

USIPeace Briefing

What Do Islamists Really Want? An Insider's Discussion with Islamist Leaders

By [Abdeslam Maghraoui](#)
May 2006

Throughout the Muslim world, Islamist parties have emerged as major power brokers when allowed to compete in free elections. Yet their positions on many crucial governance issues remain unknown or ambiguous. Most debates on the potential to moderate and integrate Islamists in the democratic process have focused on Islam's compatibility with democracy or on debates over Islamists' normative commitment to democracy separately from the mechanics of achieving political power.

As part of its "mobilizing the moderates" theme, the [Muslim World Initiative](#) of USIP organized an off-the-record roundtable discussion on May 5, 2006, on the viability of democratic politics within an Islamic framework. Specifically, the discussion focused on the Islamists' political strategies while in opposition and their commitment to democratic procedures and principles once in power. The meeting brought together the leaders of three moderate Islamist parties and movements from Arab countries as well as U.S. government officials, scholars, and independent policy analysts.

This USIPeace Briefing highlights the central themes and questions that emerged during the discussions. There is a great diversity among moderate "Islamist parties," and their strategies are the products of local power relations. Caution is thus in order in applying these general comments to various Islamist parties.

A Brief Note on Terminology:

For the purposes of this paper:

- **Islamic** refers to institutions, practices, beliefs, and so on, that have no specific ideological or political connotations. Thus: Islamic architecture, Islamic ceramics, Islamic philosophy, and so on.
- **Islamist** refers to political parties and movements that seek to legitimate or subvert a political order on the basis of their interpretation of Islamic principles. Though these movements go back to the 1940s and 1950s (in Egypt), the term

became more commonly used in the 1980s, after the Khomeinist revolution of 1979.

- An important distinction can be drawn between **moderate** and **radical** Islamists. Moderate refers to political parties and movements that use Islamist principles, Islamic law, and/or Islamic referents to participate peacefully in the political process. Radical, extremist, Wahhabists, Salafists, or Jihadists are terms for those who eschew nonviolence in the name of their Islamic beliefs.

The Islamists' Positions

The three Islamist leaders made the following points during the short presentations and responses to questions during the meeting and in substantive discussions before and afterwards. They represent Islamists' views of themselves, or at least their self-representations before a critical, Western audience. In some instances, interviews, articles, and speeches by one or more Islamist panelists were consulted to have a better sense of their positions on key issues.

Rising Confidence in Democratic Participation and Procedures:

- Moderate Islamist parties see themselves as modern, credible, and reformist political actors, not traditional religious preachers with a moral agenda.
- They portray themselves as pragmatic parties that can respond effectively to autocratic regimes, deteriorating social and economic conditions, and increasing extremism.
- They seek power through peaceful means and, in many countries, are confident that they will win if free and fair elections are held.
- As evidence of their political skills and willingness to work within the system, they boast broad and solid social support (including among youth, women, and professionals), vast national networks, good performance in local government, positive relations with entrepreneurs, and willingness to cooperate with secular parties and NGOs.
- They are confident about the prospects for democratic reform and political change despite continuing institutional political constraints and, in some cases, clear repression.
 - They value the benefits of democratic participation, including competitive elections, legal opposition politics, and the alternation of power.
- Islamists dismiss the fear that they might monopolize political power or religious authority if they win wide majorities.
- They counter that existing centers of power (civil societies, ruling monarchies, powerful security and military institutions, or traditional religious establishments) prevent such a scenario.

Commitment to Democratic Norms, Compatible with Islam:

- Islamist leaders assert their commitment to democratic principles, including minority rights, religious tolerance, women's equality and participation, cultural diversity, and political pluralism.

- They underline their commitment to popular sovereignty and qualify the meaning and importance of divine sovereignty.
- Their objective is to make Islamic principles more responsive to modern, practical political needs.
- Moderate Islamists insist that their normative visions draw on Islamic principles such as justice, equality, accountability, and limits on the powers of rulers.
- These principles, they argue, are compatible with Western democratic norms, but not necessarily with liberal values that privilege individual freedom over community rights.
- The question of governance in Islam is open and has not been clearly delineated in Islamic texts.
 - It is inaccurate, they say, to argue that Islamic political principles are incompatible with democratic norms.
- Some party leaders reject the "Islamist" label. They prefer to describe their party as a "party with an Islamic reference point."
- The example moderate Islamists often use as a model for their case are Europe's Christian democratic parties.

