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Religion and Democratization: Belgium and Algeria

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Introduction *

On January 12, 1992 the Algerian military aborted the country's electoral process. In doing so, they deprived the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) of a sweeping victory, ushering the country on the path of a bloody civil war which is still raging. For many analysts, the sad end of the Algerian experiment was yet another proof of the incompatibility of religious mobilization and democratic politics (Zoubir 1995:135; Lavenue 1993:132). At the end of the nineteenth century, Belgium faced a similar challenge. During the 1870s, a rising religious movement, Catholic and aliberal, challenged the country's parliamentary regime, which was in the process of opening up to mass participation. At stake was the fate of democratic institutions: either democratization would succeed, or limited parliamentarism would revert to authoritarianism. Contrary to Algeria, Belgium's democratization was successful.¹ The Catholic party won the crucial 1884 elections. The government bowed to the electoral outcome even though it had the power to abort it. In turn, the Catholic party, despite the introduction of clerical reforms, did not subvert the country's emerging democracy. Catholics were integrated into the liberal order, and democratization was successful.

The Algerian sociologist Lahouari Addi saw the prospect of an electoral victory by the Islamist party FIS as a "fecund regression" (Touati 1995:125). He argued that the (regressive) triumph of the FIS could prove a step forward in Algeria's democratization. In other words, democracy could emerge despite the initial absence of convinced democrats among the FIS, as a "fortuitous by-

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¹Democracy is defined as a regime in which governmental offices are filled as a consequence of contested elections (Przeworski 1991). The term democratization refers here to the transformation of emerging democracies into full-fledged ones. Emerging democracies are incomplete or unconsolidated democracies engaged in a path toward democratization. Their democratic institutions are young, fragile, and/or incomplete (in the sense that large segments of the population are excluded from the electoral process); the likelihood of significant political groups refusing to accept the country's key political institutions as the only legitimate framework for political contestation is high.

product” (Waterbury 1997). By accounting for the divergent outcome in Algeria and Belgium I examine what makes democratization possible in the presence of powerful aliberal religious movements. More precisely, I focus on the conditions under which incumbents will allow democratization to proceed by complying with the electoral victory of such a movement.

I begin with an overview of the issue and a brief description of the Algerian and Belgian cases. I then use the comparison to highlight the features that constrain or facilitate democratization in the presence of religious mobilization. The main finding is counterintuitive: centralized, non-democratic, and hierarchical religious institutional structures can have a positive effect on democratization processes because they allow religiously motivated actors to overcome credibility problems.²

Religion and Democratization

Since the transformation of nineteenth century aliberal Catholic movements into twentieth century secular Christian Democratic parties, the debate on religion and democracy has focused overwhelmingly on Islam. While the Iranian experience has shaped the Western view on Islamic politics, Algeria was pointing to the possibility of a different, non-revolutionary, path: the Islamic party FIS was set to win through ballots, not bullets.

² A country’s likelihood of long-term democratic survival might be affected by a variety of factors unrelated to religion, such as political economy, etc. For instance, Anderson (1991) and Luciani (1994) stress the obstacles generated by the overborrowing, welfare, and rentier, character of the Algerian political economy (but note Luciani’s point that the fiscal crisis of rentier states, linked to the decline or disappearance of the source of rent, may actually facilitate democratization). In this paper, I am only interested in examining whether and how aliberal religious mobilization undermines the process of democratization *per se*, rather than in exploring a country’s long-term prospects of democratic survival.

A review of the literature on the compatibility of Islam with liberal democracy could easily fill an entire library. The arguments that posit their incompatibility run along three lines: empirical, based on the practice of existing Islamist states, particularly Iran; circumstantial, since many Islamists openly reject democracy; or structural, claiming that Islamic theology and culture lacks and opposes the essential ingredients and fundamental values of Western liberalism (Burgat 1996:186-188). This last category stresses the antidemocratic and antimodern essence of Islamic thought and tradition: Islam requires divinely rooted sovereignty as opposed to popular sovereignty; state legitimacy derived from the application of the religious law (*shari'a*) and fusion of religion and politics (*din wa-dawla*) as opposed to separation of state and church and legislation without reference to religion; overlap of the political community with the community of believers (*ummah*) and hence exclusion of non-believers and women; rejection of political pluralism (which places on an equal footing the true “party of God” and other parties) and of majority rule (since this is based on the false idea that issues of right and justice can be quantified and disregard religiously defined morality). An extreme, but hardly exceptional, version of these arguments was put forth by a French foreign affairs minister: “unfortunately, the Muslim nature of Algerian society won over civilization” (Attaf 1994:189). Not surprisingly, then, the Algerian citizens who voted for the FIS have been portrayed as “intrinsically antidemocratic” (Labat 1995:14).

