Kamran Bokhari and Farid Senzai, *Political Islam in the Age of Democratization*, New York, NY: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2013

Jocelyne Cesari, *The Awakening of Muslim Democracy: Religion, Modernity, and the State*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014

Shadi Hamid, *Temptations of Power: Islamists and Illiberal Democracy in a New Middle East*, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2014

Will the 2011 uprisings lead to democratization in the Arab world and what role will Islamist movements play in that process? This important question exercises analysts of the Middle East, policy makers and, more importantly, the citizens of the region. It also provides a unifying theme for the three works reviewed here.

The question is one of many that can be asked about the impact of the 2011 uprisings on the Middle East region. In dealing with it, we must steer between the Scylla of Western-centrism and the Charybdis of Middle Eastern exceptionalism. On the one hand, we cannot fall victim to the Western obsession with democracy that Anderson identified in her seminal and still prescient article (2006) as bedevilling US Middle Eastern studies and skewing scholarly analysis of the region's politics. On the other hand, we cannot presume that in the Middle East democracy 'does not matter' or that it matters less than in other parts of the world. The Arab uprisings of 2011 showed that democracy does matter in the Middle East region. Although the popular demand for it was not expressed under the 'democracy' label as such, the substance of it lay behind the calls for 'dignity' which, alongside 'social justice', constituted the main demands of the demonstrators. In 2011, the people of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen and Syria, and in other parts of the Arab world, erupted in fury against the lack of accountability, arbitrariness, tyrannical practices and arrogance of the authoritarian

regimes that ruled over them. What else but the institutions of a democratic polity would remove such types of behaviour and achieve decent governance?

Four years after the outbreak of the uprisings, the Middle East region has been transformed in (predictably) unexpected ways – a point to which I will return below – but the question of democratization remains. Given their prominent role in the political developments which followed the uprisings – though not in the uprisings themselves, which they did not lead – it is legitimate to focus our attention on Islamist movements. The question asked by interested observers is: in those contexts where a democratization process has occurred in the post-2011 Arab world, have Islamists been playing and will they play a positive or negative role? Behind it lies a broader question: Can Islamist movements and, by extension, Islamist political parties espouse democratic norms and, if so, can we see instances where they have, in fact, espoused them? The latter question predates the uprisings by years and even decades and has been an important aspect of the academic literature and wider public debate on political Islam. It has also informed the research underpinning the books reviewed here. In these three works, as elsewhere, the answers given to these questions diverge widely and sometimes depend more on the predispositions of the observers than on the cool observation of empirical reality.

Kamran Bokhari's and Farid Senzai's *Political Islam in the Age of Democratization* aims 'to assess the role of religion in politics within Muslim societies, especially in light of the transformational changes taking place since the Arab Spring' (p. 185). The authors offer a theoretical discussion of democratization and political Islam, and various typologies of Islamists (see pp. 26 – 30), finally settling for 'participators', 'rejecters' and 'conditionalists' (pp. 44 – 7) as the book's organizing principle. Chapters 4 – 10 examine, over the three periods of the 1990s, the 2000s and the post-2011 years, Islamist movements which participate in democratic systems (the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Arab Shia parties), those that reject it (al-Qaeda and the Taliban) or accept it with conditions (the Salafis). The Turkish Justice and Development Party (AKP), a 'secular party' (p. 173), is treated under the special category of 'post-Islamism'.

The reader is left somewhat uncertain about the book's main argument. Is it that Islamists will participate in democratization in some way or other, generally and in the post-2011 Middle East? The book's Conclusion states: 'Our central argument is that Islamists have played a decisive role and will continue to do so in the years and decades ahead as the region transitions through this democratization process' (p. 185). If so, this is a rather

obvious and general statement. Or is the book's main argument that Islamists are becoming more moderate and will play a positive role in the democratization process? If so, the evidence to back it up is not really provided. For one thing, the authors' assumption that 'democratization' – a word which inherently contains the idea of transition – is taking place in the region, is not really borne out by events. The authors refer to 'the current Islamist-led transitions' (p. 38) but not a single one such remains in the Middle East following the July 2013 military coup which overthrew the Muslim Brotherhood-led government in Cairo, the Tunisian parliamentary and presidential elections of October– December 2014 and the chaos in Libya. Even if we assume that democratization will eventually take place, at least in some Middle Eastern countries, and that Islamists will inevitably play a role in it, there is no evidence in the book to support the authors' claim that '*the majority* [my italics] of Islamists are participatory with regard to democracy' (p. 189). If the Muslim Brotherhood, the Arab Shia Islamists and elements of the Salafis in Egypt comprise the 'participatory' category, it is not made clear how and why these constitute a 'majority'. This is an important distinction: it is one thing to argue that Islamism in the Middle East is becoming 'participatory' with regard to democracy, and quite another to say that one strand within it is doing so – the implication being that other Islamist strands could be going the opposite way.

The book raises the further issue of whether Islamist participation in the democratic process entails the espousal of democratic norms and how one understands these norms. There is no doubt that the Muslim Brotherhood, which is analysed in Chapter 4, is a 'participatory' Islamist movement, in the sense that it has chosen to play by the formal rules of the democratic game. However, although the authors write that the Brotherhood is 'committed to the democratic process' (p. 76), they also state that 'it has still not internalized democratic norms' (p. 77). A clearer distinction between democratic and liberal norms – specifically whether by 'democratic' norms they mean 'liberal-democratic' or equate democracy with majority rule – would have sharpened their argument.

Bokhari and Senzai can be careless with their references and, at times, sweeping in their statements. They make numerous references to 'Western academia' as if it is a uniform body. For instance, they maintain that 'the idea that Islamists might have something meaningful to contribute to the political discourse is unfathomable' (p. 1) and that 'Western thinkers have long considered secularism as a precondition for democracy' (p. 8). Both statements pass over the profound disagreements within Western academia, if such a thing indeed exists, over these issues – evident in Jocelyne Cesari's

book, to give but one example – and the latter, in particular, ignores the extensive debates on religion, secularism, de-secularization and post-secularism of the past few years.

Reading Bokhari and Senzai's references to 'Western academia' alongside Shadi Hamid's assessment of it in *Temptations of Power: Islamists and Illiberal Democracy in a New Middle East* is a disconcerting experience. For Hamid, the straw man called 'Western academia' is an altogether different guy! Hamid assures us that Western academics have all too easily accepted the thesis that 'political participation leads to moderation'. This may, indeed, be a widespread view among students of political Islam and some policy makers, particularly in the United States, but it is by no means the uniform position on the subject that Hamid makes it out to be (for a critique, see Dalacoura, 2011).

Against this alleged consensus in 'Western academia', Hamid argues that repression, rather than inclusion, leads to moderation. His evidence in drawn from research carried out in 2004 – 06, 2008 and 2010 – 13. He examines Islamism in the 1980s, the 1990s and 2000s (Chapters 3, 4 and 5 respectively). The second half of the book covers the Arab Spring (Chapters 6 – 8), the focus here being Tunisia and Egypt. Besides his core argument, the author develops the additional position that Islamist movements may have become more 'moderate' but have not, in fact, genuinely democratized, adopting, instead, the trappings of democracy and liberalism for tactical reasons. The book ends with a clear statement that Islamism and liberalism are irreconcilable (p. 188). A final chapter on 'the Tunisian exception?' confirms the author's scepticism. For Hamid, it is not only that moderation, in the sense of democratization, has not taken place within Islamism – but that it can never do so.

Like Bokhari and Senzai's volume, Hamid's book would have been well-served by a clear conceptual distinction, at the start, between the exigencies of democracy and liberalism. If democracy is simply defined as majority rule, then the term 'illiberal democrat' (p. 173) is an appropriate one for describing many Islamist groups. However, the author does not use the terms democracy and liberalism consistently throughout the work. As for the term 'moderate', it is not always equated with 'democratic' or 'liberal' in the relevant literature, as he maintains. Similarly to the idea of a 'political centre', 'moderation' is, or should be, always (not only sometimes, as he claims on pp. 46 – 7) a relative term: a moderate movement in one political and social context would look very different from a moderate movement in another context.

