Chapter 1: What Accounts for Popular Support for Islamist Parties in the Arab World?

Notes for CPW participants:

The following is a draft of the intro chapter to my dissertation project. At present, I am working to reframe the project to speak to a different literature than I had originally intended. Given the timing of the paper, I have not been able to incorporate all I had hoped for within this version of the document. For that I apologize, but I look forward to hearing your comments and thoughts as always.
Introduction

Following the economic crisis of the mid-1980s, elections reinstated and opposition parties were legalized in numerous Arab countries. Although many analysts believed this political liberalization might lead to full democratization, such hopes were not fully realized. Rather, competitive authoritarian systems became entrenched whereby opposition parties existed but were highly unlikely to achieve power. Regime restrictions and political institutions were developed to limit their overall success and ensure that the regime remained firmly in control. Yet, this political opening altered the nature of the system creating new risks for the regime and new opportunities for a set of political actors.

At the same time, there was a religious reawakening taking place throughout the Arab world. After the perceived failure of Arab socialism and the Arab nationalist movement as a result of defeats in wars to Israel in 1967 and 1973, the Middle East and North Africa witnessed an increasing Islamicization of society and politics (see Ajami 1992). The Iranian revolution in 1979 lent further strength to the political elements of the movement. As a result, political liberalization led Islamist actors to organize politically founding numerous parties and political movements throughout the region. While Islamist parties or movements appeared in most Arab countries, the success of Islamist parties over time is mixed. For example, in the case of Jordan, the primary Islamist party, the Islamic Action Front (IAF), has seen its support drop dramatically over the last two decades. In the 1989 elections, Islamist independents who were the precursor to the IAF\(^1\) won forty percent of the seats in parliament while capturing just over fifteen percent of the overall vote. Support in elections was relatively similar in the subsequent

\(^1\) Political parties were not legalized in Jordan until 1992.
1993 and 2003 elections, but due to changes in the electoral rules, the party only won around fifteen percent of seats. However, public opinion polls reveal an ongoing decline in support down to as low as three percent in recent years while in the 2007 election, the IAF won less than five percent of the overall vote.

In Yemen, support for the Islamist Islah party appears to have remained essentially constant over the same period. In each of the three parliamentary elections since 1993, the party has won approximately just over twenty percent of the overall vote and has maintained between sixteen and twenty-three percent of the seats in parliament. Yet, during the same period within the Palestinian Territories, the support for Hamas has steadily increased. In the early 1990s, Hamas was a relatively small party with support just under ten percent as late as 1997. However, by the time of the 2006 parliamentary elections, it captured forty-five percent of the vote.

In all three cases, political parties are legal and have been allowed to compete, although with certain constraints. Each exists within a competitive authoritarian
framework, meaning that the rules of the game are designed to disadvantage non-state parties. Nevertheless, the parties are allowed to operate formally and place official candidates on ballots unlike some other systems in the Arab world where no parties or only certain parties are allowed to participate.

Moreover, each of these parties represents a relatively similar religious ideology derived primarily from the teachings of the Muslim Brotherhood. Representing a conservative interpretation of Sunni Islam, these parties all advocate a return to Islam by Muslims throughout society and seek to increase the role of religion in public life. While all three parties—as well as most Islamist parties—officially seek to reinstate shari‘a, or Islamic law, by participating in the system these parties seek to do so incrementally rather than by overthrowing the system entirely. While there is some theological debate within the leadership of each party, on the whole the theological beliefs of these parties are relatively similar.

Although it is possible the differences in success of these parties results in societal differences in support for the concept of political Islam, empirical evidence demonstrates that in all of these three cases support for the concept of political Islam is relatively similar. Using data from the Arab Barometer (2006/7), just over half of respondents are favorably disposed to political Islam from each of these three societies. As such, it does not appear that differences in attitudes toward this basic ideology between the three societies is likely to explain this vast difference in support for the Islamist parties.

Within the literature on the Arab world, there are multiple accounts that have sought to understand support for Islamist parties, but most have concentrated only on the causes of support for the Islamist movement more generally rather than seeking to
understand differences in support across space and time. As such, these accounts tend to result in primarily post-hoc explanations of a phenomenon rather than generating dynamic models that generate testable hypotheses which predict under what circumstances support will increase or decrease.

