By the year 2000, Islamism will be approximately a quarter of a century old. This movement, though it claimed deep roots, surfaced and flourished with the major social breakdown which took place in the mid 1970s in the Muslim world. Twenty-five years later, social sciences – provided they take stock – have the opportunity to make a significant breakthrough in the analyses of what was one of the most puzzling – if unexpected – social phenomena of the contemporary period.

A quarter of a century covers the span of a generation. Activists who were in their twen- ties in the mid 1970s, on Egyptian, Pakistani or Indonesian campuses, are now middle-aged. Their black beards are turning barley and corn. They chanted slogans and forwarded the utopia of the dawla islamiyya, the Islamic state, and for better or worse, they held a record. They are established, part of the polit- ical game. Some are in power – where they dis- tribute patronage –, and some are in prison; some, dead, others in exile in the impious lands of the West – to which they have an intimate exposure.

The young Islamists of yesterday had built their vision and mobilized their fol- lowers to a large extent as a reaction to the sta- tus quo of their time – which they described in- terms of political, social and economic restric- tions of those days. To what extent are they still relevant for the young adults of the year 2000? The 1997 presidential election in Iran gave some indication that a majority of the Muslims of Iran were willing to oust the incumbents. In Turkey, Refah Partisi’s short-lived venture in government and the Algerian Islamists, despite their back- outs, in spite of their wide following, were unable to topple the State, and could not help their splitting up into competing splinter groups – ignoring the fact that Mr Erbakan and his friends could not engi- neer enough social pressure to remain in power. In Egypt, the British-educated and independent Islamists, despite their wide following, were unable to oust the State, and could not help their splitting up into competing splinter groups – ignoring the fact that Mr Mubarak and his friends could not engi- neer enough social pressure to remain in power. In Algeria, the FIS was able to mobilize side by side the pious middle-classes and the young disen- franchised – something which hampered its capacity to seize power, and then to resist repression. Such phenomena should lead us to a quarter of a century should have been long enough for social scientists to dispel their fas- cination for the mystique of contemporary Islamism: it is now high time for scholars to treat it like any other social object – something which may well, in turn, shed more light on our understanding of the social use of religion on the eve of the twenty-first century.

One of the most puzzling – if unexpected – social phenomena of the contemporary period was the breakdown which took place in the mid 1970s in the Muslim world.

A quarter of a century should have been long enough for social scientists to dispel their fascination for the mystique of contemporary Islamism: it is now high time for scholars to treat it like any other social object – something which may well, in turn, shed more light on our understanding of the social use of religion on the eve of the twenty-first century.

The Political Sociology of Islamism

Research

ISIM NEWSLETTER 1/98

Gilles Kepel

Research Approaches

Prof. Dr. Gilles Kepel is the director of research at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique and professor at the Institut d’Études Politiques in Paris.

One of the difficulties of this task is due to the extremely politicized aspect of the majori- ty of the literature which is produced on Islamism. The very nature of Islamism is such that it is self-promoting. Some is aimed at the pious middle-classes and the young disenfranchised – something which hampered its capacity to seize power, and then to resist repression. Such phenomena should lead us to be more aware of the social composition of the Islamist parties, and of the wealth of social factors to their capacity for mobilization – whether it be in the case of Refah Partisi, of Jama’at-i Islami and the other Pakistani religi- ous parties, of the Arab Muslim Brothers organizations and their rivals within the politi- cal Islamic field, of ICM and the Muham- madiyah in Indonesia, etc. To what segments in contemporary Muslim societies do those move- ments eventually deliver, and what do they actually deliver – in either camp, financial resources and mobilization, or partial or hegemonic access to power? And, conversely, which are the social groups that feel deprived, or ill-treated by them?