Critics of this argument point out that it is based on the flawed assumption that there is one Islam, timeless and eternal, whose character is essential, primordial, and constant; the failure to grasp the breadth and depth of contemporary Islam and Muslim politics leads to mystification. Instead, there exist different and contradictory Islamic traditions, both across time and space. Many Islamic thinkers have offered interpretations qualifying, or even rejecting, the concept of indivisibility of the political and religious realm. Finally, a careful

reading of the historical record indicates that politics and religion became separable not long after the death of the Prophet and the establishment of dynastic rule (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996; Esposito 1995; Roy 1994). Both proponents and critics of the non-democratic essence of Islam based their arguments on different interpretations of the *same* theological corpus of Islamic doctrine and tradition. For instance, the search for elements of Islamic law and tradition that could assist the development of some form of democracy is a well developed exercise. Such elements, compatible to the cognate principles that belong to the intellectual heritage of liberal democracy, include a disinclination to arbitrary rule, a contractual and consensual perception of sovereignty, the qualities of dignity and humility, and values such as *shura* (consultation), *ijtihad* (independent reasoning), and *ijma* (consensus) (Kubba 1996:87; Lewis 1996:55-6; Leca 1994:60). In its most extreme and absurd version, this approach seeks elements of Islamic thought which could literally mimic landmarks of the historical and philosophical evolution of the West, such as the Protestant reformation (Wright 1996). This is a misreading of both Islamic tradition and the history of the West since it posits a single way to liberal democracy and assumes that democracy only developed in Protestant countries! Plus, as Roy (1994:21) points out, one should not forget that the Protestant Reformation was a fundamentalist mode of thought.

Religious doctrine, like all kinds of doctrines, is a contested field of meaning, amenable to a multiplicity of cultural expressions, interpretations, and political arrangements, lending itself to multiple and continuous modifications, manipulations, and reinventions. Islam has been used to support democracy and dictatorship, republicanism and monarchy, while Islamists creatively deploy selected elements of Islamic tradition to justify their actions (Esposito 1995; Beinin and Stork 1997). This can be confusing: “many controversies surrounding Islamic thought focus so heavily on semantics, on names for ideas and persons, that the real issues often disappear from sight” (Filali-Ansary 1996:78). In fact,

the interpretation of sacred texts is the “real issue;” interpretation is an object of political contention. Furthermore, ideology, especially in its theological dimension, can be a particularly flawed predictor of political action. Not only is it elastic and shifting, but it is only one among many factors that motivate social and political action. Its inadequacy as a predictor of action is revealed by the Iranian example: Shi’ite traditions recommend avoidance of direct participation by religious leaders in governments as demeaning to spiritual authority. However, Khomeini revised Shi’ite political thinking: he condemned traditional Shi’ite quietism and the practice of *taqiya* (dissimulation) arguing that the ulamas could rule directly. The Iranian revolution led to government by religious leaders and the creation of a clerical organization with the functional equivalent of a hierarchy of archbishops, bishops, and priests--a true revolution within Islam (Dessouki 1982; Lewis 1996; Wright 1996). Ideological discourse can be an even worse indicator of future intentions. Statements of Islamist leaders in favor of democracy can be rejected as strategic posturing which obscures true intentions, while open condemnations of democracy can be interpreted as reflecting true intent, thus acquiring the status of proof--and vice-versa (see Waterbury 1994:40 and Burgat 1996:14-15 for opposite interpretations of similar statements by Islamist leaders).³

In short, whether Islam is compatible with democracy is a question that cannot be possibly answered within the framework of the debate on the philosophical foundations of Islam. This is compounded by the fact that Islam is not just a religion but also a culture and a civilization. Hence, the necessity to move beyond semantics, ideology, and the search for the “essence” or “correct interpretation” of Islam, and focus instead on political action. This, according to

³ Likewise, ideology can be a flawed predictor of foreign policy. According to Roy (1994:203), the “cultural opposition [of Islamic states] to the West is unrelated to the strategic choices made by states. Anti-Christian attitudes and discourse reach their highest pitch among the Saudis, who, strategically are in the western camp, but who forbid the erection of churches on their soil, whereas Iran never had an anti-Christian political position and has always accepted a certain Christian visibility (to the point of authorizing the Armenians to make wine).”

