

## **Remaking Muslim Politics: Pluralism, Contestation, Democratization**

*Robert W. Hefner, ed.*

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We can sense, Robert Hefner announces in the introduction to this edited volume, “a new dynamic of popular participation and contestative pluralism ... inspiring dreams of a Muslim politics that is civil and democratic” (p. 11). Herein lies the book’s singular thesis. Since 9/11, scholars have spilled enormous quantities of ink in convincing western audiences that radical violence and ideological intolerance do not characterize mainstream Islam. Yet the quest to delineate Islam’s compatibility with democracy often meant ignoring the complexity of ideas *within* the stream of democratic Muslim thought. This eclectic collection fills this gap, bringing together twelve authors who demonstrate the rise of new Islamic voices promoting civic pluralism within the boundaries of religious tradition. However, they also show that such views have triggered fierce contestation from more conservative

interlocutors. In laying out a sweeping map of these battles, the volume performs a necessary service to general scholars of Islamic politics.

This book ties together thirteen remarkably diverse chapters, most consisting of detailed case-level analyses of countries as diverse as Egypt, Malaysia, and France. They all revolve around a deceptively simple claim: An autochthonous discourse of a civil-democratic Islam *is* emerging in Muslim public spheres and can provide an alternative to the dichotomous trap that plagues political discourse in so many Islamic (especially Arab) countries: either secular autocracy or illiberal Islamism. However, the volume hesitates to provide a theoretically robust framework for what a civic-democratic Islam precisely entails beyond the vague notions of “decency” and “equality.” Even accepting the caveat that, as Peter Mandaville warns in his “Sufis and Salafis: The Political Discourse of Transnational Islam,” that “it is not and will never be possible to identify a single form of civil, pluralist Islam” (p. 322), it still behooves the authors to postulate what basic rights and institutions would emerge under a minimal view of a civic-democratic Islamic order.

Thus, there are many well-researched chapters, among them Gwenn Okruhlik’s “Empowering Civility through Nationalism: Reformist Islam and Belonging in Saudi Arabia,” Bahman Bakhtiari’s investigation of former President Khatami’s reform program in “Dilemmas of Reform and Democracy in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” and Jenny White’s study of the Justice and Development Party in “The End of Islamism? Turkey’s Muslimhood Model.” However, while they explore the national contexts of discursive struggle, they give little empirical guidance as to how the most basic variables (e.g., political structures and economic relations) might change if civic-democratic Islamic voices *do* triumph.

Such vagueness also clouds the contradictory articulations of Muslim democracy in other chapters. For instance, M. Qasim Zaman’s essay, “Pluralism, Democracy, and the ‘Ulama,” establishes that the ‘ulama will continue to retain a central role in any Islamic political order. Compare this with Thomas Barfield’s contribution, “An Islamic State Is a State Run by Good Muslims: Religion as a Way of Life and Not an Ideology in Afghanistan,” which concludes that such deference to traditional authority has deterred the formation of independent political parties in post-Taliban Afghanistan, institutions that he concedes are part-and-parcel of a functional democratic system (p. 237).

Yet perhaps because the concept of civic-democratic Islam is so messy, the volume does succeed in demonstrating the sheer diversity of actors, contexts, and vocabularies involved in its crafting. Many authors draw from the

sociological literature on civil society to explore how democratic Muslim voices might “scale up,” as argued in Dale Eickelman’s “New Media in the Arab Middle East and the Emergence of Open Societies,” to generate novel forms of “participation linking persons, localities, and regions to wider society” (p. 54). Civic-democratic Islamic politics requires not only a resurgence of associational activism from below, but also a symbiotic interaction with state actors from above. Such state-society bridging can enable the vibrant social forces examined in this volume (i.e., the middle class, political parties, the `ulama, women’s movements, liberal reformists, and legal scholars) to forge inter-group coalitions and open dialogues with the ruling elites.

The state-society symbiosis also applies in western contexts. Mandaville’s exegesis on transnational Islam and John Bowen’s “Pluralism and Normativity in French Islamic Reasoning,” for example, scrutinize how immigrant Muslim communities in Europe have renovated their ethical and legal traditions to deal with new social situations. They do not face a banal choice between an ossified view of the Qur’an or an unabashed adoption of western norms. Instead, many Muslim intellectuals have refined such concepts as civic decency, institutionalized pluralism, and individual rights to fit within their own principles of reasoning. As Mandaville notes:

We are not charged only with seeking to shift Islam toward a more progressive orientation, but rather – and perhaps more importantly – we are also seeking to create the conditions that allow Islam’s rich history of pluralist tolerance to flood into the present. (p. 323)

Unfortunately, the book stutters at another key point. The tone set out in the introduction suggests that the *social* production of an indigenous Islamic pluralism emphasizing civic and democratic tolerance will lead to *political* transformation in stagnant autocracies across much of the Islamic, and especially the Arab, world (pp. 25-28). For political scientists, however, the robustness of long-standing authoritarian regimes derives not from their control over Islamic interpretation, but rather from the coercive capacity of ruling incumbents: regime elites, whether king or president or general, simply possess more resources to coopt or crush civic challengers than do those challengers who seek to nudge recalcitrant autocrats toward making concessions. Only when incumbents lose their mechanisms of control during crises do democratic transitions commence.

Hefner’s chapter, “Muslim Democrats and Islamist Violence in Post-Soeharto Indonesia,” offers a sterling example of the dissonance between social theorizing and empirical reality. The author focuses on describing how nascent liberal parties and Islamic movements have toiled in consoli-

dating the fragile democratic order, born in the turbulent regime transition of 1998. But Soeharto's downfall materialized not because moderate Islamic voices had overtaken the corrupt Indonesian state apparatus, but rather because a string of political disasters (i.e., the fiscal crisis of 1997 and subsequent mass demonstrations) had so vitiated the authoritarian regime that policymaking and security processes simply collapsed. Unless civic-democratic Islam offers a practical framework to chip away at the institutional foundations of dictatorial rule, efforts to anchor civic pluralism within Muslim thought may be ineffective in fostering overt democratization.

*Remaking Muslim Politics* remains, on balance, an important work. It captures the wide breadth of civic-democratic Islamic voices with exhaustive detail in cross-national contexts. Its theoretical imprecision notwithstanding, it remains a valuable descriptive reader for social scientists wishing to observe the "state of the field" in the manifold struggles of interpretation unfolding in Muslim legal and political discourse.

Sean L. Yom

Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Government  
Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts