

With reference to case studies from TWO different Middle Eastern states, discuss the relationship between Political Islam and the modern state.

Political Islam has been a powerful political movement in Middle Eastern states throughout the 20th century and expanding now into the 21st. Born amidst the decolonization process of the region it was aimed at countering western influence and restoring the values of Islam to society as a means to solve not only the spiritual but also political, social and economical problems of Middle Eastern society. As a transnational movement, it strives for the creation of an all encompassing Islamic State but it has been very limited in its action and deeply fragmented by national boundaries and identity. Despite the rejection in principle of the modern state, political Islam tends to accommodate itself to the system as its supporters become closer to power. In the end, the Islamic state, where religion and politics become combined, is no more than a myth. I will draw on the examples provided by the Islamic Brotherhood movement, in Egypt, and the Islamic Republic of Iran to strengthen my argument.

To start our discussion we must first try to understand what Political Islam is. The term is usually used to define a claim to establish an Islamic state, under Islamic law. The basis of this claim is that Islam is seen as a religion that is all encompassing and that has an ideology applicable to every aspect of social and political life (Roy, 2002: 58). The ideologists behind movements of this kind advocate a return to the golden age of Muhammad and the establishment of a pure Islamic state - similar to the community created by the prophet in Medina - which has the sharia (Islamic law) as the basis for its legal system (Zubaida, 2009: 38). Since it requires religious supervision, it is essentially undemocratic.

Islamists claim to base their ideas on the past but the contrary has been argued by several authors. Despite their rhetoric, they in fact pick and choose which elements of the religious texts they want to apply to modern society (Halliday, 2005: 212-213). As Ayubi argues, “political Islam is a new invention” that draws on the historic symbolic relationship between politics and religion and, not only does it try to establish a formal connection between the two spheres, it also aims to put religion ahead of politics, as opposed to what has happened in the past (Ayubi, 1991: 3). In the historical Islamic state, religion and politics were brought together through an effort by the state to legitimize the taxation of its Muslim citizens, which it required to support its growing needs (Ayubi, 1991: 5). Politics appropriated religion and not the other way around.

Political Islam in its quest to unite the political and religious spheres in one Islamic state is essentially Pan-Islamic – “to Islamists the Islamic state should unite the *ummah* (community) as much as possible, and not be restricted to a specific nation” (Roy, 2002: 59) – and, therefore, rejects the modern state, that it deems illegitimate (Dalacoura, 2001: 235). The state-system, a western creation, is itself one of the reasons for the rise of Islamist movements.

As Halliday argues, Political Islam is the result of imperial domination of the Middle East, by the European powers. The creation and rise of the nation state, as well as the political and economical domination that countries such as the United Kingdom, France and the United States imposed on the region, for the last two centuries, are at the root of these movements (Halliday, 2005: 213-215). Islamists draw on secular ideologies for a political system that opposes the west and their, perceived, international domination (Halliday, 2005: 215). Troubled by the failures of

the state in the political, social and economic realms, these movements claim that the application of religious texts to modern politics and society can “solve the world’s problems” (Halliday, 2005: 212).

To unite the *ummah*, Political Islam presupposes the unification of the different religious schools and sects under the banner of the Islamic state. (Roy, 2002: 59) However, despite this religious “homogenisation”, their Pan-Islamic goals and their supranational claim, these movements are usually bound to the countries they originated from (Roy, 2002: 62). The social, political and economic conditions of the state play a decisive role in the definition of Islamist movements, as well as in their expansion and success (Dalacoura, 2001: 246).

The national influence on the Islamic political current that is deployed can also be seen from a state perspective as Islam can also be used as a legitimizing force. It is often used by governments to expand their power and justify certain policies (Dalacoura, 2001: 246). In this perspective, the Islamic Republic of Iran can be used as an example as it will be demonstrated in this essay.

We can conclude that political Islam is an appropriation of religion by politics with the intent to legitimize it. It can be used as a tool to challenge the rulers in power or as a weapon to maintain it, by those that have already seized it (Halliday, 2005: 213). Those that oppose Islamist movements tend to be labelled tools of foreign powers, as being corrupt and as oppressors, if they are part of the ruling structure; or as traitors if they challenge it (Halliday, 2005: 213-214). As Halliday argues, “religion is not ‘for’ or ‘against’ either, is not an endorsement or an obstacle, but can be interpreted to support either” (Halliday, 2005: 214). This rhetoric combines attacks on imperialism, colonialism and Zionism in the name of a religious reform but it strives

to achieve the same as other political movements: “power, relations with the outside world, interest and (...) the subjugation of women” (Halliday, 2005: 214). These interests might be shadowed by the religious claims and motivations but they tend to be revealed as these movements come closer to or come into power, as we will see with the next two examples.

Egypt: The Muslim Brotherhood

The roots of political Islam in Egypt date back to 1928 when Hassan al-Banna, a school teacher, founded the Muslim Brotherhood. (Zubaida, 2009: 47) Al-Banna was struck by the corruption and inequalities in Egyptian society and the subordination of Egyptian politics to foreign rule (Esposito, 1998:1 37). He saw in Islam the antidote for western poison and called for a return to the “Koran and *Sunnah* of the Prophet” (Esposito, 1998:137); a return to the golden age of Islamic history like it was mentioned above.