Burgat (1996:98;19), requires neither a reference “to an ‘absolute of divine origin’” nor “the mobilization of all resources of religious history and thought.”

Belgium and Algeria

Belgium and Algeria share a similar strategic situation: an opposition movement challenges incumbent rulers in the context of an emerging democratic regime.⁴ Incumbents face a choice between compliance with an electoral outcome favorable to the challenger or subversion. A crucial feature that sets Belgium and Algeria apart from typical transition cases is that the challenger is a religious movement ideologically opposed to democratic institutions. According to Przeworski (1991:52), “conflicts over the political role of religion, race, or language are least likely to be resolvable by any set of institutions.”

Mixing religion and politics is generally seen as dangerous. Religiously motivated political actors, the argument goes, are concerned more about theological and moral values than material ones. Such goals are hardly amenable to political bargaining and compromise. As Waterbury (1994:40) puts it, “where the scriptures are both holy and explicit, as in the case of Islam, pragmatic compromise will be very difficult.” Because parties in the Middle East are struggling over fundamental political issues such as the content of public morality, Leca (1995:75) argues, “we may be facing a dead-end since the [democratization] process’s prerequisite is also its outcome.” Hence, “the presence of Islam and the high-risk politics of morality ... might leave the Middle East

⁴ In Belgium, the immense majority of voters were excluded from the electoral process. In Algeria suffrage was universal, but democratic institutions were new and fragile. In both cases, powerful political groups poised to win did not regard their country’s key political institutions as the only legitimate framework for political contestation.

subject to some unique form of strategic calculus that confounds the more mundane logic of everyday political struggle” (Heydemann 1996:175). In short, religion is overdetermining. The implication is twofold: religious politics is structurally incompatible with democracy, and the process of democratization in the Middle East cannot be approached meaningfully from the perspective of the transition literature.

Arguing that religion and democracy are incompatible goes beyond Islam: it is part of a view which holds the explicit commitment to democracy by the main political and social actors as a fundamental condition for the emergence and consolidation of democratic regimes: democratization requires the adoption by non-democrats of democratic values (Linz and Stepan 1996:16). In the case of religious movements, this requires a transformation of their ideology through a reinterpretation of sacred texts: nothing short of “an Islamic Reformation” (Wright 1996:75). A research implication is to decipher whether the espousal of democracy by Islamists is tactical or sincere (Esposito 1995:187). However, this can prove a futile exercise: ideological statements and political declarations are open to any interpretation and future action is not necessarily or always a faithful reflection of present ideological positions.

An alternative view is that the compliance of political actors to democratic rules is not necessarily dependent on their ideological preferences and results from the largely contingent strategic pursuit of their interests under constraints (Kalyvas 1998; Przeworski 1991; Rustow 1970). According to Salamé (1994:3), democracy “could be judged less by the attachment to its principles by some actor or the other, than its common use as a means to avoid civil war or institutional chaos.” Hence democracy is a spontaneous and self-enforced equilibrium, possible in the initial absence of convinced democrats or mass democratic culture: in Waterbury’s (1997) terms, a “fortuitous by-product.”

Religion can be explicitly integrated into this framework. Processes of democratization pose important obstacles to religious movements. Even when willing to provide *ex ante* guarantees about their post-electoral behavior, these movements find it extremely difficult to do so because they remain hostages of their very identity: their “pious passions, strong beliefs, and inflexible values” undermine their credibility (Kakar 1996:170). In addition, incumbents expect them to make more concessions than non-religious movements. Yet, democratization cannot succeed unless challengers guarantee, before the crucial elections, that once in power they will not hijack democracy and set up a religious dictatorship; instead, that they will comply with democratic institutions and be subject to democratic control. This point raises crucial questions: given their ideological preferences, are religious movements willing to send such signals in the first place? What kind of signals are credible? Which institutional features facilitate or hamper credibility?