Hamid argues that repression has not led to genuine democratization or liberalization but the tactical and hypocritical adoption of liberal and democratic principles by Islamist groups. Arguably, including Islamists in the political process – rather than repressing them – could have led to a more genuine endorsement of liberal and democratic values. Hamid would probably not agree with this suggestion but the question is why. In a revealing passage, he contrasts the Islamists in the Middle East with the leftists in Chile who did, he argues, sincerely adopt liberal and democratic values as a result of Pinochet's repression. For Hamid, Islamist groups are 'fundamentally different from traditional political parties' (p. 49); Islamism is a particular type of ideology, a special case, which can never be reconciled with liberal and democratic principles.

Hamid castigates Islamists for having one thing in their hearts and saying and doing something else when they are in power (p. 218). One wonders why this is different from politicians of other hues, the world over (the author touches on this but does not follow its implications through). Peering into people's souls for evidence and assuming a direct link between values with behaviour is a tricky business. The broader question here – linked to how we understand the prerequisites of democracy, a question I will turn to in the conclusion – is whether Islamists will play a positive role in a democratic process only if they sincerely adopt democratic principles or, alternatively, by virtue of their constituting one of many centres of political power.

In contrast to Hamid, my view is that the plasticity of religion – Islam included – is enormous, if not infinite, and that Islam in particular has the potential to be reconciled with democratic and liberal principles. This is not to say that *at this historical juncture* Islamists have liberalized and democratized: for a variety of historical and socio-political reasons (some of which are suggested by Cesari's work, discussed below) they have not, although a number of them have taken steps in that direction, i.e. they have become increasingly willing to participate in the democratic game.

Hamid's book is verbose and sometimes prone to platitudes, but it is very readable. The author's reference to 'hundreds' of interviews does not bode well. However, it soon becomes clear that he has a good feel for his subject and the book is interspersed with anecdotes of considerable insight which are used in support of the argument. One example is his observation, in the Egyptian electoral campaign of 2011, of the public's lack of interest in political issues and its obsession with 'morality' (p. 18). Here again, however, one wonders whether the dramatic groundswell of opinion against the Muslim Brotherhood during its year in power, due to its failures in

addressing tangible security and economy problems, means that, ultimately, politics did trump 'morality'.

Jocelyne Cesari's work, *The Awakening of Muslim Democracy: Religion, Modernity, and the State*, is a game of two halves. Part I of the book shows that Islam's politicization in the modern Middle East started with the process of state formation in the region, and specifically through the appropriation of Islam by the state for the purposes of nation-building. This is not a new argument but Cesari's important contribution is to demonstrate it in detail and emphasize that the co- optation of Islam was carried out even by secular regimes. In four dense, impressive chapters (3 – 6), Cesari describes the nationalization of Islamic institutions and the role of Islam in the constitutions, the legal systems and the national educational curricula of Egypt, Iraq, Tunisia, Turkey and Pakistan. The building of a hegemonic Islam led to the 'invention of Islam as a modern religion' (p. 110) and the moralization of the public order. Through this process, aspects of pre-modern Muslim societies, such as gender, conversion and blasphemy, which had been part of the social sphere, became politicized. In the author's words, the increased social and political visibility of Islam is not caused by an increase in beliefs. People are not stronger believers than they used to be, but their identification to belonging and behaving has certainly shifted. It means that collective identifications and public norms are reshaped by Islamic values or principles and vice-versa, even in the case of secular regimes such as Turkey, Tunisia, or Pakistan. (p. 117) Part II of the book argues that 'the intertwined fabric of the state and Islam explains why Islamism became the major political force in most Muslim countries' (p. 120) and that 'Islamism can be interpreted as an amplification of the framing and pruning of Islam by the authoritarian state' (p. 121). The careful demonstration of this argument – the causal mechanisms whereby a hegemonic Islam turns into an oppositional Islam – should have been, in my view, the key contribution of the book but the promise is only partly fulfilled. Chapter 7, for example, argues that Islamist movements turned against incumbent regimes after rising through Islamic institutions, such as mosques and religious festivals, and other loci of religious authority, which 'indirectly provided venues for political opposition' (p. 123). What is not fully explained is why these institutions escaped the control of the state and, more importantly, what fuelled the oppositional drive of these movements to existing governments. Cesari argues that 'religious norms and references cannot be completely controlled by the state' (p. 115) but no more is offered on this tantalizingly insightful comment.

