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Middle East Elections: Stability or Democracy?

Elections in Israel: the inconvenient results of an unbalanced system

Marina Eleftheriadou

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In its post-election issue the Israeli newspaper Maariv came out with a two-sided front page featuring Benjamin Netanyahu and Tzipi Livni, each one under the header "Congratulations Mr. (Ms.) Prime Minister" and a different set of articles depending on which side you held it. Nothing could better summarize the last elections which, immediately after the Gaza assault and amid an international economic crisis, revolved around security rather than economic issues, highlighted the decline of the traditional left, and signalized the political fragmentation and instability emanating from an unsuitable electoral system.

The apparent importance of the February elections failed to mobilize the Israeli public. The final turnout was 65,2%, slightly higher than the historic lowest of the 2006 elections (63,2%) - and the bad weather was not an adequate excuse. The relatively low turnout in addition to the high percentage of last moment undecided voters reflected an uninteresting electoral race, based on vague platforms. The only one able to stir the passions was Yisrael Beitenu's Avigdor Lieberman with his 'No loyalty, no citizenship' slogan and advocacy of harsher measures against Gaza. He was accredited with 15 seats (four more than in the previous elections), leaving the Labor party in fourth place (13 seats, six less comparing to 2006). The big winner however was Likud, which under Netanyahu's watch has managed to recuperate from near dissolution after the walk-out of the Sharonist pro-disengagement deputies and the creation of Kadima. Likud secured 27 seats, regaining the 15 seats it lost in the previous elections. It would have fared better, had it not been for the Gazan war and its inconclusive outcome, which helped channel votes away from Likud and towards the hardliner Lieberman.

So which of the issues raised during the electoral race had greater leverage with the voters and determine each party's success or failure? While the rest of the world was, and remains preoccupied with the economic crisis, neither the national or global economy featured significantly in any campaign. This seems peculiar if we take into account that according to estimates by the Bank of Israel, the Israeli economy in 2009 is forecasted to contract by 0, 2%. In fact these estimates constitute a readjustment of a previous forecast of a 1,5% expansion. The above figures are more impressive under the light of a 4,1% growth in 2008 and over 5% in the four previous years. At the same time, the exports which constitute 45% of GDP are expected to drop by 6,9% in

2009 after a 3,6% and 8,5% growth in 2008 and 2007 respectively. The same applies to unemployment which, after reaching its lowest point in 20 years in 2008 (5,9%), is expected to rise back to 8% in 2009. While everyone admits that the Israeli economy is on its way to recession - although the situation is not as serious as in other countries such as the U.S. - except Netanyahu who tried to capitalize on his successful tenure (2003-5) as Minister of Finance, the parties kept the economy out of debate. Arguably, Netanyahu's frequent references to his economic prowess, particularly as an ardent free market advocate, may have been more damaging than beneficial to his campaign bearing in mind that it is precisely what he preaches that is under intense scrutiny globally. Moreover, in Israel his policies are thought to have only increased income disparity and are blamed for the hit the pension funds have recently taken. Finally, the lowering of tax rates, championed by Netanyahu in his electoral campaign, are challenged by the Bank of Israel itself which contends that lower tax rates (already down by 16% comparing to last year) would worsen the budget deficit which they claim to fix.

Interestingly, these same issues had a much deeper impact on the Israeli vote three years ago when the economy was booming. At that time the Labor party had chosen a syndicalist (Amir Peretz) instead of a peace-man (Shimon Peres) to lead the party. Then, however, the security-related debate centered around the unilateral



disengagement, and apart from a small segment of the society, there was relative consensus regarding the unilateral disengagement policy. Today, after two failed wars, owing to the apparent and perceived failures of the 'disengagement doctrine', security concerns are predominant. Hamas remains in place, not in the least annihilated after the Operation Cast Lead, and Iran is maintaining its course in the desire to achieve regional and nuclear preeminence, while the new US administration seeks to accommodate rather than confront. Bearing this in mind, the rightward turn of the Israeli public was predictable. Many analysts claim that Israeli society has made a u-turn from left-wing ideals to right-wing conservatism. They make their judgments under the prism of 2006 elections which were 'sui generis elections'. However, if the results are considered within the broader picture there is no such u-turn apparent (except if seen in a few decades spectrum). It is simply one of the occasional center vote swings from one camp to another. What is important however, is the fragmentation inside those camps. On the one hand, in the right-wing camp Yisrael Beitenu has emerged as a considerable force on Likud's right, representing not solely the Russian-speaking vot-

ers as it once used to. On the other hand, Kadima has evolved into a center-left party, 'draining' Labor's pivotal position in the left camp. The net result is a fragmented political landscape with no dominant parties able to impose themselves on their junior coalition partners. Thus, the proportional electoral system that managed until now, with occasional instabilities, to produce workable governments has reached a stalemate.

The outcome is a dysfunctional, patchy, 30-member government, the biggest in Israel's history (in fact the government's meeting table has had to be extended to accommodate them). Despite Kadima's lead by one seat (28), Peres assigned Netanyahu who seemed to have better chances to form a government. After fruitless efforts to form a national unity government with Kadima (and Labor), Netanyahu approached Yisrael Beitenu and three religious parties (Shas, Jewish Home, United Torah Judaism). Although those parties guaranteed him the necessary 61 seats, he opted to include Labor as well. With Labor in the coalition he will not so easily be blackmailed by the smaller religious parties, and will succeed in constructing what will be externally viewed as a more middle ground government (as many raised concerns about the original hawkish composition, especially with Lieberman as Minister of Foreign Affairs. Another unuttered reason was Netanyahu and Barak's hope to push Kadima down the road of Shinui and the Pensioner's Party -to history's dustbin. This coalition stirred a lot of controversy and triggered reactions from Likud (the primary reason for a 30-member government and several ministers without portfolio) and Labor alike. The decision to participate in the government was passed by a marginal 58% while seven Labor deputies sent a letter to Netanyahu stating that they were not bound by the agreement. Barak had his reasons. At the age of 67 and having failed to prevent Labor from heading downhill, it was his last chance for a ministerial chair and his only hope to remain in charge of Labor. However, while digging Kadima's hole, he put Labor's future in jeopardy. This does not mean Labor will disintegrate completely, but it may encourage an increase in voter bleedout from Labor (to some extent Meretz, too) towards Kadima at the electoral or party level. Under Livni's slogan "Bibi or Tzipi" Kadima attracted many left wing voters. It is enough to examine the kibbutznik vote (traditionally Labor) to detect this trend. In 2003 elections 45,5% voted for Labor and 27% for Meretz. In the last elections Labor gained the trust of 31%, exactly as many as Kadima, while for Meretz voted 18% of kibbutzniks. In any case, ten years ago no one could imagine a leakage similar to that Likud suffered in 2005.

The Kadima-Labor duel for a place in the country's political future will be determined by the government's survival, performance and respectively Livni's prospects for an effective opposition. The coalition partners of the new government disagree on everything but Iran, hence if anything pro-active is to be expected from this government, it will come from this front. However, given that the Israelis in a 'red lines' document (presented to Clinton) on the Iranian issue assented on Obama's outreach to Iran under a strict -unspecified- time limit, it is not sure if the Israeli government will be around when this time limit expires -unless Israel chooses to act preemptively. In the meantime, moves can be expected in regards to dealing with Syria, however this is yet another quagmire to trudge through as Israel will make very small and careful steps which will slow down the entire process. The chances for negotiations to take place are slim but still can't be ruled out. Netanyahu visited Golan

few days before the elections and indicated that the return of the heights to Syria is out of question. However, Netanyahu has partaken in dialogue with the Syrians before and realizes the benefits of decoupling Damascus from Tehran. The most stringent reactions will come not from Likud but from Lieberman.