While models within the broader literature in political science have developed models to predict the likelihood of success for opposition parties in non-democratic states, on the whole these models have focused on regime failure rather than on party success. In cases where these models do examine the opposition party, they have largely ignored the role of ideology as an explanatory factor. Additionally, relative few of these accounts have explicitly considered the dynamics specific to a party claiming to embrace a religious ideology and if and how this may affect the overall success of a party.

In seeking to address these limitations, I seek compare the changes in support over time between the three aforementioned cases. I argue that the existing alternative explanations have tended to focus attention on the state or regime, largely ignoring opposition parties and their ability to win voters ideologically. Within the realm of religious parties, such as these Islamist parties, I seek to demonstrate that the use of religion presents an initial opportunity for the party. Within these contexts it provides an basic underlying ideology and worldview in addition to offering protection based on its association with religion. As such, these parties show initial strength compared to non-religious parties.

However, embracing religion also represents a severe limitation if the party seeks to increase support over time. Given its religious nature, the party will struggle to develop clear and meaningful platforms on many non-religious issues. Unless it can
successfully “Islamicize” the most important issues facing society, it is unlikely to increase its support. Thus, rather than helping in to increase popularity, the religious nature of the party limits its ability to appeal to a broad segment of citizens. In sum, the embrace of religion by these parties is the pathway to initial success, but it also serves as a virtual straightjacket which limits their long-term success in most cases. Thus, only in unusual political contexts will these parties be able to be highly successful.

**Definitions**

**Islamist Party**

Adherents of political Islam, or Islamists, believe of that religion should play a greater role in both society and politics. They believe that the decline of the Arab and Muslim world is due to the fact that modernity has decreased the place for religion in both regards. As such, Islamists seek to use the Qu’ran, the *sunna* and *hadith*, and Islamic tradition to develop a complete system of governance under Islamic law, or the *shari’a*. Thus, Islamists seek to translate theology into a political ideology and apply it to the modern world. By extension, Islamist parties are organizations that seek to compete in elections and win support in the hopes of affecting the political system. However, it should be noted that although the final goal for these parties is the implementation of the *shari’a*, not all parties seek to implement this immediately and the exact interpretation of the *shari’a* often varies.

This definition offers middle-of-the-road approach compared to others within the literature. Some minimalist definitions simply accord that political Islam is “Islam used
to a political end” (Knudson 2003, 2) while being largely agnostic about what this means or the methods. Other definitions include detailed statements about the exact belief structure of each group such as Ayubi (1991) or Roy (1994) which may needlessly exclude some Islamist movements. However, this definition largely accords with Fuller (2003, xi) who states that adherents of political Islam believe that “Islam as a body of faith has something important to say about how politics and society should be ordered in the contemporary Muslim world and implemented in some fashion.”

**Party Success**

The dependent variable in this analysis is the *success* of Islamist parties. For a political party, success can be defined as being able to implement or affect political outcomes to reflect the desires of the members of the party. In order to affect policy, a party needs be an active player in the political arena within a country. Most often, this means contesting elections, serving in parliament, and attempting to mobilize supporters in the goal of realizing the desired changes. For issue-specific parties, this may mean that their relevance is short-lived. In some cases, parties can actually be successful by having other major parties co-opt their issues or incorporate them into their platform. For parties with a broader agenda, success implies influencing the political outcomes over time.

Most often, party success is understood in terms of vote totals which is a measure of overall support, at least within democratic regimes (Meguid 2005). While this measure could be questioned in non-democratic regimes given a lack of freedom of expression and limitations on the freedom to vote, overall support remains the most crucial aspect for understanding party success in these contexts. If a party has little
support from the public, it cannot be said to be successful and will likely only feature in politics if the regime completely fails. On the other hand, if a party can win a large share of support from the public under unfavorable conditions, it can be said to be highly successful. In the intermediate case, there are some parties which win some support from the public, but do not approach levels which could realistically challenge the regime. These can be said to have intermediate levels of success.

More specifically, parties with less than ten percent of support amongst the general public or in elections can be said to have low levels of support. Occupying the intermediate ground, parties with ten percent to twenty percent support can be said to have intermediate levels of support. Finally, if an opposition party has more than twenty-five percent support from the general public or in elections, it can be said to be successful in non-democratic settings.