Flexibility on Application of Sharia:

- On the question of applying sharia, or Islamic law, moderate Islamists show some flexibility.
 - None of the panelists advocated the traditional application of sharia.
- They all invoke the important role of ijihad, reinterpretation of sacred texts, to adapt Muslim practices to modern needs.
- They refer to liberal Islamic precedents concerning the positive treatment of religious minorities.
- However, Islamist leaders don't discard sharia or see it as incompatible with modern democratic principles.
 - They consider the application of Islamic law in some instances as a social necessity, not a fervent fulfillment of a religious duty.
- They consider religious moral values and Islamic law effective deterrents against social deviance and political decay.

Cautious on Relations With the United States:

- In general, constructive but cautious engagement best describes how moderate Islamists envision their relations with the United States.
 - Notwithstanding major disagreements over U.S. foreign policy, moderate Islamists are conscious of the importance of America as a global superpower.
- U.S. support for their integration into the political process is key to their strategy.
- They also cite the role of religion in public life in America as an example of how religion and politics can coexist.
 - However, moderate Islamist parties prefer to engage the United States multilaterally and in the framework of international laws and conventions—rather than bilaterally.

- Moderate Islamists don't seem to have any plans for bilateral cooperation on "big issues" such as combating terrorism, promoting democracy, or resolving pivotal conflicts (Iran, Iraq, Israel/Palestine, Sudan).
- Islamists have strong reservations concerning most U.S. policies in the Middle East.

Attitude toward Hamas and Relations with Israel:

- Moderate Islamists support [Hamas'](#) right to resist occupation and consider its government democratic and legitimate.
- Though not all moderate Islamists necessarily consider Hamas' electoral victory a triumph for democracy, they highlight the occupation's mitigating circumstances.
- Moderate Islamists therefore see no contradiction between Hamas being in charge of the Palestinian Authority and attacking Israel.
- They argue that Islamist-led governments would fully cooperate with Hamas and will help it shore up international support.
 - Moderate Islamists view Israel as a hostile occupying force that oppresses Palestinians. But they embrace a two-state solution.
 - They do not foresee playing a moderating role between Israel and Hamas or normalizing relations with Israel in the near future.

Major Concerns

During the meeting, a number of participants raised questions about the Islamist commitment to democracy and noted a number of tensions between what Islamist leaders say and what they actually do or might do if they achieve power. Some participants sent follow-up questions and comments after the meeting. What follows covers the range of issues raised during and after the meeting.

Participation in the Democratic Process is Strategically Motivated:

- Some participants expressed concern that Islamists are willing to participate in the democratic process because it favors them, not because they embrace democratic norms.
- These participants worry that there are no guarantees that Islamists will abide by the rules of the game if they come to power.
- They also fear that Islamists can find religious justifications to exercise absolute power once in office.
 - It is not clear, they said, whether moderate Islamists could maintain their popularity and credibility if they participate in a constrained political framework imposed by the regimes.
- Nor is it clear how moderate leaders would deal with more conservative party rank-and-file on key issues such as pre-negotiating a political outcome with governments, building coalitions, and moderating their views on key issues such as the application of Islamic law.

Contradictory Commitments to Democratic Norms:

Among the questions these skeptics had about Islamist parties, a number focused on their apparent inconsistencies regarding democratic norms.

- Some participants wondered whether moderate Islamists are truly committed to democratic norms, including fundamental civil and political liberties, and if so, then what then makes their parties Islamic.
- They questioned how Islamists' verbal commitment to the full range of civil and political rights would play out in the real world.
 - They observed that while Islamist leaders qualify the relevance of "divine sovereignty" and emphasize the role of elected rulers, that does not necessarily guarantee that they will respect modern democratic rights. Anti-democratic norms and restrictions can be imposed in the name of a conservative majority that believes ultimate sovereignty rests with God.
- Islamist leaders, they said, are not clear about whom they represent: "The people" as a whole? A moral majority? Or constituencies with the usual social demands and political priorities?
- Some Islamic principles may well be compatible with modern democratic norms, they argued, but the proof of the pudding will be in how Muslims choose to apply them.
- The possibility exists that different, even contradictory, interpretations of Islamic principles can arise and, in the absence of institutionalized religious authority accepted by all, lead to the subversion of democratic norms.