The Political Sociology of Islamism

One of the difficulties of this task is due to the extremely politicized aspect of the majori- ty of the literature which is produced on Islamism. The very nature of Islamism is such that it is self-promoting. Some is aimed at the pious middle-classes and the young disenfranchised – something which hampered its capacity to seize power, and then to resist repression. Such phenomena should lead us to be more aware of the social composition of the Islamist parties, and of the wealth of social factors to their capacity for mobilization – whether it be in the case of Refah Partisi, of Jama’at-i Islami and the other Pakistani religi- ous parties, of the Arab Muslim Brothers organizations and their rivals within the politi- cal Islamic field, of ICM and the Muham- madiyah in Indonesia, etc. To what segments in contemporary Muslim societies do those move- ments eventually deliver, and what do they actually deliver – in either camp, financial resources and mobilization, or partial or hegemonic access to power? And, conversely, which are the social groups that feel deprived, or ill-treated by them?

A quarter of a century of existence provides a lot of data, and allows for comparative analysis – something which was hardly feasible for those of us who engaged in early studies of the phenomenon by 1980. Then, the task of the social scientist who tackled such a topic was to be an eye-opener, to uncover the significance of the ideological movements in the context of their historical, cultural and political constrains, the pre- notions or the common wisdom of the social sciences discourse of the times, that dis- counted the phenomenon as insignificant, ephemeral, reactionary, fascist, and the like. During this pioneering stage, each of us was discovering his own field, and we had very little access to comparision, because social science literature was scant. As a new phenomenon, it did not bring with it much historical depth: it could be seen against the backdrop of earlier movements such as the Egyptian Muslim Brothers for instance – but the social environments of British-controlled and independent Egypt were, after all, apart. It could be related to the traditional political culture – such as the œuvre of Sayyid Qutb – but dogmatism by now is a sure pro- tagonist of political mobilization in the Western world.

One of the difficulties of this task is due to the extremely politicized aspect of the majority of the literature which is produced on Islamism. The very nature of Islamism is such that it is self-promoting. Some is aimed at the pious middle-classes and the young disenfranchised – something which hampered its capacity to seize power, and then to resist repression. Such phenomena should lead us to be more aware of the social composition of the Islamist parties, and of the wealth of social factors to their capacity for mobilization – whether it be in the case of Refah Partisi, of Jama’at-i Islami and the other Pakistani religious parties, of the Arab Muslim Brothers organizations and their rivals within the political Islamic field, of ICM and the Mahammadiyah in Indonesia, etc. To what segments in contemporary Muslim societies do those movements eventually deliver, and what do they actually deliver – in either camp, financial resources and mobilization, or partial or hegemonic access to power? And, conversely, which are the social groups that feel deprived, or ill-treated by them?

One of the difficulties of this task is due to the extremely politicized aspect of the majority of the literature which is produced on Islamism. The very nature of Islamism is such that it is self-promoting. Some is aimed at the pious middle-classes and the young disenfranchised – something which hampered its capacity to seize power, and then to resist repression. Such phenomena should lead us to be more aware of the social composition of the Islamist parties, and of the wealth of social factors to their capacity for mobilization – whether it be in the case of Refah Partisi, of Jama’at-i Islami and the other Pakistani religious parties, of the Arab Muslim Brothers organizations and their rivals within the political Islamic field, of ICM and the Mahammadiyah in Indonesia, etc. To what segments in contemporary Muslim societies do those movements eventually deliver, and what do they actually deliver – in either camp, financial resources and mobilization, or partial or hegemonic access to power? And, conversely, which are the social groups that feel deprived, or ill-treated by them?

One of the difficulties of this task is due to the extremely politicized aspect of the majority of the literature which is produced on Islamism. The very nature of Islamism is such that it is self-promoting. Some is aimed at the pious middle-classes and the young disenfranchised – something which hampered its capacity to seize power, and then to resist repression. Such phenomena should lead us to be more aware of the social composition of the Islamist parties, and of the wealth of social factors to their capacity for mobilization – whether it be in the case of Refah Partisi, of Jama’at-i Islami and the other Pakistani religious parties, of the Arab Muslim Brothers organizations and their rivals within the political Islamic field, of ICM and the Mahammadiyah in Indonesia, etc. To what segments in contemporary Muslim societies do those movements eventually deliver, and what do they actually deliver – in either camp, financial resources and mobilization, or partial or hegemonic access to power? And, conversely, which are the social groups that feel deprived, or ill-treated by them?