**Existing Literature**

Insofar as the broader literature within political science has examined opposition party success in non-democratic societies, it is usually viewed through the lens of regime breakdown or transition. As a result, this literature has tended to make two basic assumptions. First, it is largely assumed that regimes are the primary actor in these contexts with the capacity to limit opposition gains in most circumstances. As a result, this literature makes a second related assumption which is that opposition only occurs when the regime has first been severely weakened. Accordingly, rather than examining when and why opposition parties are likely to succeed directly, most of the existing literature focuses on why authoritarian breakdown occurs which in turn leads to openings
for opposition parties. Most often it is predicted that opposition parties will succeed by virtue of regime weakness during times of economic failure (see Desai et al. 2009; Magaloni 2006; Greene 2007) or when the state loses the capacity or willingness to repress the opposition (see Bellin 2005). Others present an institutionalist account, claiming that certain institutional features make a non-democratic state more or less likely to endure (see Geddes 1999; Brownlee 2007).

These regime-centric accounts largely assume that opposition parties succeed due to the void created by a regime failure. However, regime weakness or failure does not necessarily lead to opposition party success. In the three cases mentioned above, Yemen is widely considered to have the weakest state apparatus. Nevertheless, the opposition party has achieved only a moderate level of success. Regimes may weaken, but they do not collapse fully unless another actor is able to overtake them. As such, assuming that opposition parties succeed when regimes fail provides an incomplete understanding of this phenomenon.

While the broader literature within political science has largely ignored the dynamics that lead to the success of opposition parties, much attention has been given to Islamist opposition parties within the Arab world. These accounts provide numerous theories to account for general support for Islamist parties, including sincere and strategic support, network advantages, and public service provision (see Clark 2004; Gellner 1981; Layachi 2004; Lewis 2002; Sahliyeh 2005; Singerman 2004; al-Suwaidi 1995; Tessler 1997; Wickham 2004; Wiktorowicz 2004). Others have even attempted to determine if the Islamist parties, as well as the movement more broadly defined, has succeeded or failed (see Ayubi 1991; Kepel 2002; Roy 1994). Yet, these accounts have two important
limitations. First, none of them seek to account for why Islamist parties win a certain level of support within each society. Rather, most seek to simply understand what factors underlie support.

Second, with the exception of García-Rivero and Kotzé (2007), Kepel (2002), and Roy (1994), these studies tend to focus on a single case rather than from a comparative perspective. Given the similarities between these parties as noted above, there is significant leverage which is gained from examining multiple cases to identify the factors leading to differences in Islamist party success. As such, a full understanding of the dynamics of Islamist party success must take these two factors into account.

**Opposition Party Success in Authoritarian States: A Framework**

Understanding the factors that underlie differences in party success requires examining the competition that exists between the regime and opposition parties for the support of individuals. Within this framework, individuals represent the demand side of the equation hoping to benefit in some manner by either voting for the regime, voting for the opposition, or abstaining. Islamist parties and regimes represent the supply side of the equation, with the opposition party seeking votes while the regime seeks to win votes from supporters and abstentions from dissenters. While these actors compete against each other, the potential success of both parties and regimes will be constrained by the political contexts in which they operate, meaning that it is necessary to take this factor into consideration as well.

*Individuals*
For ordinary citizens it would seem irrational to cast a vote against the regime given the possibility, however remote in some cases, of retribution for voting for the opposition in a non-democratic system. Given that most elections are not fully free or fair, it is possible for the regime to have knowledge of how an individual cast his or her vote. Since there is generally little if any expectation that an opposition party will win, it is rarely if ever rational to cast a vote for such a party within this context. Moreover, even if violent repression is not a likely consequence, regimes can use vote totals as an important test of loyalty to the regime, meaning that votes against the regime can be costly in material terms for a given region. As such, it does not appear that the demand for opposition parties will be great within these societies.

Yet, there is demand for opposition does exist and many opposition parties receive a meaningful vote share in elections in non-democratic regimes. Thus, this outcome results in a paradox: ordinary citizens cast votes which seem to be against their own interests. This paradox, however, has strong parallels to one which has long been examined by scholars, namely why individuals choose to join rebellions or undertake revolutionary actions. While the argument that the existence of selective incentives can resolve this paradox is controversial, Lichbach (1994) argues in favor of this approach. Namely, he argues that in cases where no rebel organization exists, open rebellion is relatively unlikely. However, in cases where there is an organized resistance, it is possible to use selective incentives to help resolve this paradox. Lichbach argues that in cases where material incentives can be provided to the poorer peasants and a combination of material and ideological incentives to middle-class peasants, then rebellion becomes a realistic possibility.
The case of Islamist parties has an important difference from cases of rebellion or revolution. First, these parties operate legally and in plain view of the regime. Second, the relative costs of participation are relatively low. Relative to being actively involved in an organization, voting is a fairly minimal form of participation. Moreover, given that Islamists win a sizeable minority of the vote, it is unlikely that the regime will have the capacity to repress every individual who voted for the party. Third, voting does not necessarily translate into clear benefits. The regime is not able to directly reward each citizen that voted loyally, meaning that benefits or punishments are more likely to be in the forms of collective goods rather than individual goods. In sum, the relative costs and benefits of voting for the regime or the opposition are much less within these political systems compared to open rebellion or joining a revolutionary movement.

Nevertheless, it can be assumed that in order to cast a vote for the opposition, a citizen must expect that some benefit will possibly result. Generally speaking, this perceived benefit could fall in to one of three categories: material benefits, public goods, or to send a signal of protest to the regime in power.

In the first case, an individual is likely to support an individual or candidate if there is the possibility of receiving material benefits or gaining access to power. While it is commonly assumed that elections in non-democratic societies are largely meaningless, recent scholarship has revealed that there is actually significant competition in many cases. In Jordan, Kilani and Sakijha (2002) and Lust-Okar (2004) both detail the importance of elections in competing for access to representation for economic interests. Parliamentarians are expected to provide friends and associates with wasta, meaning that they channel both jobs and material benefits to their supporters. In Algeria, Benstead
(2008) finds elections play a similar role as citizens compete for access to individuals who can provide basic services or other assistance to his or her constituents rather than for ideological issues.

If voting for material benefits or services is the norm, then this results in a major disadvantage for a non-regime party. First, parliamentarians are oppose the regime are less likely to be able to deliver public services and other material benefits to their constituents. These benefits from the regime are reserved for candidates that are loyal, meaning that if an Islamist candidate wins, it is highly unlikely that his or her constituents can expect *wasta* in return. Yet, Islamist parties also face another challenge in regards to providing material benefits to supporters. Given that this is a form of corruption, it can be detrimental to their religious image to engage in such practices. As a result, Patel (2006) details that in Jordan the Islamist IAF strictly limits the provision of *wasta* by its parliamentarians. Elected officials police one another seeking to limit such behavior to help reinforce the party’s image of being against corruption. As such, the expectation is that if an Islamist candidate wins election, there is a lesser chance of receiving individual material benefits from government channels.

Nevertheless, there is a parallel manner in which Islamist parties can reward their supporters. Due to its association with the broader Islamist movement, party supporters can be channeled to Islamic organizations to receive material benefits. Islamic hospitals and other social services organizations connected to the broader Islamist movement provide these benefits throughout the Arab world (Clark 2004). In fact, these parallel institutions are often better in quality than those provided by government, and Patel notes that Islamist parliamentarians often do channel constituents to these services.
Yet, while it is possible to provide some material benefits through Islamic charities to supporters, it is more difficult to make these benefits exclusive to supporters. Given the mission of Islamic charities, the goal is to provide services for those in need regardless of whether or not beneficiaries vote for the party. Charities are located in most regions of these societies, including in areas without strong support for the Islamist party. While it may be possible to provide known supporters with preferential access to these services, potential voters understand that they can receive these services without supporting the Islamist movement (Clark 2004). As a result, the likelihood of material selective incentives playing a major role in explaining support for Islamist parties appears low. And, by extension, it appears unlikely that this is the factor leading to significant variation in the success of Islamist parties over space and time.

