Faith in Moderation: Islamist Parties in Jordan and Yemen

Jillian Schwedler
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. 252 pages.

Much that has been written about political Islam emphasizes the negative images of suicide bombings, bearded and seemingly blind proponents of jihad, patriarchal gender ideologies, and intolerance toward non-Muslims. Jillian Schwedler's comparative study of two "Islamist" political parties in Jordan and Yemen, respectively, is a welcome reminder that Muslims are just as capable of protecting their faith in moderation as anyone else. Her book provides a valuable record of the historical development of both Jordan's Islamic Action Front (IAF: Jabhat al-`Aml al-Islami) and the Yemeni Congregation for Reform, better known simply as the Islah (Reform) party. A political scientist with first-hand experience in both countries, she has researched the previous literature on each party and conducted over three dozen formal on-the-record interviews with party officials and other relevant individuals (and more than 200 political actors overall, p. 31). The bulk of the interviews were conducted between 1995 and 1998, with follow-up trips as recently as 2003.

The book has two main goals. One is the comparative case study, which compares and contrasts the very different political trajectories in both coun-

tries. Overriding this is a theoretical concern with explanations for transition to democracy, a field called "transitology" in political science. Of special interest to Schwedler is the inclusion-moderation hypothesis, a pragmatic argument that "including Islamists will both promote moderation and reduce radicalism" (p. 11). The book's first chapter is devoted to a review of the extensive literature on this issue, including its application to Middle Eastern and/or Islamic cultural contexts. Some of this literature review, so necessary in the Ph.D. process, may discourage readers who are not political scientists, as might the social science in-narrative referencing system (e.g., on p. 8 over three dozen author/date citations on the page break the narrative flow). But the author's argument is sound, and the detailed analysis of the political process is well worth continuing through to the end of the book.

Her field study leads Schwedler to correct earlier simplistic causal scenarios and issue a call for more nuanced study of "Islamists" in the political process:

> This study calls for detailed attention to the internal dynamics of particular groups, not to identify moderates from radicals but to reveal the range of activities, alliances, and debates that characterize entities often treated as unitary actors. It also underlines the need to study political practices outside of formal state institutions. (p. 214)

A very important finding, especially for political science, is that "the distinction between state and nonstate actors is not always clear" (p. 83). As an anthropologist I applaud her study, in which careful observation of what Muslims both say they want to do and actually do differently hones theory, rather than subsumes political actors into pre-existing and often self-serving essentialist notions. Yet I wonder why this perceptive critique does not also lead to a questioning of the widely variable term *Islamist* itself. If there are significant differences in the Jordanian and Yemeni contexts, do we really need to label both by a term with prejudicial baggage in its popular usage and much previous academic referencing? Are all parties claiming a Muslim identity *Islamist* in a meaningful way?

Having conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Yemen since 1978, I am in a better position to judge the case study of Islah. Schwedler gives the unique background of Yemen's contemporary history, in which Ali Abdallah Salih (the current president) and Abdallah al-Ahmar (the most significant tribal leader) represent the loose coalition of an emerging military-backed nationalism grafted onto the fiercely independent tribal base of local community action. It is unfortunate that the author, when dealing with Yemen's tribal

context, relies almost exclusively on Paul Dresch, whose quoted claim that "only about 25 percent of Yemenis are tribal in any meaningful sense" (pp. 136-37) would come as a surprise to the majority of Yemen's population. Previous ethnographic studies on Yemeni tribalism by Najwa Adra, Steven Caton, Tomas Gerholm, Andre Gingrich, and Shelagh Weir (not to mention a slew of relevant Arabic books and journalistic accounts by Yemenis) would have provided a valuable corrective to Dresch's narrow definition of what constitutes "meaningful" tribalism. Indeed, it may be the tribal values, shared by most rural Yemenis regardless of the formal tribal structure adduced by an outsider analyst, that best define the seemingly incoherent base of Islah as a political party.

Finally, there are several printing errors and one glaring historical misstatement that no doubt was a copyediting slip: Imam Ahmad, not his father Imam Yahya (p. 57), died in 1962 on the eve of the Yemeni revolution in the north. In addition, there is no mention of Imam Badr, who, although deposed, continued the struggle for a Zaydi state with backing from Saudi Arabia and several northern tribes. The singular for tribe is *qabilah* and not *qabil* (p. 136), "portral" (p. 145) should be "portrayal," and "al-Zidani" (p. 188) should be "al-Zindani."

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