Addressing these questions requires a focus on democratization processes in which incumbents both comply with, and subvert electoral outcomes favorable to religious parties. Algeria is a case of subversion. Unfortunately, no case of compliance with an Islamist electoral victory is available: only in Algeria did such a party win (or come close to doing so).⁵ However, it is possible to find an instance of incumbent compliance with a comparable religious victory at the polls elsewhere: nineteenth century Belgium is such a case.⁶

Is it possible to compare nineteenth century Belgium to contemporary Algeria? The two cases, separated by time, geography, religion, culture, and history, could not appear more distant. This issue can be addressed in a

⁵ This is hardly surprising since elections are rare in the Middle East. Their absence is generated by the prevalence of (non-Islamist) authoritarian regimes rather than Islamist mobilization. Turkey or Jordan cannot be used here, since Islamist parties have not won majorities at the polls. Likewise, Iran, Sudan, or Afghanistan are instances of revolutionary rather than electoral success of Islamist movements.

satisfactory way once the following points are made. First, although differences are real, we often tend to exaggerate them; second, many differences are irrelevant to the question at hand; third, since the goal of comparison is inference, the equivalence of the strategic situation across cases matters more than their similarity in every respect; in this context, relevant differences are essential for inference; fourth, a comparison should be judged as much from the quality of its premises, as from the significance of the insights it generates.

While differences between the two case are real, we often tend to exaggerate them. Indeed, our perceptions are often shaped by implicit extrapolation from the present to both past and future: thus, we tend to view Algeria, currently suffering from a civil war, as forever prone to authoritarianism and violence, while we see Belgium, whose present politics are relatively mild, as a ceaselessly peaceful and compromising country--both biased views. For instance, politics in Belgium during the 1870s is described by leading Belgian historians as a “true ideological civil war” (Witte and Craeybeckx 1987:54). Both nineteenth century Belgium and Algeria were young countries, vulnerable to foreign intervention, undergoing a process of modernization, state-building, and nation-building in a period of international democratic expansion (the “first” and “third wave”). In both countries, the state assumed a symbiotic relationship with religion, which became a central component of national identity. Catholicism was the faith of the vast majority of Belgians and the constitution guaranteed the privileges of the Catholic church. Likewise, Islam has always been viewed as the source of Algeria’s national solidarity and unity. Islamic ideology, symbolism, and rhetoric were central to the Algerian war of independence. The constitution established Islam as the state’s religion and required the president to “respect and glorify the Muslim religion,” while Islamic values were declared to be a “fundamental constituent element of the personality of the Algerian people” (Vatin 1982:233).

⁶ Belgium is the only nineteenth century European country in which a confessional party won a parliamentary majority.

When a religious cleavage emerged, it also became the vector of economic and cultural demands. On the economic front, this cleavage pitted a bourgeoisie with close ties to the state (the Masonic liberal bourgeoisie in Belgium, and the state-rentier one in Algeria) against a coalition of petty-bourgeois urban and rural sectors threatened by economic modernization (Chhibber 1996; Falter 1986). On the cultural front, this cleavage translated the efforts of dominated actors (peasants and workers) who, in alliance with the middle classes (small businessmen, low-level bureaucrats, and educated segments of the population), contested the hegemony of the ruling elite in the cultural field (Labat 1995:15; Chhibber 1996:127): this is why the religious cleavage also captured the bifurcation between Francophone elites on the one hand and Arabophone or Flemish-speaking popular segments on the other.