The Brotherhood thrived on the social failures of the Egyptian state to gain its support. In the 30s and 40s it gained popularity through welfare projects that improved the livelihood of small communities: centres, mosques, schools or small industries run by the Brothers became beacons to spread al-Banna’s ideas (Esposito, 1998:138). The organisation grew in numbers and attracted people from the lower to the middle classes and eventually developed an armed branch (Zubaida, 2009: 48). While Egypt was under the rule of King Farouk, they were responsible for several political assassinations, most notably the killing of prime-minister al-Nuqrashi (Zubaida, 2009: 48).

With the Free Officers coup of 1952 and the rise to power of Gamal Nasser in 1954, the Muslim Brotherhood faced a turning point. Despite their original support of the revolution, the Arab Nationalist ideals put forward by Nasser clashed with their quest for the Islamic state (Esposito, 1998:139). Nasser arrested, executed and persecuted the Islamic Brotherhood after 1956, when a plot to overthrow the government was allegedly discovered (Zubaida, 2009: 48). The movement was forced into hiding and only returned into the political spotlight under Sadat's rule.

Repression and persecution made the Brothers revise their political strategy and modus operandi. Under the leadership of Al-Tilimsani, the movement turned its back on violence and became a reform oriented organisation, similar to a pressure group, which aimed to improve Egyptian society and lobbied for the application of Islamic law (Rubin, 1991:28-31).

This new found position went against the more fundamentalist factions of the Brotherhood that were inspired by the founder al-Banna and, more specifically, by one of the organisations former leaders, Sayyid Qutb (Zubaida, 2009: 51). Qutb advocated a holy war (*jihad*) against the ignorant (*jahili*) Egyptian society that would only end when the rule of God (*sharia*) had spread all over the world (Zubaida, 2009: 51). This divergence in strategy led to the creation of more militant Islamic groups that followed a path different from the one taken by the Muslim Brotherhood.

The brothers pursued a different course and tried to become a true political party. The objective was to avoid persecution, and repression, and change the system from within (Rubin, 1991:30-32). They aligned themselves with two established parties, first the Wafd and then the Liberal, which provided the

organisation with 8 and then 36 seats in the People's Assembly in the 1984 and 1987 elections, respectively (Rubin, 1991:32-33).

The political gains brought institutional stability, wealth and prestige to the movement and its members. The links with Islamic banks and investment companies became an asset the Brotherhood wanted to protect and so the organisation dimmed the confrontation with the government (Rubin, 1991:34). The movement became part of the system it wanted to change, even though it still lobbied for the application of the *sharia*. The conciliatory attitude towards the government made the organisation patronize the more radical Islamic movements and refuse participation in demonstrations; even for causes it supported (Rubin, 1991:36).

The political gains and lucrative links the Muslim Brotherhood made through its political activity transformed the organisation; it gained from the stability of the system it worked in and became more a reformist pressure group than a revolutionary organisation (Rubin, 1991:39-40). The focus turned to specific issues of society (e.g. the implementation of the Sharia) and no effort was made to define the Islamic state, what it would look like and what institutions would compose it (Esposito, 1992: 104). Continued repression, the lack of a specific program and the unwillingness to challenge the head of the state eventually "marginalised and limited" the appeal of movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1990s (Esposito, 1992: 104-105).

The Islamic Republic of Iran

The rhetoric behind the Islamic Revolution in Iran was very similar to that of the Muslim Brotherhood, in its earlier period. The movement, which led to the fall of the shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi in 1989, saw in Ayatollah Khomeini the religious

symbol of the revolution. Like Hassan al-Banna, Khomeini was very critical of the westernization of the country, of western domination of the Middle East and of the state of Israel (Esposito, 1998: 206). He argued in favour of the islamisation of Iranian society, through the implementation of the *sharia* (Esposito, 1998: 208) and while he drew on many Koranic terms to incite the revolution, he made sure to endow them with modern connotations (Halliday, 2005: 213-214).

While most of the Iranian clerical community (*ulama*) remained apolitical, Khomeini seized the moment of criticism and became the main voice calling for change (Esposito, 1992:112) He demanded the implementation of *sharia* rule in the country and argued that the *ulama* should play a supervising role, over the government (Esposito, 1992:113). His ideal of the Islamic state were unknown to many outside his academic circle and very few understood what was happening to Iran until Khomeini finally seized power.

From a supervising role to a direct clerical rule was just a small step and thus the figure of the *vilayat-i-faqih* (a guardian, expert in the *sharia*) was created (Esposito, 1992:116). The new constitution approved by the people in 1979, limited popular sovereignty and, despite criticising the west, borrowed intensively from it to create a system that would be both Islamic and republican (Milani, 1997: 82). The guardian figure was written into the constitution under the premise that absolute sovereignty belongs only to God (Milani, 1997: 82) The authors of the constitution argued that once the people accepted the creation of an Islamic republic, “they must live within the boundaries of Islam interpreted by the *ulama*”, namely in the figure of the *vilayat-i-faqih* (Milani, 1997: 83). Naturally, the man who took the role as supervisor of Iran’s new government was Ayatollah Khomeini himself.