Instead of a meticulous exposition of how and why Islam, initially co-opted

by the state, is then adopted by oppositional groups which turn against it, Part II offers a general description of Islamic parties (in Chapter 7, though the chapter is purportedly about Islamic institutions), a rather broad discussion of Islamist ideology (Chapter 8) and of Islamist techniques of social mobilization (Chapter 9). The analysis goes back a few decades, as it should; however, the author is also constantly tempted to tell the story of the Arab Spring and its aftermath. This is interesting and useful in itself, of course, particularly because of the detailed information Cesari has amassed, but occasionally becomes a digression from the main argument, especially as only two of Part I's five case studies (Tunisia and Egypt) experienced major upheavals in 2011.

In Part III, Cesari introduces the concept of 'unsecular democracy', defined as a political system where civil liberties and democratic institutions and practices, such as 'free and fair elections, the right to political opposition and organization, the right to express political opinions, and freedom of the press (to a certain extent)', are respected; but where religious symbols, ideas and rituals are prominent and also inscribed in the law; and the 'rights granted to the person, from sexual freedom to the right to exit or criticize Islam', what the author calls 'the rights of the self', are limited (p. 240). The author argues that 'the institutionalization of Islam and its public presence need not be an obstacle to successful democratization' (p. 237), although it must be noted that this rests on the distinction between democratic and liberal politics (p. 239). Turkey and Pakistan are mostly dropped and the discussion focuses on developments following the Arab Spring in Egypt and Tunisia and, in the case of Iraq, events of recent years.

The applicability of the concept of 'unsecular democracy' to the Middle East is still to be determined (and its relationship with the 'Muslim democracy' of the book's title is not elucidated): following the military coup in Egypt in July 2013 and the regression of Iraq into war and turmoil, it is only to the Tunisian case that it may be applicable and, even there, the elections of October– December 2014 demonstrated a rebounding of secular forces which are resisting 'unsecular democracy'. Nevertheless, 'unsecular democracy' will most probably have enduring value, in that it captures the idea that the social sphere will remain politicized and conservative even in those Middle Eastern states which adopt democratic institutions in the formal sense. For some, such a democracy is an oxymoron but others – including, arguably, Cesari (pp. 240 – 41) – see it as a stepping stone towards a full-blown liberal democracy.

Parts of the Arab Middle East are currently in the throes of counter-revolution and war, both common – some would say inevitable – outcomes

of revolution. This does not mean that the 2011 uprisings have not jolted the region towards democratic change. It will happen, two steps forward, one step back, and two developments have already pushed in that direction: the first is the popular turn-around in Egypt against the Muslim Brotherhood following its one year in power; the second is the rallying of secular forces in Tunisia against the Islamists. Both are signs that some degree of healthy political contestation has been re-injected into the region's body politic. However, Middle Eastern polities will not evolve towards a uniform condition called 'democracy', nor will they do so in a uni-linear fashion. Rather than thinking about democracy in the Middle East as a system which polities either attain or not – judged against a mythically prototypical 'Western democracy' – it is more fruitful to think about the process of accomplishing democratic reforms and the piecemeal building of democratic institutions, achievements along the way towards varied and imperfect outcomes.

When considering the prospects of democracy in the Middle East region, it is right and proper to consider the values of significant actors, such as the Islamists (but also secular political forces and the wider citizenry), and ask whether they have truly espoused democratic and liberal principles. However, democratic change can alternatively be seen as a 'second best solution to intractable conflicts of interest' (Waterbury, 1994: 34) – the product of bargaining or a struggle for power between a constellation of political forces, even if these forces do not hold democratic or liberal views. From this perspective, a democratic polity emerges out of a vibrant political scene which combines, for example, popular participation and pressure from below, a dynamic and sophisticated political class, civil society organizations, political parties and other centres of political power. If, indeed, democracy is not directly or primarily dependent on the political preferences and standpoints of significant actors and citizens, Islamists will play a positive role in its emergence in the Middle East, even as 'illiberal democrats'.

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