A second explanation that may lead an individual to support an opposition party or candidate is the perceived potential to affect public policy. In fact, in cases where Islamist parties have formed powerful blocs within parliament, the direction of policy has changed. For example, following the 1989 elections in Jordan, Brand (1999) and Sahliyeh (2005) detail the social policies which were altered when Islamists controlled four ministerial portfolios as a result of having won forty percent of the seats in parliament. For example, laws governing relations between the sexes were altered to conform more closely to the Islamists’ interpretation of the shari’a. Even in cases where the Islamist party is not likely to win, it may be possible, with a large enough vote share, to get the regime to co-opt some policies forwarded by the party to prevent its further success.
As such, potential voters might support opposition parties due to the particular nature of their platform. For Islamist parties, the nature of their platform can be divided into two types of policies: religious and non-religious. In the case of the former, Islamist parties, seek to increase the role of religion in politics. Given that traditional interpretations of Islam advocate that political and religious power should be unified (see Gellner 1981, 1; Lewis 2003), pious Muslims are likely support a party seeking to increase the role of religion in politics. Similarly, these parties often advocate social policies based on Islamic teaching such as relations between men and women. Individuals who support these policies would also be more inclined to support the party. Thus, despite the potential costs, individuals who strongly believe that religion should have a greater role in politics are more likely to support an Islamist party.

Alternatively, individuals might also be attracted to Islamist parties due to their support of non-religious policies. Unlike religious policies, these issues have no specific basis in religious law or religious tradition, but are nonetheless incorporated into an Islamist party’s basic platform. For example, Islamist parties strongly condemn corruption and some potential voters may support Islamist parties due to the perception that they are less likely to be corrupt (Tessler 1997; Lahloh 2006). Although the Islamist party cloaks this claim in religious language emphasizing that Islam forbids such behavior, ultimately a campaign against corruption is a non-religious issue. Similarly, Islamist parties may advocate policies that advocate increasing public services for the poor. While Islamic language is used to justify these positions, this too is a fundamentally political platform. In the extreme, in Yemen the Islah party has put forth detailed policies about how to improve the state of fisheries throughout the country. As
such, if an individual is attracted to these policies, it is possible they may support the party.

Given that the exact nature of a party’s ideology as well as the nature to which a party focuses on a certain issue can vary over time and space, differences in response to party platforms could account for variation that exists over space and time.

Third, it is possible that individual support for an opposition party is strategic, meaning the real intent is to signal disapproval to the regime to a greater extent than simply than abstaining from the election. Tessler (1997) and Layachi (2004) find support for this claim, noting that much of the support for Islamist parties in the Arab world derives from individuals who are not overly religious or supportive of a greater role for religion in the public sphere. Rather, these individuals are frustrated by a lack of improving standards of living, high levels of unemployment, and an inability to have an affect on existing policies. As such, these individuals seek to send a message to the regime. Given that Islamist parties represent the most powerful opposition movement in most societies, then this behavior is likely to lead to support for these parties.

Yet, there are other means to indicate disapproval for the regime than voting for an Islamist party. Rather, an individual is able to abstain, an option that can be a more powerful option given the fact that relatively few citizens believe that the election will be free and fair. Low turnout rates can be seen as strong rebukes to the regime, functionally denying that the regime and the election have little if any legitimacy. Second, strategic behavior of this nature should affect electoral outcomes, but should have a lesser effect at other times. Given that public opinion surveys asking respondents which party they feel
best represents their views reveals variation over space and in some instances over time, strategic support is not likely to be the primary factor accounting for this variation.

*Parties*

Islamist parties seek to compete for the support of individuals in the previously mentioned manners. However, within this competition, there is reason to believe that they may have some advantages over other types of parties due to their association with the broader Islamist movement. First, religion represents a competing authority to that of the state (Linz and Stepan 1996) with many adherents in most societies. Moreover, the line between religion and politics is quite blurred with many social policies and issues falling within both realms. As a result, the state faces a significant challenge in limiting the activities of religion. Fearing the strength of the Islamic movement and its leaders, the state can face a significant threat to its own legitimacy as it tries to limit the actions of the Islamist movement. As a result, by existing partly in the sacred sphere and party in the political sphere, the Islamist movement both faces less state repression and has a greater capacity to resist in when the state does repress the movement compared to non-religious opposition parties.

The association with the mosque accords other advantages as well. First, not only is the regime less likely to openly act against the party, but the party also has a greater capacity to organize and mobilize supporters than non-religious parties. Preexisting networks between mosques and religious leaders can serve the dual function of organizing the faith and organizing its political arm (see Layachi 2004; Singerman 2004; Wickham 2004). Friday sermons can be used to help mobilize potential supporters to
vote for the party and to support its activities more broadly. Religious leaders can also use the sermon to condition members of the congregation to believe that certain issues are important, which likely overlap with the issues highlighted by the party.³

Second, Islamist parties benefit from having a clear and coherent message that is widely accepted. Within the Arab world, the basic concept of the *shari’a* or Islamic law in the abstract is highly popular (Arab Barometer 2006/7) and has extremely positive connotations in Arabic given that it literally means the right or straight path. Given that the majority of Muslims generally support this concept, Islamist parties have a natural and popular claim to forward within the political realm.

Third, this basic platform presents a vision that is easily conceptualized by most potential supporters. The Islamist vision is one that reminds individuals of the strength and glory of the Arab world in the past and contrasts it to the present weakness of the Arab world. It claims that by returning to religion and religious law, it would be possible to return to these past glories (Ayubi 1991). While the religiosity of past rulers and empires is questionable, there is a general perception that piety has decreased over time. As such, whether factual or not, Islamists provide a clear version of what went wrong and also how to fix it. Although not all citizens are likely to agree with this platform, it does represent a viable position capable of winning support.

Yet, while these parties are advantaged relative to other parties, these same advantages are also found in each of the three cases under study. In each society, the party can use the free space created by its association with the mosque to organize and the nature of this space has not changed significantly over time. Additionally, the basic

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³ Religious leaders do not necessarily do so intentionally. In fact, in most cases it is likely an unintentional effect. Nevertheless, given the common occurrence of political questions being addressed in Friday sermons, such conditioning is likely to take place.
party vision and worldview are also constant between cases and have not changed appreciably over time. As such, it is unlikely that the variation seen in these three cases is the result of these factors.

However, as noted previously, the one variable which the party can affect and which can change over time is party strategy related to its ideological positions. In each case, the party is able to choose the positions it advocates as well as how much emphasis it chooses to place on these issues. If the party can develop positions that are relevant to potential voters, then it becomes possible to win support. As such, the exact nature of the party strategy in regards to its platform can vary. Thus, party strategy in regards to ideology is the most likely party-level factor which could account for this variation in party success.

*Regimes*

The goal of non-democratic regimes can be assumed to be to capture rents and to secure legitimacy for its rule. In an attempt to maximize both of these functions, these regimes do not necessarily seek to eliminate all sources of opposition. Such action is extremely costly in terms of both resources and can damage legitimacy, meaning that often other strategies are pursued. Rather, regimes seek strategies that will help insure their continued control of the state while minimizing the costs spent overseeing and intervening to limit opposition gains. As a result, some opposition may be tolerated as long as the regime believes it is not a significant threat to its hold on power.

The first option available to a regime seeking to limit opposition gains is direct repression; it is possible to arrest leaders and supporters of the movement, break up their
rallies, or make their activities illegal. These techniques are all employed by all three regimes, however, making it unlikely that the variation in support is the result of this strategy.

A second technique employed by regimes is indirect forms of repression, including institutional designs meant to limit the success of opposition parties. For example, regimes, cognizant of areas of opposition strength, may underweight representation from these areas within parliament through gerrymandering (see Lust-Okar 2004). As a result, opposition parties, even if they win a higher percentage of the vote, only make incremental gains in parliament. Moreover, if gerrymandering is done effectively, it can make it appear that the party is losing strength by winning fewer seats. For example, in Yemen, despite winning a more-or-less constant share of the vote, Islah has seen its number of seats in parliament steadily decline over the last four elections. In light of Timur Kuran’s (1997) cascade model, the perception that opposition parties are in decline based on electoral results could help limit party success.

Other tactics can also be employed to help affect the vote. In Yemen, for example, it is common for government workers to receive a significant bonus in the days before the election as a clear reminder of whom they should support. In other cases, such as Algeria, the constitutional commission banned a key opposition figure for running for the presidency in 2004 citing that he did not meet certain qualifications (Robbins and Tessler 2007). Other strategies include ballot stuffing or intervening in a small number or races but not in the majority to create a sense of a “fair” vote. Many other techniques are also available to regimes as Schedler (2002) demonstrates.
More subtle strategies to limit opposition gains include techniques to limit the ability for opposition parties to gain traction politically. Opposition parties, by definition, oppose the regime, meaning that if the regime can make this act more difficult, then it will hinder opposition parties. There are multiple manners in which the regime can undertake such action.