With regards to the Palestinians, the picture is even dimmer and more of a re-active attitude is probable. The last few governments have been preoccupied with buying time to create facts on the ground while at the same time trying to empower Abbas against Hamas. The previous government was reluctant to halt settlement expansion; the present government reportedly plans to authorize the building of another 72.000 settler units especially in the corridor linking Ma'ale-Adumin with Jerusalem. The only difference will be that those repetitive meaningless meetings will be reduced to almost null. What we will witness instead will be a recurrent emphasis on economic development of the occupied territories as Netanyahu professed (with no reference to a future Palestinian state whatsoever) and the -slow- phased process of the Road Map which Lieberman advocated while renouncing the Annapolis process.

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The Israeli policy will attempt to slow the peace process down. However, the exact pace will depend on what may keep the Americans and to a lesser extent the Europeans relatively satisfied. If the Israeli government plays its cards right and merely continues to pay lip service to the notion of a two state solution, (considering certain European officials alluded that should it be taken off the table they would freeze the upgrade of EU-Israel relations), the Israeli government should not face any serious stability problems. In any case the biggest test will be relations with the U.S. The Congress and even the American Jewry are not as susceptible to Israeli demands as they were in the late 1990s. If Netanyahu succeeds to make them and the administration see things from his perspective without having to make tangible concessions, no conflict will arise in the ranks of his government. However, it seems highly improbable that American policy will remain as flexible as it was, and then Netanyahu will find himself in Shamir's position with the American factor intensifying internal policy (economy, religious vs. secular) disputes. Under this light, Netanyahu will find it extremely difficult to keep his coalition together, thus bringing the Israeli political landscape back to square one. What is left to be seen is whether Netanyahu and the rest of the political elite will wait for the 'invisible hand' to bring equilibrium back to the system, or opt for state interventionism and change the electoral system despite the fierce reactions of smaller parties who will struggle for their survival.■

Iran's upcoming elections

Anna Apostolidou

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On June 12, 2009, Iran will hold its 10th Presidential elections, where current incumbent Mahmoud Ahmadinejad will compete with the Reformists Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karubi, as well as with two more independent candidates. The international community hopes for a change in the Iranian leadership, anticipating a shift in Tehran's international conduct; however, the change, if it is about to come, will be related mostly to Iran's domestic affairs rather than its foreign policy.



At first sight, Iran's peculiar political system incorporates various democratic elements: the President gets elected directly by the people, the right to vote is catholic and includes women, and let us not forget that until 2007 the voting age was set at only 15 years old, offering thus the disproportionately large adolescent population the chance to participate in the political process. However, the elements that represent Iran's theocratic system are much more dominant: the highest political and religious authority is the Supreme Leader, a post which has been held by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei since 1989. The so-called velayat-e faqih appoints the heads of the most powerful posts, such as the commanders of the armed forces, the chief judge and the 12 jurists of the most powerful political body of Iran, the Council of Guardians. Apart from its legislative and judicial authority, the Council has the right to reject candidates for Presidential, Parliamentary, and Assembly of Experts elections, and it has repeatedly exercised it, with most recent example the exclusion of 1,700 candidates from the 2008 parliamentary elections on grounds of insufficient loyalty to the Islamic Revolu-



tion. It is worth mentioning that the overwhelming majority of the banned candidates came from the Reformist coalition.

A brief examination of the main three candidates' profiles demonstrates the tendencies characterizing the Iranian political scene: Ahmadinejad is the hard-line Principalist, internationally known for his flamboyant anti-Israeli and anti-American - at least until Obama's election - rhetoric. His social policies are equally controversial, from the crackdown on what is known as 'improper hijab' and the proposed Family Protection Bill (2008) which further deteriorates women's position inside marriage, to attacking newspapers, such as the Tehran Emrouz, the Kargozaran and the Shahrvand-e-Emrouz. His economic policies have also proved to be disastrous: during his term, Iran suffered an unprecedented fall of its GDP, as well as inflation and an increase in unemployment. Despite a recent rift with Ayatollah Khamenei over the implementation of a law regulating the gas supply to villages, Ahmadinejad still enjoys the Supreme Leader's support. It is true, that his failed economic policies, as well as his inflexible rhetoric, resulted in a plunging popularity even inside conservative circles, and in fact, it was rumoured that other conservatives, such as Tehran's mayor Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, would join the presidential race. In the end, the conservative front remained unified with Ahmadinejad as its sole candidate, while the Supreme Leader, for the very first time since the founding of the Islamic Republic, endorsed indirectly the election of the conservative candidate. Khamenei stated that the Iranians should vote for the candidate who guards 'the principles that constitute the regime's identity' instead of 'weak and impotent individuals', with the latter being perceived as an innuendo to Khatami, who had declared his candidacy only to resign later in favour of Mousavi.

On the other hand, the reformist candidates' relations with the conservative ruling elites are rather tenuous: Mousavi's clashes with Khamenei date back to the period when he was the Prime Minister and the latter the

President of Iran, and in fact, they are considered as the main reason for the constitutional change that led to the abolition of the Prime Minister post. The other reformist candidate, Karroubi, was forced to resign from all his political posts, including that of advisor to the Supreme Leader, when he accused a series of conservative politicians such as Mojtaba Khamenei, son of the Ayatollah, as well as the Council of Guardians, of manipulating the vote in the parliamentary elections of 2005. In case, one of the reformist candidates' wins, an attempt to limit the Council's power will not be unexpected. Mousavi has already stated that it is necessary for the country's development to hand over of the police and law enforcement bodies to the President. However, it is dubious whether this is implementable; during his presidency, reformist Khatami tried to pass two bills which would have reinforced his constitutional power as the President and limit the Council's control over election candidates, only for the Council to dismiss them as unconstitutional. Therefore, there is not much room left for a serious institutional change. What seems possible though is the gradual liberalisation of the Iranian society; Mousavi has consistently argued, as soon as during the 1989 Constitutional Convention, that in the name of freedom of expression, private television networks should be allowed. If he gets elected, and assuming that he achieves to persuade both the Majlis and the Council of Guardians for the necessity of this constitutional change, the liberalisation of the mass media could open Aeolus' bags. Nevertheless, it would be too extreme to argue that it would automatically allow anti-regime voices to sound; after all, Mousavi linked the media opening to 'supervision to ensure absence of political or ethical problems'. However, it would first and foremost allow the opposition's voices to reach a broader audience, especially in the rural areas, which currently are a conservative stronghold. Secondly, in spite of certain censorship, it could reinforce the press' status as the '4th authority' aside from the executive, legislative, and judicial ones. Thirdly, depending on the degree of censorship, it could allow the repre-

sensation of ideas and images beyond the government's established worldview, which could lead to debates over social issues, such as women's social status, currently only hollowly pictured in films and the literature. In any case, given the influential power of this medium, private TV stations will gradually pose an alternative to the state's monopoly of ideology.

