

Political Islam: Between the Illusion of “Victory” and the Reality of Failure

(Translated)

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Islam is the Deen of Allah (swt), which He revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (saw) to solve the problems of humankind and regulate his three relationships: his relationship with his Lord, his relationship with other human beings, and his relationship with himself. Therefore, Islam is a comprehensive religion, and that includes the state. It is a Deen that provides for those who believe in it devotional and moral laws, and a State that takes care of people’s affairs, rules between them by Islam, deals with other states according to its rulings, and carries the message of Islam to the world.

From here, an important question arises: When did modern thought begin classifying the Islam that deals with matters of governance, society, and public relations under the label of “Political Islam”? And what existed before the emergence of this classification?

Islam did not begin as “political” in the twentieth century; rather, what has emerged recently is the classification of “Political Islam” as an independent phenomenon in modern political science and sociology, and the resulting placement of Islam and the movements based on it within the political sphere into a new terminological framework.

Among the earliest documented academic uses of the term that we encounter is in the 1980 book, *Political Islam*, by the American researcher Martin Kramer. However, the mere appearance of the term in modern literature does not mean that Islamic thought has approved of it as a correct concept, or that Muslims prior to that distinguished between “Islam” and “political Islam”; for the existence and spread of a term is one thing, and the validity of the concept it denotes is another.

Hence, the problematic issue emerges: if Islam, in its general conception, addresses both the private and public affairs of human beings and includes rulings related to governance, judiciary, economy, international relations, and other matters, then what does it mean to describe this aspect of Islam as “political”? And does this term lead to assuming a duality between a religious Islam and a political Islam, as if politics were an extraneous element added to Islam in the modern era?

This question becomes even more important when we move from the term to the movements described by this label: if “Political Islam” is a modern and semantically imprecise term, then what do we mean when we talk about its success or failure? Is it sufficient for an Islamic movement to reach parliament, form a government, or reach the pinnacle of power for that to be considered a victory for Islam?

Or is the matter merely a political success for a movement operating within an existing political system, without necessarily meaning the success of the project which that movement claims it came to achieve?

From this point begins the inquiry into the more important question: Was the arrival of some Islamic movements into the institutions of the contemporary political system a victory for Islam, or was it a victory for political movements that managed to succeed within a system whose foundations remained unchanged?

The term “political Islam” was not the conceptual framework employed by Muslim scholars when addressing the issue of governance and politics; they addressed it within the concepts of Imamah (Shariah leadership), Khilafah (Caliphate), Shariah Politics (as-Siyasah ash-Shar’iyyah), and Rulings of Authority (Al-Ahkam as-Sultaniyyah).

Thus, Al-Mawardi discusses the Imamah, its functions, the preservation of the religion, the implementation of Shariah rulings, and the realization of justice in his book *Al-Ahkam as-Sultaniyyah* (Rulings of Authority).

As for Ibn Taymiyyah, he states that (ولاية أمر الناس من أعظم واجبات الدين، وإنه لا قيام للدين والدنيا إلا بها) "governing the affairs of the people is among the greatest obligations of the Deen, and that neither the Deen nor worldly affairs can be established except through it."

As for Ibn Khaldun, he defines the Khilafah as (خلافة عن صاحب الشرع في حراسة الدين وسياسة الدنيا به) "succession to the bringer of Shariah Law, (Muhammad (saw)), in the guardianship of the Deen and the governance of worldly affairs by it."

Thus, we see that Muslim 'ulema did not treat governance and politics as a domain added to Islam, nor as a "type of Islam" that stands in contrast to the Islam of worship and morality. Rather, they studied them within the very system of Islam itself, under the headings of Imamah, Khilafah, Shariah Politics, and Rulings of Authority.

So what happened in the modern era that we now need to classify movements calling for the application of Islam in governance under the label "Political Islam?"

From the Khilafah to the Modern State

The most significant transformation that Muslims have faced in the modern era has been their transition from a political reality in which the Khilafah, the Imamate, and the general framework of the Shariah were present in the conception of the state, to a new reality where nation-states with independent political borders, constitutions, modern institutions, and legal systems were formed, alongside the decline of the unifying political frame of reference for Muslims.

The abolition of the Ottoman Khilafah on March 3, 1924, was a decisive milestone in this transformation. The Turkish National Assembly abolished the position of the Khilafah and simultaneously established institutional structures oriented toward the new secular system. The impact of this transformation was not confined to Turkey; rather, the Muslim World, following the fall of the Ottoman state, became distributed among multiple national or regional states, each with its own political and legal system. This was a new reality that differed from the political framework with which classical Islamic political jurisprudence texts had engaged.