Ambiguities Surrounding Application of Sharia:

- Given that the most important characteristic of legitimate "Islamic government" is implementation of Islamic law, where, asked some participants, do moderate Islamists exactly draw the line?
- Moderate Islamists, they said, fail to address in specific terms what portions of sharia, if any, are "dispensable" and what portions are both binding and adaptable to modern needs.
- If elected Islamists legislated on matters of public morality and modesty (which could cover a wide range of issues including the hijab, freedom of speech, and alcohol consumption), they would be acting both as modern legislators and as religious scholars and jurists.
- This accumulation of religious authority and political power subverts both democratic norms and the separation of powers essential to the functioning of a democracy.

Implications for U.S. Policies

On the basis of these discussions it becomes clear that moderate Islamists need to sort out several tensions and make some hard choices. A key concern, their professed commitment to modernize and democratize Muslim polities within the context of their religious identity, may take some time to resolve. Yet, the Islamists' ultimate objective of ousting ruling autocrats through free and transparent elections is real and cannot be dismissed as a political ploy. This is also, ironically, a major U.S. objective but in the

consensus opinion of the participants, the United States has as yet no clear policy on engaging Islamists.

In the final part of the meeting, participants offered their thoughts on how the United States should proceed.

Should the United States Engage with Islamists and Support Their Bid for Democratic Politics?

- It remains unclear whether moderate Islamist parties would respect democratic rules and norms once elected to office. Experiments with Islamists in the democratic process are too rare, recent, or the product of exceptional circumstances to withstand generalization.
- Yet, given the Islamists' popular appeal, efficient organization, and political potential, the United States cannot afford to ignore them.
- The professed U.S. democracy promotion strategy is neither credible nor likely to succeed without the cooperation and participation of Islamists.
- In addition to reinforcing secular NGOs and political parties, the United States should support and train Islamist parties, invite their influential figures to Washington, and expand exchange programs with the next generation Islamist leaders.
- Rather than imposing external political conditions on engaging Islamists, the United States would be in a better strategic position if it appears "neutral" among competing political visions.
- The United States should let local political actors negotiate the incentives, constraint mechanisms, and red lines to ensure a successful and sustainable democratic outcome.
- U.S. democracy programs should support programs to foster internal debates between conservatives and moderates within the Islamist parties; dialogue between Islamists and secular parties and NGOs; and a constructive negotiation framework between governments and Islamist opposition groups.

Should the United States Engage Islamists on Normative and Religious Issues?

- The consensus view among U.S. policymakers now is that the United States cannot and should not pursue policies that involve normative/theological issues.
- Proponents of this view argue that the United States would be violating the separation between state and religion and would get bogged down in "esoteric" discussions with no clear end results.
- Others argue that many U.S. programs (such as the revision of textbooks, the modernization of education, and the empowerment of women) already involve normative issues.
- They contend that relying on procedural mechanisms alone to mitigate the Islamists' monopoly of political power is not enough and actually involves some serious risks.
- Taking Islamists on in the cultural and normative dimensions is especially important because those are the fields in which Islamists have their greatest influence.

- One reason why Islamists are so influential in these domains is that procedural constraints may bar Islamists from changing a country's constitution, civil and criminal laws, or even its civil-military relations; but Islamists can control sensitive cabinets such as education, culture, the media, and social services. These cabinets are not crucial to the immediate survival of authoritarian regimes and thus they might more easily relinquish them. But Islamists can use these portfolios to exert tremendous ideological influence.
- Another concern is that institutional constraints might be used by authoritarian regimes to forestall meaningful democratization. These constraints could delegitimize moderate Islamist parties, and benefit radical groups who reject the democratic process altogether.
- For these reasons, the consensus view of the participants—regardless of their degree of skepticism toward moderate Islamists—was clear: the best long-term strategy for the United States, if it seeks to bring peaceful democratic change to the Middle East, is to engage Islamists on normative grounds.
- The most effective strategy to engage Islamists on normative democratic issues is to refer to Islam's progressive and humanistic traditions, not to Western liberal democracy.