First, if the regime presents itself as the primary defender of the nation, then it becomes more difficult for opposition parties to oppose it. For example, the regime may seek to hold itself up as the creator of the nation as well as the critical factor holding it together due to the fact that existing countries were artificially created in the aftermath of colonialism. This strategy is common throughout this region. As Fred Halliday (2000, 40) writes, in the Arab world “it would seem that the nations did not capture the state. Instead, the state captured or rather created the context for the formation of the nation.” As a result, the regime can hold itself up as the sole protector of both the state and the nation, suggesting that if it were to fall, then chaos would ensue. This portrayal by the regime is in line with Darden and Grzymala-Busse (2006) who find that in societies where the nation and state are not distinct, opposition parties are less likely to be successful.

Second, regimes can seek to control the nature of the political spectrum to increase the salience of certain issues while minimizing others. Namely, the regime can seek to promote unobjectionable policies to provide few if any issues for an opposition party to compellingly oppose. For example, an issue such as economic development is emphasized without providing specific policy details. The opposition is left with few means to oppose this policy as the natural opposite is non-development. Without
specifying a clear plan of how development will be obtained, the party cannot challenge individual policies but in effect agrees with the regime that development should be a priority.

Similarly, regimes promote increasing access to and the quality of government services. Given the poor state of most public services throughout the region, this call is one that is widely supported by Arab publics. Yet, it also offers the opposition few openings. It cannot openly be against services, but without a plan of how to improve services, there is nothing to directly oppose. As such, the opposition party once again finds itself in functional agreement with the government. Thus, by forwarding functionally unobjectionable policies, the regime can help shape the political environment to limit the ability for opposition parties to use ideology to appeal to potential supporters.

Third, regimes can also seek to create a political environment that does not emphasize ideology in the political process. Most commonly, the regime can seek to make political competition explicitly about economic distribution. If potential voters pursue rent-seeking behavior, then ideology will have less salience to potential voters. While Islamist parties may be somewhat more insulated due to their association with Islamist charities, they are unable to match state resources for those hoping for material benefits. More importantly, however, this regime strategy can serve to limit the ability for an Islamist party to win voters based on ideology. If national elections represent a competition for state resources where voters have a reasonable expectation of receiving some material benefit, then it is more difficult for an opposition party to win potential
supporters. Thus, while parties seek to increase the importance of ideological elements in elections, regimes seek to decrease the importance of ideology within the political sphere.

Political Contexts

While both parties and regimes can seek to affect the importance of ideology within the political system, their ability to accomplish these goals is partially dependent on the political context. In terms of the importance of ideology, there are two primary factors which could affect the ability of these actors to increase or decrease its importance in the political process.

First, the nature strength of traditional identities can play a significant role. Given that Islamist parties seek to appeal to a religious identity, the existence of other traditional identities is an important intervening factor. This is especially true given that Islamic identity, while strong, is unlikely to be overly salient as an appeal in elections due to its universality. Because there are few who candidates or parties who do not pay lip service to Islam at some level, other identities have the ability to be more salient given that they are not universally held. For example, family, tribal, regional, or, in some cases, linguistic differences may have a greater salience than religious identity. These identities are more likely to create an in and out group which can serve as the basis of political competition. As such, the potential value of an appeal based on Islamic issues can be diluted due to the existence of other traditional identities.

Second, the stronger these competing traditional identities are within society, the more likely it is that the regime can limit the importance of political competition in elections. Given their non-ideological nature, traditional identities allow the regime to
use these identities as a means by which to distribute economic resources through the political process. For example, leaders of powerful families or tribes can compete in elections to win access to the patronage of the regime, thus removing political issues from the political process (Lust-Okar 2004). Similarly, if regional identity is important, then this creates unity around a party or slate of candidates seeking increased regional powers without any other significant ideological claim. In cases where such traditional identities are not present, or cannot be readily made salient in the electoral process, then the regime faces a more significant challenge in centering political competition around non-ideological issues.

Second, regime type can have important implications for ideology. In political systems with a dominant party, it can be more difficult to decrease the importance of ideology within the political spectrum. As a party, it is more likely that regime has or at one time forwarded some form ideological commitment, meaning it could face challenges from an opposition party based on its association with this set of beliefs. On the other hand, a non-party regime such as a monarchy possesses no real ideological commitment. Rather, the monarch can portray the palace as being above politics and as the protector of the country. Thus, assuming legitimacy comes from a traditional basis, the monarch has no need for ideology to secure legitimacy for the thrown. As such, in regimes without a dominant party, the regime is more likely to be able to decrease the importance of ideology within the political system.