Regarding Iran's international relations, one can argue that the power of the consolidated political elites in Iran is the main reason that Iran's foreign policy is hard to change, at least in a way other than symbolic. Foreign policy issues, as well as the nuclear file one, are under the jurisdiction of the Supreme Leader, and the President's subordination to him essentially reduces the possibilities of undertaking any major initiatives. For instance, regarding the uranium enrichment programme, it would be naive to consider that even a Reformist president would yield to the Western pressure and abandon it.

The development of nuclear technology has become part of Iran's 'hegemonic ideology', as proved by the statements of all candidates, in which they fully support the country's nuclear activities. Likewise, all candidates tend to recognise the necessity of improving ties with the West, in particular the US; Ahmadinejad's congratulations letter to Obama, as well as his softening rhetoric, broke 'the taboo of negotiations with the US', as fellow candidate Karroubi put it. Regardless the next President, Iran is gradually preparing for a rapprochement with Washington. Additionally, it is expected that whoever the President will be, he will maintain Iran's strong ties with Russia and the Central Asian states, and he will continue to improve its relations with the Gulf States and the Arab world.

But even if the outcome of the election will not change the way Iran perceives other countries, it will significantly influence how other states view Iran. The potential replacement of Ahmadinejad by a Reformist, probably most moderate Mousavi, will lead to a renewal of Iran's image; and Mousavi has vowed, if he becomes the next President of the Islamic Republic, to change Iran's

'extremist face'. The fact that Washington has not initiated negotiations yet regarding Iran's nuclear file and Iraq, and as Reuters reports, does not plan to press for new economic sanctions until the elections, is probably due to this anticipation.

Though it is the Supreme Leader that decides essentially on the most important issues, a more moderate president could facilitate the negotiation process. A second reason for the West's silent awaiting is the notion that dialogue with pre-election Iran could shift the electorate's focus from domestic issues, in particular economic one, which have wounded Ahmadinejad's popularity, to the US-Iranian relations; a topic where the conservatives can exploit the anti-Western popular sentiment in order to rally the people and win the elections. The US allies seem to agree with this tactic: in an interview with the Japanese Kyodo news agency, the Israeli President Shimon Peres expressed his hope that Obama will postpone the rapprochement 'because it may affect the results of the elections'.

However, the outcome of the election might not be the one the West hopes for: as much as Ahmadinejad's popularity has fallen, mainly due to his unsuccessful economic policy, the presence of two Reformist candidates might split the reformist front. Khatami might have withdrawn from the presidential race; however it is unlikely that Karroubi abandons the race. Furthermore, even with Khatami's support, it is dubious whether Mousavi's middle class voters surmount Ahmadinejad's rural supporters. Nonetheless, even if Mousavi achieves to gain the presidency, becoming thus the second reformist President after Khatami he will not be able to generate any radical changes. His election will be merely granted a symbolic significance. The nature of the Islamic Republic's political system, as well as the might of its conservative political elites will not allow it to be anything more. ■



Hizbullah: the most disputed party in the forthcoming Lebanese elections

Styliani Saliari

Hizbullah is one of the several Islamist movements that are shunned by the U.S., Israel and many Arab and Western states as it has not incorporated the universal enlightened values of the 'Western' guardian. Its labeling as a terrorist group nurtures the idea of the existence of an Islamic menace which finds its reflection on the ground in the badly elaborated 'War on Terrorism'. Nevertheless, Hizbullah has become a significant and pivotal force in Lebanon's political landscape and represents one of the main parties of the March 8 Alliance.

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Amid a situation of deep misunderstanding, characterized by a Manichean worldview: a struggle between 'us' who appreciate life and 'them' being Islamists and thus terrorists who embrace death, Hizbullah has actually achieved to sit in the parliament. In the light of the forthcoming elections Hizbullah's leading figures Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah and Sheikh Naim Qasim are convinced that the opposition (March 8 Alliance) will win. Precisely, Hizbullah's deputy secretary general Sheikh Qasim argues that the elections 'will not produce a vast majority and a crushed minority, but rather a majority that has few more deputies above the average'.

Quintessentially of Lebanese politics the pre-electoral situation is complicated and intricate as there are too many factors to consider while various questions have not been solved yet: what about Hizbullah's disarmament? Will there be a transformation of the movement if the March 8 Alliance wins the elections? How will the 'community of nations' react if a non-state actor and resistance movement becomes one of the winners in Lebanon's elections? Will 'Western' states withdraw their ambassadors, impose a trade embargo; in other words, create a situation similar to Gaza?

Hizbullah attempts to create an optimistic atmosphere while emphasizing its commitment to consensus and partnership in ruling Lebanon after the elections refraining from any specific statements about the post-electoral situation. However, as much as Hizbullah reiterates that it wishes to form a national unity government with the other camp and rule in harmony it avoids the issue of finding a solution to the controversial subject of its disarmament. The 'West' in general and the Lebanese parliamentary majority in particular claim that Hizbullah's weapons undermine the authority of the Lebanese state and feel threatened by Hizbullah's self-description as an Islamic resistance movement. Nevertheless, the movement refuses to disarm, asserting that its arms and militia are fundamental for the defence of the country against Israel.

Therefore, the expression 'state within the state' usually alludes to areas within Hizbullah's realm of influence, i.e. an area where weapons can be found not supervised by the regular military and security forces. Moreover, Hizbullah has also rivalled the state and increased its popularity in providing social services and responding to vital needs. According to Judith Palmer Harik, Political Science professor at the American University of Beirut, Hizbullah still trucks out some 300 tons of garbage a day from the dahiye (the densely populated southern suburbs of Beirut).



Thus, one could argue that winning the elections would be too troublesome for Hizbullah as the organization would have to adjust itself sooner or later 'a good deal more' to Lebanon's political situation. Precisely, the movement would be the one in charge of Lebanon's enormous public debt, could be forced into Arab-Israeli negotiations and above all would have to deliver its weapons while its Resistance could be integrated into the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). The 'state within the state' would merely become 'the state' and Hizbullah might have to transform itself into a 'typical' national party. Its popularity could be forfeited since as mentioned elsewhere, according to Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, lecturer at London's School of Oriental and African

Studies, Sayyed Nasrallah's popularity cannot be explained by his 'democratic credentials' but by his vehement opposition to Israel and the U.S. while 'the existence of Israel provides the very raison d'être of movements such as Hizbullah'. Finally, Hizbullah would find itself in a paradoxical situation as its original aims would cease to be in compliance with its new ones.

Regarding the international situation, one might imagine slightly what will happen if Hizbullah becomes part of the parliamentary majority in the forthcoming elections; an organization which above all is mainly perceived as a 'terrorist' group internationally. Particularly, on 3 November 2001 the U.S. refined its classification of Hizbullah by officially naming it a 'Foreign Terrorist Organization' capable of 'global reach'. Moreover, former Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage claimed that 'Hizbullah made the A-team of terrorists [but] maybe Al-Qaeda is actually the B-team'.

Nevertheless at the beginning of March 2009, Britain announced its readiness to engage in talks with Hizbullah, but only with its political wing in order to emphasize the need for dismantling 'militias'. London has not engaged in official talks with the group since 2005 and listed the movement's military wing as a terror group in June 2008. However, according to an opinion piece by Sarkis Naoum on March 13 in the Lebanese pro-government An-Nahar daily a differentiation between the political and military wing does not exist within the organization as Hizbullah's ideology controls everything. In other words, there are not two Hizbullahs. Britain is aware



of this fact; however, it does not want to contradict the American policy and that of several European countries which refuse to talk to Hizbullah as it is a 'terrorist' organization which does not recognize the existence of Israel. According to the U.S. Hizbullah must abandon its 'terrorist activities' and recognize the State of Israel before the movement could anticipate even the lowest level of dialog with the U.S., White House spokesman Robert Gibbs stated on Tuesday March 10. France on the other hand, refuses to support one political party at the expense of another and argues for political dialog and consensus. It said that it would accept any outcome of the forthcoming elections in Lebanon; however this statement seems doubtful as France said the same about the Palestinian parliamentary elections in 2006.

