

Debating the state strategies and responses to the Islamist challenge

State responses to the Islamist challenge can broadly be divided into two categories: co-optation and suppression. Co-optation means engagement by the government with the Islamists and their inclusion either through permitting them to stand for elections and to take up seats in the government or through partially adopting their discourse and agenda. The government of Jordan has pursued a strategy of co-optation since the mid-1980s, allowing the Muslim Brothers to organize, stand for elections and participate in the governance of the state as long as they did not resort to violence. Malaysia under Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed (1981 – 2003) pursued a slightly different path. It allowed for an official Islamic opposition in the form of the *Partai Islam se-Malaysia* (PAS), while at the same time trying to undermine this opposition by adopting a more Islamic discourse for the state. The co-optation strategy is, of course, easier when the state faces political rather than militant Islamists but it has also been relatively successfully used to moderate militants. For example, some of **Hizb'allah's** aims were moderated through its participation in Lebanon's electoral politics. Co-optation, however, has proved difficult with die-hard anti-systemic Islamists who are not interested in participation. Here states have often opted for suppression. Suppression has also been the preferred choice of states which fear opening up their political system to any form of opposition, irrespective of whether or not it is Islamic, and of states whose overall domestic and foreign policy has been built upon coercion. For instance, in the late 1970s and early 1980s Syria's **Ba'thist** regime was challenged by the Muslim Brothers. The challenge was met by force and Syria descended into a spiral of violence until the Syrian army unleashed its full force on the Islamists in 1982 in their stronghold of Hama. The Islamists were brutally crushed, resulting in up to 20,000 dead. A more recent example is that of Algeria which had embarked upon a path of cautious political liberalization with its first democratic elections in 1991. When it was clear that the Islamic Salvation Front would capture more popular votes than the government party, the elections were cancelled half-way through and the army moved against the Islamists, resulting in a brutal civil war which lasted for much of the 1990s.

Yet, just as Islamists do not necessarily fall into clear-cut categories, some states also shift back and forth between responses. For instance, Egypt has shifted between a policy of suppression under President Gamal Abdel Nasser, to 'encouraging' Islamists under President Anwar Sadat, and to both co-opting moderates and marginalizing extremists under President Hosni Mubarak. Then in the Arab Spring the Egyptian army played a key role in the deposing of Mubarak, allowing for the election of the Muslim Brotherhood's Muhammad Mursi, only to depose him a year later. If the

success of the state's response to the Islamist challenge is measured purely by whether a particular government or regime has been able to stay in power, both strategies appear to have worked. However, that would be oversimplifying the issues at hand. The majority of Islamists are playing a long game and believe that not only God but also time is ultimately on their side. Thus the state faces a dilemma in that neither suppression nor co-optation has proved effective in truly eliminating the challenge. The security approach of suppression has ignored the socio-economic dimensions and, in some cases, has even increased the popularity of Islamists by making them into martyrs. Co-optation has often been interpreted by the Islamists as weakness and has encouraged them to push harder. Similarly, the state's adoption of a more Islamic discourse has been seen as a partial victory.

success of the state's response to the Islamist challenge is measured purely by whether a particular government or regime has been able to stay in power, both strategies appear to have worked. However, that would be oversimplifying the issues at hand. The majority of Islamists are playing a long game and believe that not only God but also time is ultimately on their side. Thus the state faces a dilemma in that neither suppression nor co-optation has proved effective in truly eliminating the challenge. The security approach of suppression has ignored the socio-economic dimensions and, in some cases, has even increased the popularity of Islamists by making them into martyrs. Co-optation has often been interpreted by the Islamists as weakness and has encouraged them to push harder. Similarly, the state's adoption of a more Islamic discourse has been seen as a partial victory.