In this context, contemporary Islamic movements emerged as a response to this new reality. A prominent example is the Muslim Brotherhood, founded by Hassan al-Banna in Egypt in 1928, four years after the abolition of the Khilafah. Academic sources describe it as one of the oldest contemporary religious-political movements; it began with a reformist and proselytizing project, and then its activities increasingly turned toward the political sphere.

In the Indian subcontinent, within the same context, the project of Abul A'la Maududi emerged. He founded the Jamaat-e-Islami in 1941 and worked on re-formulating the concept of the Islamic state in confrontation with nationalism and the modern state. Specialized studies indicate that Maududi's project was not merely a literal restoration of the classical theory of the Khilafah, but rather an attempt to formulate an Islamic state capable of functioning within the reality of the modern state.

And They Seek "Victory"

If the emergence of modern Islamic movements occurred within a new political reality, then the question that imposes itself is not how these movements managed to reach power? But rather: what did they actually intend to achieve by reaching it in the first place?

A movement that proceeds from the premise that Islam is not merely acts of worship and ethics, but rather a comprehensive system for life, and that governance must be established upon the foundation of the Islamic creed, cannot make merely reaching the institutions of governance the criterion for the success of its project; because reaching power is not the ultimate goal, but rather the goal is what this authority will do, and upon what basis it will be established.

And here lies the problem that warrants pause: some Islamic movements have sought to work within the existing political systems, entered elections and parliaments, allied with various political forces, and then sought to reach government or the presidency of the state, based on the premise that possessing the tools of power would then enable them to bring Islam to governance.

However, this path raises a fundamental question: If the existing system is built upon foundations and concepts that contradict the vision from which the movement originates, is it

possible to achieve a change in that system by adhering to its rules and mechanisms without this adherence leading to a change in the project itself?

The problem is not in entering elections or parliament as they are two means, but rather in the means turning into an end, and in success in obtaining votes, seats, and positions becoming the measure by which the strength of the Islamic project is judged.

And at this point, the illusion of victory begins: that a movement reaches governance and believes it has brought Islam to rule, while what may have actually reached power is an Islamic movement operating within a political system whose foundations and legislative reference have not changed.

Hence, it is necessary to distinguish between two matters: the political success of a movement, and the success of the project whose slogan the movement raises.

A movement may succeed in elections, obtain a parliamentary majority, form a government, and perhaps even reach the presidency of the state; all of that is indeed political success, but does it necessarily mean that Islam has been victorious?

This is the question that must be answered, not replaced with the question: How many seats did the movement obtain? How many ministers did it get? Did it reach the pinnacle of power?

If the goal is to establish a governance system based on Islam, then the criterion for success must necessarily be related to the extent to which this goal is achieved, not merely by the amount of success the movement has attained within the existing political system.

And after all this, the illusion of victory does not lie in the fact that Islamic movements have entered the political arena or reached some institutions of governance, but rather in considering their mere arrival there a victory for Islam, even though the movement has become a part of the very reality it was originally established to change.

Thus, when a movement becomes normalized with the reality, reshapes its project according to the reality's conditions and limits, and integrates into its system instead of striving to change it, then its success in reaching power becomes a success for the movement as a political entity, not a success for Islam, whose banner it had raised.

And the true failure here lies not in losing elections, nor in losing parliamentary seats, nor in being removed from power; rather, it lies in contravening the foundation that Allah (swt) established for Islam: that it be manifest, dominant, not subservient to another methodology, and not integrated into it.

Allah (swt) said: ﴿هُوَ الَّذِي أَرْسَلَ رَسُولَهُ بِالْهُدَىٰ وَدِينِ الْحَقِّ لِيُظْهِرَهُ عَلَى الدِّينِ كُلِّهِ وَكَفَىٰ بِاللَّهِ شَهِيدًا﴾ **“He is the One Who sent His Messenger with guidance and the Deen of truth, so that He may make it prevail over all religions. And sufficient is Allah as a Witness”** [TMQ Surah Al-Fath: 28]. Islam did not come to be a component within another system, nor to take its place within a framework that contradicts its fundamental principles and then call that a victory for it. Instead, it came to be the ultimate reference by which all methodologies and systems are measured, not to be the one that conforms to them.

Hence, the correct question when discussing the success of Islamic movements is not: Did they come to power? Nor: How many seats did they obtain? Nor: How many years did they remain in authority? Rather, the question is: Did they preserve their ultimate objective? Did they proceed on their path according to the methodology of Islam? And was their arrival to power a step towards manifesting Islam, or was it an integration into a reality that managed to change them before they could change it?

Attaining power may be a victory for a movement, achieving a majority may be a political success, and forming a government may be a partisan accomplishment; but not every political success is a victory for Islam, just as not every political loss is a failure for the Islamic project. Herein lies the clarity of the distinction between the illusion of victory and the reality of failure.