Thus, Lebanon's forthcoming elections emphasize once more that political Islam has developed into a major global force. In other words, religion has been politicized successfully while Islamists are visible in the public scene and are not associated with the periphery anymore. Secondly, and inextricably linked to the former observation, strict policies of isolation and repudiation of Islamists mainly employed by the U. S. have not worked and will not work while Francis Fukuyama's euphoric thesis of the 'End of the History' has crumbled and dissolved into itself. If the elections in Lebanon establish a government 'led' by Hizbullah the U.S., Israel and Europe cannot treat Lebanon like Hamas or Syria because an approach which claims that one part of the world defines the rules which the so-called 'other' must adhered to proved not to be effective: Hizbullah, Hamas, the Taliban, Syria and Iran (the U.S.-led camps major enemies) have mainly 'disobeyed' U.S. sanctions and threats and continue to be.

What is necessary is a nuanced understanding of groups such as Hizbullah since by naming somebody a 'terrorist' one obscures more than reveals. This kind of labelling might merely have its 'pay-offs' from an American or Israeli perspective. Moreover, one should be careful with distinctions between 'moderates' and 'extremists': the Obama administration states that it is interested in ascertaining contacts with 'moderate' Taliban in Afghanistan who could be distinguished from the 'extremists'. Nevertheless, it rejects talks with Hizbullah, a movement that is actually part of the Lebanese parliament. A refusal to understand political Islam is dangerous as it is not just a phenomenon which seeks to fill a void but should be understood as a response to encounters with specific modes of power wherein the state may be 'the most public symbolic and actual repository' as stated by Charles Tripp, Professor of Politics with reference to the Middle East at London's School of Oriental and African Studies. If politicians do not want a repetition of atrocious events such as the Gaza War in 2008/09 they should rethink their political proceedings regarding Islamist movements while Hizbullah itself should be aware of the fact that winning the elections does not only mean gaining power but also being able to compromise otherwise Lebanon will continue to be a 'global transformer station that converts every deviation from the norm into a program of action for a public busy securing water and bread, and burying the dead' as stated by the famous Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish.■

Afghanistan's next President: In search of an authoritative figure

Chrysoula Toufexi



In the face of the Islamist resurgence in Afghanistan, presidential elections are considered to be critical in terms of shaping the region's future. However, the lack of a prominent figure for the presidency up to this moment poses a challenge to the political system as Karzai is perceived as an inherent problem of Afghanistan's inability to fight poverty, corruption, drug trade and terrorism.

As the theatre of war moves from Iraq to Afghanistan the international community pays close attention to the forthcoming elections of the country while at the same time it provides assistance to elect Afghanistan's new President. The presidential elections in Afghanistan are set to be held on August 20, 2009 given that the Independent Election Commission (IEC) decided in non-compliance with the Constitution to postpone the voting. Particularly, the elections were supposed to take place one to two months before the expiration of President Hamid Karzai's term this May. One major concern regarding the election process is the deteriorating security situation, at a time which is characterized by an intensifying Taliban insurgency. According to IEC's chairman Azizullah Ludin's statements in the New York Times, there are still 84 out of the 364 districts in Afghanistan that need to be secured in order to ensure

the safe casting of votes to the ballot boxes. The previous year had been the bloodiest since 2001, indicating the deterioration of security in the country.

However, the delay might lead to a crisis of legitimacy based on constitutional grounds. Precisely, Karzai's authority as the President of the Afghan State might be questioned as his term expires on May 21. Already, members of the United Front Party, which controls about 30% of the House of People - one of the two legislative bodies of the bicameral chamber - have started to raise their concerns over what they see as a technique on behalf of Karzai to rally support for the upcoming elections by using state resources to promote his campaign for re-election. Members of the opposition demanded from the President to appoint an interim government after May 21, which should run the country until the August ballot, especially if he wishes to stand again as a candidate.



Their worry is in no case exaggerated since the highly centralized political system of Afghanistan allows the President to hold extensive executive powers, such as the appointment of district governors and the allocation of governmental posts broadening in this way his base of support.

The surrounding conditions regarding Karzai's intentions to run for President or not are characterized by secrecy and are mostly destructive in an already tense political scene. Although Karzai has hinted at his desire to run again for the presidency, he has not made his objectives clear, thus nurturing his opponents' fears over his alleged exploitation of the state mechanisms - which would be quite harmful to his political rivals. The uncertainty that surrounds the governing of Afghanistan in these three months is a crucial factor for the security of the country as the climate conditions of this period offer a unique opportunity to the Islamic fundamentalist militias to intensify their warfare. In this sense the Afghan Supreme Court's non-binding opinion issued on March 29, to extent Karzai's powers until August in favor of the government's stability and continuity seems plausible as well. It is a decision that aims at surpassing any power vacuum that might be created and exploited by Taliban fighters in case a transitional government leads until the elections. However, the Supreme Court cannot amend the Constitution. This right is reserved to the grand tribal assembly, a body that consists of tribal representatives of Afghanistan and which represents right now the only institutional authority that could end the legitimacy crisis.

Prominent Afghan politicians have requested a constitutional change in order to create the position of the Prime Minister next to that of the President. This demand has been translated as a tactic aiming at curbing the executive power of the President. The scenario is also contrived by Europe and the U.S. in order to promote decentralization of power, in case a prominent candidate able to contest Karzai in the August elections does not

emerge, as European officials stated in the Guardian. Thereby, due to the lack of alternatives, Karzai will retain his status as the only salient political figure ruling Afghanistan; however, his rule will suffer an outflow of power from the President to a possible Prime Minister and from the central government to the local provinces and districts.

Political friction continues amidst recent indications that the U.S. administration has become impatient due to Karzai's inability to curb government corruption, drug illicit trade, poverty and growing instability. An opinion that had already been expressed last year by the then U.S. senator on foreign relations committee Joseph Biden and it is also shared at this stage by the special U.S. envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Holbrooke.

Several news reports highlighted the recent visits of four potential candidates for the Afghan presidency to Washington during Obama's inauguration ceremony. All of them - needless to say rivals of Karzai - sought support for their presidential campaigns. Dr Abdullah Abdullah, a former minister of finance and a leading member of the former Northern Alliance who helped fighting the Taliban in 2001, is likely to be nominated by the National Front, the government's main opposition party, as its candidate for the presidency. Ashraf Ghani, also a former finance minister and Ali Ahmad Jalali, former minister of interior have not yet confirmed their candidacy. They are both well-respected figures in the international community, whereas Jalali incorporates the youth vote superseding sectarian lines. It is estimated that the youth in Afghanistan will play a significant role at the polls as it comprises the majority of the population. Lastly, Gul Agha Sherzai, a former warlord and the governor of the Nangarhar province is presented by the media as the strongest rival of Karzai. His Pashtun dominated province is located in Eastern Afghanistan sharing borders with Pakistan. Once an opium production center, poppy cultivation in Nangarhar has been reduced up to 95% under

Sherzai's governance. Sherzai also served as the governor of Kandahar where he fought for the expulsion of the Taliban in 2001.