Although Khomeini advocated a return to the time of the prophet, his form of government was something that had never been seen in Islamic history (Zubaida, 2009: 59). It was also one that did not enjoy widespread support of the clerical community, with many religious leaders criticising the doctrine of the “rule by the jurist” (Esposito, 1992: 116-117). However, once established in power, Khomeini was reluctant to allow criticism of his Islamic state and dissident clerical voices were silenced – most notably the one of senior ayatollah Shariatmadari, who was defrocked in 1982 (Esposito, 1992:117). Thus, the *ulama* took control of the legislative, executive and judiciary branches of government and the revolution was institutionalized (Esposito, 1998: 215).

As with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Khomeini used the rhetoric of Islam to criticise the western dominated government of the shah. However, once he seized power, in spite of relying heavily on western influence to design his own government, he continued to use the same rhetoric to counter his opponents. His rejection of the state system was only possible in words as his own rise to power was only possible through the institutions of the modern state. Despite claiming to unite the Islamic *ummah*, under Islamic law, and calling for a return to the time of the prophet, Khomeini seized power “through modern forms of political action, the mass demonstration and the political general strike”; for all its nostalgia for a distant past, it was one of the most modern revolutions in world history (Halliday, 205: 217).

Iranian politics after the revolution maintained its Pan-Islamic character but not to the extent one would expect given the pre-revolution rhetoric. As we have seen before, Islamist movements are deeply conditioned by their national origin and so was the case with Iran. After 1979, Iran supported Islamist movements all over the Middle

East, including Bahrain, Iraq and Lebanon (Dalacoura, 2001: 241). However, especially since the war with Iraq, Iranian foreign policy has been more supportive of the countries own national interests than of the expansion of the Islamic state.

The death of Ayatollah Khomeini, replaced by Ali Khamenei, facilitated the rise of more liberal presidents, like Rafsanjani and Khatami, who favoured the normalisation of economic and political ties with the international community (Esposito, 1998: 221). The objective was the reconstruction of Iran and the recovery of its economy, after the war, and national interest superseded the export of the revolution. Economic and political interest saw Iran supporting Russia, India and China against Islamic factions inside their countries (Halliday, 2005: 218) and the establishment of close ties with Christian Armenia (Dalacoura, 2001: 242). Iran has also accused the Taliban of Afghanistan of “un-Islamic” behaviour (Esposito, 1998: 225). Despite rejecting the modern state system, the revolutionaries in Iran used it to seize power, and maintain it, and Iranian foreign policy, since then, has become deeply influenced by its national interests.

Politics prevailed over religion in foreign policy but it also did in domestic affairs and not only after Khomeini’s death. The political domain toppled the religious one in the choice of leader but also in the application of the *sharia*, the cornerstone of political Islam (Roy, 2002: 87). Khomeini himself stated that overruling Islamic law can happen if it benefits the Islamic state, claiming that it will, therefore, benefit Islam as well (Roy, 2002: 87). The requirements for the guardian of the state were also changed for political interest, rather than to benefit Islam. The constitutional amendments of 1989 reversed the qualifications needed to occupy the role of *vilayat-i-faqih* from religious to political requirements (Roy, 2002: 85). These changes

happened as to allow the nomination of Ayatollah Khamenei, better known for his work as president than as a religious leader. The new constitution also prohibited the direct election of the guardian by the people in a clear political move to protect the government establishment (Roy, 2002: 85).

Conclusion

As I have demonstrated with the two examples of opposition and ruling Islamic movements, the quest for the Islamic state is no more than a myth. Despite their all anti-western and anti-state rhetoric, these movements are deeply conditioned by their national boundaries, especially in the scope of their action. They argue in favour of an Islamic state, ruled by Islamic law, but their closeness to power dims their religious aspirations in detriment of their political interests. The revolutionaries in Egypt chose a more reformist path, in order to maintain their lucrative status quo. The same happened in Iran, where the clerical elite chose to overrule the *sharia* for political motives and to stop its support of all Islamic movements for the sake of economic and political ties with the international community. Despite their undeniable influence in changing the political landscape of the Middle East, these movements have failed to live up to their promise (Roy, 2002). They failed to create a true Islamic state because of their inaccurate political framework as well as their changing perspective on politics – brought on by their actual involvement in it. The politicisation of their movements has put politics ahead of religion and, in doing so, did the exact thing they argued against – the secularization of politics; “political logic won over the religious, instead of promoting it” (Roy, 2002: 61). The differences between the different political and religious fields at work, in the Middle East, have made Islamist movements essentially nationalist in their action and forced them to redefine the

relationship between politics and religion as two autonomous spheres (Roy, 2002, 81-83). Despite arguing the contrary, they perpetuate the modern state system by working within it and taking advantage of its institutions to seize and maintain power (Dalacoura, 2001: 247). The modern state survives and, in the end, the main difference, put forward by Political Islam, is a rhetorical one.

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