli's economic policies (Willis, 1996, 128-129). Moreover, even after winning local elections of 1990 with a strong majority and coming to power, the FIS continued to maintain communication with the regime. There were further meetings with President Chadli after the FIS's victory in local elections to discuss the holding of free elections to the National Assembly as well as President Chadli's willingness to share power and cooperate with the FIS following the National Assembly elections (ibid, 171). Thus, during its inclusion in the political system, despite the FIS opposing the regime on grounds of its corruption and immorality and having a strong support base among the masses, (Martinez, 2001, 21), it did not seek to radically overthrow the regime and instead negotiated and compromised with it at many stages to ensure a smooth transition in Algerian politics. It, therefore, demonstrated cooperation, tolerance, and a willingness to share power with others, not just in its internal dynamics but also in its interaction with the regime.

Such a position of moderation by the FIS was continued and strengthened even when the regime started changing the rules of the political sphere to the FIS's disadvantage. In March 1991, the regime, in a blatant attempt at gerrymandering, passed a new electoral law that increased the number of seats in National Assembly from 295 to 542, creating extra seats in constituencies where the army-supported National Liberation Front (FLN) had previously performed well (Iratni and Tahi, 1991, 475-476). In response, the FIS began calling for early elections to the National

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Assembly and revocation of the new electoral law and announced an unlimited strike in May 1991 (ibid). Yet despite such a move by the regime and the sense of betrayal felt by the FIS, Madani held meetings with Prime Minister Mouloud Hamrouche before the beginning of the strike to discuss the FIS's demands, to inform him of the demonstrations that the FIS planned to organize and to affirm the FIS's peaceful intent (Iratni and Tahi, 1991, 476; Willis, 1996, 178-179).

As increased tension between the demonstrators and the regime led to clashes, the regime began cracking down on the FIS by arresting its members and eventually arrested Madani and Belhadj after Madani compared the situation to that under French colonialism and spoke of action similar to the November 1954 Revolution (ibid, 180). This, however, must be understood as Madani's expression of anger with the regime and not as an actual call to arms or abandonment of a moderate stance. Such an interpretation of his statement makes greater sense especially in light of the FIS's subsequent course of action. After the arrest of Madani and Belhadj, Madani guaranteed Abdelkader Hachani's accession to the party leadership to ensure more influence of Djazairist leaders within the FIS (ibid, 191) and to maintain moderation in a highly volatile situation. This commitment to moderation appears even stronger when one considers the fact that such a moderate position was ensured at a time when hundreds had been killed and injured due to the army's brutal clampdown on the demonstrations (Human Rights Watch, 1992), and hence recruitment for an armed struggle against the regime by invoking the memory of the bloody riots of October 1988 and the Revolution of November 1954 would have been a very easy task for the FIS. Yet, instead of taking a radical position, the FIS continued governing its local constituencies, campaigned for the National Assembly election, and went on to win the first round of the national elections in December 1991, despite its top leadership being in prison. It also incorporated the Berber culture and began using Tamazigh in their literature to highlight the importance of Berber culture in Algeria (Willis, 1996, 238). Moreover, even in such an atmosphere where the FIS felt targeted by the regime, it affirmed its willingness to cooperate with the FLN and other parties in the National Assembly (ibid, 237). This is an important point since even when the political system stopped rewarding the FIS for playing by the rules, the FIS continued to maintain its moderate position. It, therefore, demonstrates that the political incentives offered through inclusion are not the main reason for moderation, contrary to what the inclusion-moderation theory holds.

Phase II – Exclusion

The exclusion of the FIS from the political sphere began after its victory in the first round of the National Assembly elections. As uncertainty began to mount and the continuation of elections seemed unlikely, the FIS again met President Chadli and urged FIS supporters to remain 'reconciliatory' (Burgat, 2005, 105). Hachani also encouraged party members to show restraint (Willis, 1996, 236). He further reaffirmed the FIS's willingness to cooperate with other parties and even called for a coalition government at one point (Willis, 1996, 237). Thus, just as the FIS had expressed its openness to cooperation with others before, it continued to do so even when the army appeared intent to keep the FIS from coming to power.

On 11 January 1992, the army responded to the FIS's electoral victory by getting a resignation from President Chadli, bringing the country under the rule of the High State Committee (HCE) and detaining the victors of the first ballot along with thousands of their supporters in concentration camps in Southern Sahara (Burgat, 2005, 105). Again, despite the situation being highly volatile and ripe for a possible call to arms, the FIS responded to the army's actions by issuing a statement that declared the President's resignation unconstitutional and the rule under the HCE illegitimate since the Constitution gave the only consultative role to the committee (Willis, 1996, 253). Hachani also issued a statement declaring that the FIS would pursue its programme but rejected the use of violence (ibid). The FIS further developed a front with the FLN and Socialist Forces Front (FFS) in opposition to the HCE (ibid) and continued to operate within the realm of law even when the army cracked down on its members and eventually dissolved the party in February 1992. This again goes on to demonstrate not just the continuation of the FIS's willingness to cooperate and negotiate with other political actors, but its commitment to moderation even when the political system was turned completely against it.

Conclusion

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The case of the FIS demonstrates moderation in terms of cooperation, tolerance, and pluralism both during its inclusion as well as its subsequent repression and exclusion. This negates the inclusion-moderation hypothesis according to which moderation results from the incentives provided by the political system, while repression leads to radicalization. In contrast, the case of the FIS shows that the reasons for moderation must be sought elsewhere since the party maintained a moderate stance even when the political system stopped rewarding its moderation and instead began repressing it. This demonstrates that Islamist movements can be moderated but not as a result of political participation or exclusion per se. Rather it is a result of the specific decisions made by the leadership in response to the context and under the influence of the party's internal structure and dynamics.

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