U.S. foreign policy is keen on implementing in Afghanistan the same tactic that General Petraeus employed in Iraq and which was deemed to be successful as it made use of Sunni Iraqi militias that thwarted al-Qaida terrorists. Reaching out to moderate Taliban elements that disagree with al-Qaida extremism would be a first step to the start of a reconciliation process in Afghanistan. However, this experiment might prove to be far more difficult to implement in a country where the Taliban and tribal leaders control 2/3 of the territory, while pitting one tribe against another would create deep divisions between them and could ultimately lead to a civil war.

Hence, an influential political figure able to extend the government's authority beyond Kabul is crucial. Sherzai has been among the first of Karzai's political rivals who welcomed the American initiative, while presenting himself as capable of seeking the moderates in the Taliban camp in order to underscore negotiations. He also promised that under his government he would approach the tribal leaders in an effort to empower them in the political and security process. Nevertheless, it is difficult to estimate whether Sherzai is the candidate that could beat Karzai at the ballot boxes.

The presidential candidacy requires a figure that enjoys wide support nationally and although Sherzai is popular among the southern Pashtun tribes it is unlikely that the northern tribes of Tajik, Hazara and Uzbek will trust him with their votes. In the previous presidential elections these tribal groups cast the majority of their votes to Karzai. However, after a five year period they feel disenfranchised by the President's central political autonomy and his tactics to alienate members of the Northern Alliance from the government. The northern tribes will most likely vote in favor of a non-Pashtun candidate such

as Yunus Qanuni, if he decides to participate in the upcoming elections, a Tajik himself, spokesman of the House of People who came second to Karzai in the 2004 presidential elections. He is considered to be a political figure which has the ability to unite the northern tribes. Still, the current president enjoys much popularity in Afghanistan and even if he does not enjoy the unyielding American support anymore, it is doubtful that any of the potential candidates for the presidency will be able to compete with his popularity.

A far more controversial candidacy in terms of its objectives is that of Anwar Ahadi, who until his resignation in February 2009 served in the ministry of finance. He is the leader of the Afghan Mellat Party that supported Karzai in the previous presidential elections in 2004. According to the Afghan daily Arman-e Melli, it is believed that if international support for Karzai withers, then the two candidates will cooperate in order to promote Ahadi for president.

Right now Afghanistan faces many challenges regarding the prospect of successful elections in August this year under the drums of war. One of the most pressing challenges is security and the safety of the electoral process. Afghan and Pakistani Taliban fighters currently regrouping themselves in the border region between the two countries have allied in the face of a renewed NATO strategy proposed by President Obama to focus on thwarting terrorism in Afghanistan by intensifying the buildup of western troops in the region. Afghanistan's ability to safeguard the election process will thus be a critical test for the country. As the ability to promote stability in the country will be one of the most important tasks for the government, it is crucial for Afghanistan to elect a president that will be able to extend his authority to the rural territories of Afghanistan while being able to act in unity with the tribes. ■

The political posture of Egypt's left-wing party

Kyriacos Th. Nicolaou *

The following article presents an analysis of the complex evolutionary trajectory of Egypt's left. It covers the modern history of the country; particularly it deals with the period of the establishment of the 1923 constitution to today while laying emphasis on the ruling eras of Egypt's Presidents: Gamal Abdel Nasser, Anwar El Sadat and Hosni Mubarak.

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The modern history of Egypt can be divided into two major periods - of course being aware of the existence of some sub-periods. Precisely, the liberal and the revolutionary periods can be distinguished. The first one covers the time period from Egypt's first constitution established by King Fouad in 1923 until the launching of Egypt's revolution in 1952 by the Free Officers, while the second period lasts until today.

The constitution of 1923 played a groundbreaking role during that time. Egypt sought to adopt a royal parliamentary democracy through the constitution; however, several of its elements did not allow a complete disengagement from the civil autocracy, such as the fact that the king had the ability to entrust the formation of the government to a person of his liking without taking into consideration the outcome of the elections or his right to dissolve the parliament.

Hence, 'normal' political life was impossible. During the 29 years of the first major period the *Quafd* party always won the elections in which it participated. Nevertheless, it merely governed seven years in total. The constitution did not comply with the King's authoritative ambitions and therefore he tried to dissolve it while succeeding only shortly during Ismail Siady's dictatorship in 1930. At that point of history, an authoritative constitution was opted in accordance with the King's ambitions which could be merely enforced for five years as it was overruled due to public outrage. It must be noted that the multi party system in Egypt started being effective in 1907. However, the parties which shaped the political scene were a result of the 1919 revolution.

The left wing party did not participate in the first elections after the establishment of the constitution since Saad Zaghloul had declared Egypt's Communist party illegal while considering Communism as a crime against society. Since then Egypt had never had a legal Communist party. That first communist party was dissolved and its leadership dispelled. Moreover, some of its members turned out to be part of the security forces, while some others like Araby supported the Nazism. During the late years of the 1930's some leftist organizations of different tones were created, mostly by foreigners that were transformed to the heroic *Hadeto* of Henry Gouriél. Many of its prominent members such as Khaled Mohy ad-Din, Youssef Sidiq, Ahmad Hamroush just to mention a few contributed to the success of the revolution initiated by Nasser.

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In the meantime, a very strong and powerful leftist tendency emerged inside the *Quafd's* youth while a part of the left cooperated with the *Quafd* as it perceived it as the civil party who would contribute to the liberation. Due to these reasons, the left was confronted with the formal line of the Kremlin which expelled it from the 3rd International.

The revolution of 1952 by the Free Officers incorporated persons with heterogeneous views and different ideological backgrounds. Their major common goal was the liberation of Egypt and the prevention of the increasing exploitation. *Hadeto* supported from the beginning the revolution while clashing with Egypt's other leftist organizations and with the formal line of the USSR. The ideological diversification of the revolution led to various confrontations and two years after the revolution Khaled Mohy ad-Din resigned from the revolution council and went into self exile to Switzerland, as he demanded the holding of multi-party elections and the government's execution by politicians and not the army to be fundamental features of the country's democracy. The result of the crisis of March 1954 was that the left stopped supporting Nasser and thus a period of antagonism set in.

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After the revolution in Egypt, a single party was established called *Haiet al-Tahrir* and was later renamed to *Al-Itihad al-Qaoumy*. When Nasser started his socialist reforms in 1961, he aimed at obtaining a party which would lead to a socialist transformation of Egypt's society. Hence, he established the *Al-Itihad al-Ishtiraky* and dissolved the *Al-Itihad al-Qaoumy*. Three years later, in 1964 the two major leftist parties of Egypt self dissolved and their members -individually and not as a unit- acceded to the new party, supporting with these actions Nasser's efforts.

When Sadat took over the presidency in 1970, political parties were once again allowed to be established. He divided Nasser's *Al-Itihad al-Ishtiraky* into three wings which in 1976 obtained an autonomous political existence and he positioned himself at the center. Thus, Khaled Mohy ad-Din established the *Hibz al-Tagamoo al-ouatany al-taqadomy al-ouahdaomy* in which Marxists, Nasserists, gentle religious persons and independent leftists found political shelter.

