

Islam, Politics, and the Resurgence of the State

CSIS Congressional Forum on Islam

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Arab governments have grown more skilled at disrupting Islamist opposition movements. While governments across the region have used increasingly similar strategies against these movements, the movements themselves have adopted a diversity of approaches and grown more fractured.

KEY POINTS

- Over the past two decades, the threats to Arab authoritarian regimes have grown and diversified. Because of eroding credibility in the international arena, the spread of new communications technology, mounting demands for democratization, and a more robust civil society, they have had to reconfigure and reorganize their approach to opposition forces.
- Arab regimes employ five main strategies against these threats: (1) appropriating and containing civil society, (2) managing electoral competition, (3) ensuring economic reforms benefit regime supporters, (4) containing new communications technologies, and (5) diversifying their international linkages to broaden their flexibility.
- Regimes manage and manicure civil society with laws that weed out unacceptable or “unnecessary” civil society groups and replace them with state-run groups. Similarly, governments appear to create a space for Islam by co-opting private groups such as Islamic charities that are apolitical in nature and have large bases of support within their own communities.
- Governments seem to be opening up politics by holding elections and allowing Islamists to participate in the electoral process. In reality, authoritarian regimes tightly limit the extent to which these Islamist groups can alter the status quo by manipulating electoral reforms and by abusing their privileged access to resources, control over the media, and power to intimidate.
- Governments have thus created the illusion of moving beyond repression, rendering traditional forms of contestation—elections and civil society—“safe” for authoritarianism.
- These tactics have weakened and fractured Islamist groups, as they divide over whether to participate in the political system or seek change from the outside.
- Authoritarian regimes in the region seem to be making no attempt to strengthen moderates within these groups who seek to lead them from confrontation and violence into participation. Instead, the governments appear to prefer to “kick them while they’re down.”

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- While memories of past repression have discouraged today’s Islamist leaders from taking a purely militant approach, these painful memories will have less of an effect on the new generation. Increasing the benefits of political participation is not only a reward for today’s moderates, but also an investment in the next generation of moderates.
- While many focus attention on the emerging moderation of Turkey’s AK Party, more attention should be paid to the role that the Turkish General Staff played ensuring that the party’s transformation was peaceful and broadly accepted.

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