**An Alternative Theory of Islamist Party Success**
Islamist parties possess a number of advantages when they enter competition within non-democratic states with a predominantly Muslim population. Their embrace of religion resolves many challenges confronted by opposition parties in other environments. First, it provides them with a basic platform claiming that religion should have a greater role in society that is generally popular with a wide segment of the population. Second, the association with the mosque offers a form of free space to allow the party to organize and broadcast its message despite efforts by the regime to limit its success. Third, the appeal to religious identity, a strong but broad identity throughout the Arab world, can provide a large number of supporters initially. Fourth, due to the absence of other opposition parties, any potential strategic voting is likely to favor Islamist parties.

As a result, Islamist parties have a natural support base in elections which appears to be around fifteen to twenty percent. This base tends to be composed of individuals who are more religious, believe that Islam should play a greater role in politics, and support the party for strategic purposes.

Yet, while this is the initial base of support in almost all Arab countries, it is not guaranteed. In fact, over time support can and does fluctuate due to the competition between the party and regime over potential voters. Thus, for an Islamist party to become successful, it must maintain its base while seeking to win more supporters. On the other hand, failure occurs when the regime can find ways to limit growth while weakening base support of the party.

Winning more supporters based on religious identity is not overly realistic. This would require a broader societal change leading to increased religiosity that would only
take place gradually. Insofar as support is generated from service provision, increasing material is extremely costly and would likely on yield a marginal benefit, especially due to the fact that there is no manner to ensure that individuals using these services actually vote for the party. Receiving additionally strategic support is primarily dependent upon individuals’ attitudes toward the regime. Moreover, with the possibility of abstention, the likelihood of increasing support dramatically in this manner is limited.

As such, the most likely manner is to win over additional voters based on non-religious ideological platforms given that it is functionally costless and could yield many additional supporters. Party strategy thus must seek to reinforce the religious base while transforming the party to appeal to non-religious ideological position. If the party can appeal to these voters and positions itself appropriately, then the result is likely to be a dramatic increase in popular support as occurred with Hamas in the West Bank and Gaza.

At the same time, regimes seek to limit the ability for Islamist parties to win voters ideologically by attempting to lessen the importance of ideology within the political sphere. If winning supporters based on ideology is not a viable option for the party, then it is likely to at best maintain its base. In this case, the party takes measures to help reinforce the base in order to remain politically relevant. If the party is successful, the outcome is a more-or-less constant level of support such as occurred in Yemen.

If, however, the regime can not only fully remove ideology from political competition but can also make elections solely about material benefits for potential voters, then the base of the party is likely to decrease. In this case, the party cannot win additional voters based on non-religious ideological platforms and also loses its base due to the regime’s ability to increase the perceived cost of casting a vote for the Islamist
party. In this case, a vote for the party means that an individual is directly giving up potential material benefits. While the former base may prefer to vote for an Islamist party, the potential costs become too great within this type of electoral system.

In sum, the result is that the competition between Islamist parties and regimes comes down to ideology. If the Islamist opposition can increase the role of ideology in the political process and be closer to the median voter, then it is more likely to be successful. If on the other hand the regime can eliminate the role of ideology, then the status quo will continue or support can even decrease in some cases.

This competition, however, is modified by political contexts. While both Islamist parties and regimes help to shape political realities, ultimately some political contexts are more conducive to Islamist party success or regime success than others. In cases where political or social issues that can be more easily cast in religious terms are present, then the opportunity for Islamist party success is greater. On the other hand, in cases where such issues are not present, Islamist parties will have a greater challenge in winning support.

Second, if the dominant societal issues allow the regime to forward an unobjectionable position, then ideology will also play a lesser role. While Islamist parties can attempt to increase the salience of issues which are more suited to opposition within this environment, it presents a greater challenge for the party and decreases the likelihood of party success. Thus, the success or failure of Islamist parties is dependent upon the outcome of the battle over the role of ideology within the political system which is modified by the political context in which the competition is taking place.
Works Cited