One year later, he accused the left wing of instigating the biggest rebellion of 1977 and started to persecute it. The persecutions got worse after the denunciation of the Camp David treaty by the left wing. The assassination of Sadat led to the imprisonment of all the oppositional leaders.

With Mubarak a new era of regime relaxation has been initiated in Egypt. His first act was to release all the political prisoners, an act that marked his willingness for allowing a degree of political freedom. During his government, there has been a substantial increase in political parties and the freedom of the press has become a reality as he allowed the creation of non-governmental newspapers. Additionally, the pro-government newspapers did not refrain from a degree of criticism. Two of the chief-editors are well known leftists - Salah Aisa at the *Qahira* and Gamal al Gitany in *Akhbar al-Adab*.

Furthermore, the left has not encountered prosecution or any other impediments in political action. The withdrawal of the Nasserists from the *Tagamoo* in order to found an independent political party did not have any negative effect on the left and particularly on Khaled Mohy; a personality who enjoys the respect of the entire political spectrum. Not only as a historic leader of the revolution but also as a major responsible critic on major political issues whereas he did not promote ideas just for the sake of gaining popularity. His successor one of the most prominent thinkers in the Arab world Dr. Riffat al Said follows the same position. Additionally, he fights vehemently for the universal Enlightenment values including the freedom of speech, helping Mubarak's regime to follow policies that show increasing respect for human rights.■

Algerian Presidential Elections: Islamists demand greater political freedom

A. Karal

Although President Abdelaziz Bouteflika won the Algerian presidential elections by a landslide, his victory is not regarded as a silent acceptance of the regime's policy. Main opposition parties, and primarily the Islamists boycotted the electoral procedure, claiming that the incumbent had effectively won even before the ballots were set.

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The April 9th presidential elections in Algeria followed predictable patterns while the happenings of earlier years reverberated throughout the country. The events of 1991 have heavily influenced any elections ever since. At that point of Algerian history, the army had disrupted the electoral process since the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), under a rather moderate leadership, had gained a spectacular lead in the first round of the legislative elections. Particularly, army commanders had cancelled the elections shortly before the second round could even take place as they believed strongly that the Islamists would acquire a massive majority in the National Assembly. The regime refused to accommodate and accept the rise of the moderate FIS thereby inducing the advancement of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) which employed even more brutal practices. The civil war that followed the crackdown of the leaders of the Islamic groups resulted in more than 150,000 deaths.

Since then, individuals or groups capable of mobilizing the masses are excluded from politics, including members of Islamist parties which have explicitly committed themselves to the democratic process. Accordingly, prominent rivals of the oppo-

sition landscape either decided not to run in the 2009 elections, or were not allowed to do so. The FIS and Wafa, a moderate alternative to El-Islah, together the most influential among the Islamic parties, are banned from political life.

Under the described circumstances, the overall turnout of the elections received a lot of international attention whereas Bouteflika's victory was almost taken as a given. Following the constitutional



amendment which allowed him to run for a third consecutive presidential term, Bouteflika's main concern was to ensure a high turnout at the ballot boxes, which would lend legitimacy and credibility to his victory. Therefore, he initiated an anti-boycott campaign to induce the people to cast their ballots in the elections. Bouteflika urged the electors to vote, even if they did not want to vote for him. He delivered his message by traveling throughout the country, visiting places such as the predominantly Berber town Kabylia, where he even paid lip service to Berber aspirations. Moreover, Algerian expatriates living in Europe, Tunisia and elsewhere were also mobilized; a special envoy was sent to France to persuade the Algerian residents to vote in the 2009 election, assuming that most of the expatriates were unfamiliar with the other candidates competing with Bouteflika.

According to the results announced by the Algerian Ministry of Interior, Bouteflika garnered 90% of the vote while the overall turnout was put at approximately 75%. This data might indicate that Algerian voters believed that the current regime could be more effective in the reconstruction of the economy than the Islamists or other opposition parties; it might also highlight that the public had not yet forgotten the events of 1990 and the suffering they brought about.

Notwithstanding the validity of these claims, the regime indeed attempted to undergo a shift of attention from ideology toward economic progress. The aggregation of national revenues and the decrease of external debt from \$29 billions in 1999 to approximately \$4 billions in 2008 were hailed as an important achievement. According to Prime Minister Ahmad Ouyahia, Algeria has a huge foreign exchange reserve of \$140 billions, which will help

the country to surmount the economic crisis despite the drop in oil prices; oil represents 98% of Algeria's exports. In accordance with the World Bank's report of March 2009, Algeria's development rate is estimated to reach 2.2% this current year, contrary to global trends.

These predictions were translated into public policy arguments as the regime claimed to have successfully continued a number of infrastructure works, covering housing, roads, bridges and social provisions, under a \$200bn plan from 2001 until 2009. As the president stated, he managed to reduce the unemployment rate by two thirds, from 30% to 12%. Bouteflika pledged to create three million jobs and build one million homes by a \$150bn infrastructure development plan for the next five years during his campaign.

However, the argument that Algerian voters applauded the regime's effectiveness is based on an unusually high election turnout in Algeria; the 2007 legislative elections went down as the elections with the lowest turning out reaching 35 % of the electoral body, which is less than half of the 2009 turnout. In addition, the opposition claimed that only 24% of the population voted in these elections. It is worth considering this claim, taking into account that the UN mission's report on the elections is still pending.

However, even the opposition admitted that there has been an increase in the overall turnout: in the 2007 legislative elections the opposition announced that 15% of the population had participated. This rise in participation in the April 9th elections can be partly attributed to Bouteflika's electoral strategy. Bouteflika, who decided to run as an independent candidate and disregard his own party (National Rally for Democracy), is said to have used

the state apparatus as his electoral machine. In any case, the government did try to gain votes by offering financial incentives to its supporters. Amel Boubekeur from the Carnegie Endowment argues that big corporations that had supported Bouteflika in 2004 gained markets and financial help from the government. Therefore, according to her, a powerful business association (the Forum des Chefs d'Entreprises) announced that it would officially fund Bouteflika's 2009 presidential campaign, something it had never done previously.

In addition, the Algerian ruler wrote off the farmers' and the small entrepreneurs' debts. He had already introduced a 50% rise in parliamentary deputies' and others high-ranked officials' salaries in September 2008 in order to reassure their approval of the constitutional amendment which allowed him to run for a third consecutive presidential term. The constitutional amendment of November 18th 2008 was thought to be a prelude to the April 9th presidential elections' results. The secular Socialist Forces Front (FFS) and the Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD), the most popular opposition parties in the Berber regions, abstained from the electoral race as a means of protest to the constitutional changes; they supported the view that the constitutional changes were aimed at ensuring Bouteflika's victory and thus at predetermining the pattern and outcome of the upcoming elections.

Bouteflika also appealed to old guard nationalism and portrayed Algeria as a country characterized by a high level of security and stability. Under the slogan of continuity during his campaign, Bouteflika hinted that the amnesty given to former GIA fighters could be extended to include the current insurgents of the Salafi Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) provided that they lay down their

weapons. The Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation, enforced in 2006 granted amnesty to those who renounced violence along with social and financial privileges, thus improving the state of security. It was announced that more than 2,000 Islamist militants were released from jail.

However, the most impressive fact of these elections was that the two Islamist candidates who were allowed to run had no grassroots legitimacy. It seems as if the Algerian leadership has tried to include Islamic parties in the political process selectively, as long as they adhere to the rules set out by the regime. The once strong Movement of Society for Peace (MSP) has joined ranks with the FLN since 2004 and fully supported the Bouteflika candidacy. El Islah has yet to recover from the 2007 reorganization, which resulted in the ouster of its influential leader Abdellah Djaballah. His candidate –and Secretary General of the group– Mohamed Djahid Yousi failed to gain much popularity. The second Islamist candidate Belaid Mohammed Said who ran as an independent is also not very popular. Finally, although FIS leaders have been freed, they are not allowed to participate in politics (i.e. neither to run as candidates nor to support any candidates) due to the state of emergency. Madani Mezrag, former chief of the FIS's armed wing, stated in an interview with Reuters in March: "If you want to convince al-Qaeda militants to lay down arms you must provide guarantees that the political space is not closed, but today Bouteflika is closing it until an unknown date".

Excluding moderate Islamic groups that have laid down their weapons, from participating in Algeria's political life might pose as much a threat to Algeria's security situation as the more moderate groups which are denied political expression as the latter may start supporting the extremist militants.■

Provincial elections in Iraq: The dream of centralization

Ilias Tasopoulos

Prime Minister Maliki's drive for greater centralization seems as distant an objective as ever, despite the good performance of the Shiite ruling party Dawa' in the recent provincial elections.

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Dawa's supported candidates gained a relative majority in nine of the fourteen provinces which held elections, and a clear majority in what are considered among Iraq's most important provinces - Baghdad and oil producing port Basra. However, the establishment of new Provincial Councils was indicative of Maliki's failure to build a cross-sectarian alliance that would have enabled Dawa' to ensure full executive control at the expense of the provinces' power. The notion of centralization is dismissed by a major part of the ruling parliamentary majority, the Shiite Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council (SIIC) and the Kurdish parties, as it involves the restriction of their local authority. Perhaps a final kick in the teeth for Dawa', after only securing the formation of governments in four provinces, is that it is now forced into a position where it should cooperate with the SIIC; Dawa had previously tried to isolate the SIIC by attempting to forge a coalition against it across the southern provinces.

Although having performed badly in the elections, SIIC still exerts considerable influence over southern Iraq, which goes to show that election results are far from being the single indicator of power and influence in Iraqi politics. The latest example that corroborates this view is the initially inexplicable deferral of the final results' release. This was widely explained by the pressure applied to the elections' commissions to prevent them from releasing the results before the parties had decided how they would distribute key posts among themselves.

The consequences of Dawa's failure to form a cross-sectarian front that would have potentially allowed for greater centralized control is that now it is forced to concentrate on developing new ways to curb the power of local authorities. One possible solution to shift power back from the periphery to the centre lies in the promo-

tion of state resources to encourage a unitary state system. However, the ruling party cannot commit itself to such a course of action as state resources are rapidly declining. According to official Iraqi sources, oil export revenues are unlikely to exceed \$30 billion by the end of 2009, whereas in 2008 oil export revenue rose beyond \$60 billion mark. This downwards trend was also reflected in the 2009 budget which was initially drafted at \$80 billion but finally reduced by the parliament to \$58 billion owing to the slump in oil prices; as oil production and exports account for about 90% of Iraq's revenue.

The ramification of such trends, particularly when taking into consideration the fact 2/3 of salaried jobs are directly or indirectly financed from the states coffers, is that little is left over to satisfy provincial authorities' demands. Subsequently, with the increased decline of state resources the central government is likely to face substantial economic pressure if it continues to try and maintain its leverage in the provinces. To compound the state's economic concerns, an influential American think tank claims that by August 2010 there will be an evaluation of Provincial Reconstruction Teams accomplishments and USAID programs, which will probably result in a reduction in foreign aid. According to the same sources, relying on oil production revenue in the near future looks even more unlikely for the Iraqi state as current investment in the sector is below the minimum requirement to sustain current production levels; the Iraqi Ministry of Oil has indicated that investments between \$25 billion and \$75 billion are needed to achieve its production target of 6 mbpd. Prime Minister Maliki's April visit to Moscow, could be seen as an attempt to explore the possibility of Russian investments in the Iraqi oil sector as a solution to this impending crisis, although the official goal of the visit was the diversification of Iraq's armament resources.

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Since the Iraqi state's financial resources are expected to decrease, the alternative path to establishing centralized control is coercion through violence, so as to ultimately monopolize the use of violence inside the Iraqi territory. However, it is not certain that the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) would be able to cope with such a military challenge or its consequences. Although the ISF number more than 600,000 soldiers the level of training and discipline appears to be insufficient. Additionally, U.S. commanders claim that insurgents have heavily infiltrated the ISF, making it a highly unstable task force. Moreover, the successful Iraqi operations in Basra and Sadr City in 2008, which enhanced the regime's confidence in its military's abilities, would not have been possible without the intervention of U.S. special forces which provided air support, intelligence and surveillance equipment.

The security situation could worsen as American commanders have been trying to "work themselves out of a job" by devolving the responsibilities of a more 'secure' Iraq to a 'capable' ISF. Simultaneously, there has been an increase in bombing attacks in April 2009. These attacks are thought to indicate a resumption of violence by militant groups who had suspended their activities ahead of the elections as the majority of Sunni parties were participating for the first time. This is also presumably linked to the release of Sunni insurgents from Iraqi prisons as required under the Status of Forces Agreement. Although these attacks are an indication that the insurgency might recover, the level of violence is far from that of earlier years when U.S. military vehicles often drove in the opposite lane of traffic to minimize the threat of suicide car bombs.

Therefore, Iraq's dream of becoming a strong and influential state, which sits amongst the big regional

players, seems far off. For the time being, it is a battlefield where external and internal powers compete. Moreover, the strengthening of the Iraqi state is not a desirable development for the two major external powers: Iran and the U.S. Iran promotes the strengthening of sectarianism in Iraq through highlighting the sub-national identities of the Iraqis. Iranian officials as well as affiliated think tanks express their preference for identity-based politics in Iraq while silently dismissing any reference to Iraqi nationalism.

As far as the U.S. is concerned, advisors of President Obama believe that American influence in Iraq is decreasing as the Iraqi government becomes more autonomous and therefore suggest that any future support of the Maliki regime is conditional to the accomplishment of certain goals. Hence, the U.S. administration's priority is the promotion of national reconciliation, which involves cooperating with Sunnis that served in the higher echelons of the Ba'ath party under Saddam Hussein.

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Furthermore, America's support of the Sunni Awakening groups and the Sons of Iraq, that were created to fight al-Qaeda in Iraq, can be seen clearly as a compromise to the Iraqi's state sovereignty as it ultimately conveys power to the local tribes. Apart from building up military power in the provinces, the Sunni Awakening groups also attempt to translate their success against al-Qaeda in Iraq into political power. One of the Awakenings group, the Anbar Salvation Council, managed to unseat the Iraqi Islamic Party which is the main group in the Iraqi Accordance Front (IAF), and further represents the Sunni pillar of the government; Along with various tribal groupings, the Anbar Salvation Council came to office in Anbar, a predominantly Sunni province, comprising nearly 1/3 of Iraq's total area.

Analysts contend that if the current sectarian arrangements - such as the tripartite distribution of power between Shi'a (Prime Ministership), Kurds (Presidency) and Sunni (Parliamentary Speakership) - persist, the development of an Iraqi unitary state will be difficult to realize. Nevertheless, Dawa' decided against officially challenging the current arrangements when the former Sunni Parliament Speaker, Mahmoud al-Mashhadani was forced to resign in December - due to his comments about the shoe throwing journalist Muntadar al-Zaidi. It stood up for the IAF while opposition parties disputed the Sunni right to hold that position, proposing instead that the next speaker should be chosen "on the basis of merit". Dawa's claim that the IAF deserved the Speakership disappointed a lot of Shi'a parliamentary members who vied for the position. This hinted that Maliki's priority is to delay the emergence of independent power centers inside the Iraqi territory by exploiting the struggle inside the Sunni communities and playing the various Sunni parties off against each other. ■

BOOK
REVIEW

Campanini, Massimo

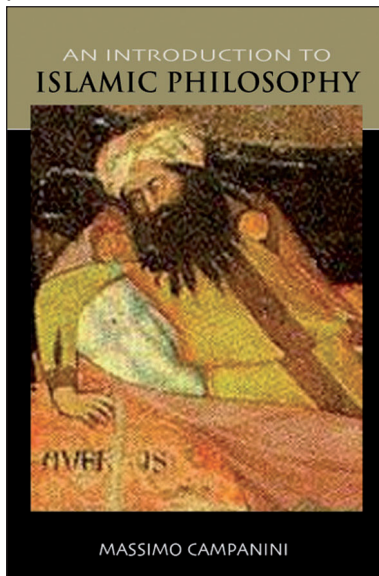
An introduction to Islamic Philosophy

Italy, Edinburgh University Press Ltd, 2008.

Elisavet Paraskeva-Gkizi

A diachronic investigation of Islamic philosophy and its greatest thinkers, the influence of Greek philosophy upon it and its reciprocal relationship with Islam are some of the main themes Campanini discusses in his book 'An introduction to Islamic Philosophy'.

Campanini divides his book into two parts, identifying the beginning of Islamic philosophy, its different trends and their representatives while dealing with the major themes philosophers were occupied with.



world views, which they were willing to absorb. According to the author, the massive migration of Greek philosophers to the East, due to the closure of the school of Athens by the emperor Justinian in 529 AD, contributed

The beginning of the first part is a historical retrospection of Islamic philosophy. After the Arabs had conquered enormous pieces of land, stretching out over Morocco and the Indus and from the steppes of Central Asia to the Persian Gulf, the conquerors encountered highly developed cultural traditions, sciences, philosophies and

immensely to the permeation of Greek philosophy into the Arab world. Hence, the impact of Greek thought on Islamist thinkers was inevitable and became more and more visible. The first schools of Islam were founded in the 9th century (Mu'tazilism, Ash'arism) and laid emphasis on theological as well as philosophical matters.

The major problem of Islamic philosophers was the reconciliation of reason and faith which they sought to resolve by interpreting philosophical concepts borrowed from Greek tradition. The first philosopher in the Islamic world was Al-Kindi (?-c. 870), who incorporated Aristotelian thought and defined philosophy as the science of causes, while following the Qur'anic conception of God; he defined God as the first cause of source of all reality. Al-Kindi maintained that there was no contradiction between reason and the Qur'anic authority, establishing a concept which was soon disseminated - however, with some modifications - among the majority of Islamic thinkers. Other philosophers such as al-Farabi (c.870-950) in the 10th century distinguished clearly between philosophy and theology.

Contrary to the Medieval West, the most fruitful and creative period of science and philosophy in the Islamic world was between the 9th and 14th century. It was the time, when the most significant philosophers and theologians lived: al Razi, Avicenna, Al Gazali, Avempace, Aver-

roes, Ibn Khaldun were among the most important ones. Campanini examines in his book, philosophers such as those mentioned above, whose ideas were formed within the context of Islam which functioned as a clear ideological reference point. The Qur'an, the central religious text of Islam and the final revelation of God, is considered to be rational and to contain a message which invites humankind to reason and speculation, embedding in a sense the seeds of Islamic philosophical thought. The Islamic philosophers accepted, as if they were common people, the dictates of religion. However, at the same time they considered themselves as capable of obtaining a superior level of understanding of reality.

At this point, an element typical of that time's elitist way of thinking about philosophy can be distinguished. Precisely, philosophers claimed that philosophy was not for ordinary people whereas religion was. Ergo, philosophy should not come into conflict with religion while ideally it could represent the most suitable means of safeguarding scientific research, particularly political research as almost all the Islamic philosophers wrote about politics. Islam on the other hand, was regarded as the determinative factor for daily life.

The second part of the book is dedicated to some of the major themes of Islamic philosophy such as the Oneness of God, the structure of the Cosmos, the human intellect, the necessity of freedom in divine action and ethics and politics.

According to the author, the concept of the Oneness of God or tawhid is more than essential in Theology and in Islamic Philosophy. All the Islamic schools of thought delved into the matter of the idea of God, such as Mu'tazilites. They tried to approach it quite often with a systematic negation of terms in order to reach every possible positive attribution to God. Nevertheless for some others, mainly theologians such as Ibn Taymiyya, the only mode of speaking of God was the using of

expressions from the Qur'an. Certainly the essence of God was not questionable and was perceived by humankind as a given, however the way with which the world derived from God was seen by the philosophers as one of the greatest fields of metaphysical reflection.

The transcendence of God forced many philosophers to adopt an emanationist vision of the creation of the world which presupposed the hierarchisation of beings. However, this hierarchy did not imply the contact between the infinitive primary substance and the created material world. In fact this meant that "only one can come from One." Particularly, this was the principle which philosophers applied in different ways, attempting to describe the structure of the world, contrary to theologians who believed in creation ex nihilo as the Qur'an affirmed.

In order to understand and to interpret the structure of the world and God's words respectively, humankind received from God the Intellect, the noblest feature of all. Campanini claims, that the basic position of the doctrine of the intellect used in Islamic philosophy is based particularly on the Aristotelian doctrine of intellect. The Islamic philosophers tried to comment upon it and to explain it always in solid relation to their religion.

However, as aforementioned coherence between theology and philosophy in Islam did not always exist. The concept of God was seen as another field, where discordance of opinions existed. Philosophers claimed that God was absolutely transcendent, while theologians stated that God was omniscient and omnipresent. This different approach resulted in many metaphysical questions such as the questioning of the overall meaning of the system of causes and hence the natural order of things.

Finally, in the last chapter of his book the author is dealing with a series of questions arising from the Platonic and Aristotelian conception which states that man is

a political animal and that society is his natural environment. By employing this ideological frame, philosophers - through the deep examination of different issues, like God's and human's justice and the art of governance - attempted to provide the moral and political substratum for the ideal society (Umma).

The emergence of issues related to Islam in general, especially in the last years (Muslims immigrants, Islamic terrorist organizations and conflicts in Muslim states) has accentuated the need for a familiarization with the theological and philosophical context of Islam. Campanini's book represents a significant effort to provide the reader with a systematic analysis of Islamic philosophy, however not in a strict chronological order. The author might try to present the evolutionary trajectory of Islamic philosophical thought which is essential for an introduction to Islamic philosophy; nonetheless he is not always successful in doing so as the reader is bombarded with extracts from primary sources without the necessary chronological cohesion and explanation. Moreover, the noticeable absence of a concluding chapter justifies the above perception: that is to say, that this book appeals more to a scholar of Islamic Philosophy than to a novice of this specific issue. ■

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