Was the diverging outcome in the two countries predicated by their history? Was a democratic political culture already in place in Belgium before the advent of fully democratic institutions, but not in Algeria, where “a strong residue of authoritarianism” permeated Algerian political culture and “mutual tolerance and trust” were absent (Esposito 1995:183; Zoubir 1995:134)? It is true that Belgian elites were “trained” in the parliamentary game longer than their Algerian counterparts. After it became independent in 1830, Belgium adopted a liberal constitution and followed a parliamentary path. While this institutional (rather than cultural) feature facilitated the rapprochement between moderate Catholics (called Conservatives) and Liberals, it does not tell us how these moderate Catholics were able to control the aliberal Catholic movement. Moreover, it is by no means true that the mass public or radical Catholic elites had a democratic culture or that relationships between political actors were ruled by mutual tolerance and trust. In fact class and religious conflict raged. Catholics and Liberals battled against each other in bloody street demonstrations, while workers, excluded from the enjoyment of the fruits of economic development, were violently repressed by the Belgian army at a cost of

hundreds of deaths (Witte and Craeybeckx 1987:100). Warnings that politics had become “a religious struggle” leading to “no other possible outcome than the proscription of liberalism or the destruction of the church” were commonplace (Haullevile 1876:133). A Belgian author (Verhaeren in Wilden 1909:10) observed as late as 1909: “Think not that this country is sheltered from the struggles of this time more than other countries. (...) Animositities, disputes, political violence, are as frequent as anywhere else. Parties are rancorous and obstinate; their spirit often attacks justice to encircle and stifle it (...) they hate and assail each other. Countryside and cities alike are under their sway; a hostile mutual vigil transforms life even in the smallest villages.” The culture of the Belgian Catholic movement or the church can hardly be described as democratic. Pointing to the rise of Catholic movements in Europe, Anderson (1995:648) underlines “the perverse willingness of the ‘people’, in a century whose economy and institutions were offering unprecedented freedom of thought, movement, and decision to ally themselves with the church; in their own words, to offer up their freedom to the most authoritarian structure around.” Finally, the political system was restricted to a few thousands voters--simple universal manhood suffrage was only introduced in 1919.

On the other hand, while the Algerian war of independence was as violent as the civil war that erupted after 1992, the period in between was (at least up to 1988) largely devoid of violence: terrorism appeared in Algeria only after 1991--to be exact, on February 10, 1992 (Burgat 1996:113; Touati 1995:148). As Carlier (1995:9) points out, “nobody could imagine, in the summer of 1988, that Algeria could fall into the most bloody civil war of the contemporary Arab world.” In fact, Francophone North Africa was for a long time considered to be culturally immune to Islamic revivalism (Esposito 1995:152). Algeria, in particular, stands out in the Arab world because of its close ties to Europe, its more egalitarian society, and its highly literate urban population, factors that turned it into a “perfect candidate for democratization” (Luciani 1994:145). Its early and vigorous

associational life established the foundations of a robust civil society (Carlier 1995:151-162). Its political culture, Rouadjia (1994b:202) points out, was marked by the French humanist and legalist tradition, which left traces in every sector of Algerian society--even in the discourse of the most radical Islamists, such as Abdelkader Moghni. It is also important to recall that many European countries (such as Spain) went through protracted periods of civil war and authoritarian government, yet managed to become democratic: armed struggle, violent conflict, and mass insurrection are part of the founding myths of many countries now enjoying a democratic and peaceful life--the French Revolution is just one example.

A striking parallel between the two cases concerns political actors: Catholic and Islamist movements share a grassroots character, a revivalist nature, a combination of a utopian millenarist message with concrete political action, the blend of religious, social, and political features, a pioneering use of techniques of mass mobilization, and the construction of a counter-society from below.⁷ Authoritarian models, be it Iran or the Ancien Regime, exerted considerable attraction for these movements. Like Islam before its recent resurgence, Catholicism in nineteenth century Europe was perceived as a declining and spent force, retreating in front of modernization. Yet, both reemerged dramatically to challenge the established order. There are, obviously, many differences of doctrine, law, institutions, and values between Christianity and Islam. One oft-cited difference pertains to the relations between state and church: whereas Christian states have distinguished between throne and altar, Islam accepts the interpenetration of cult and power. Languages of Muslim countries have no words for "secularism" or "layman" (Lewis 1996:61-2). Still, Islam's decentralized and non-clerical nature makes it less theocratic than Catholicism. Moreover, the Judeo-Christian tradition has strong historic and

⁷ The usefulness of a comparison between Islamism and political Catholicism is hinted at (but not pursued) by some Middle-East experts, such as Roy (1997), Salamé (1994:9), and Krämer (1994:204).

theological links with Islam and, again, differences can be matched by similarities. For instance, Anderson (1991:96) points to the desirability of harmonious regulation of the different orders of society in both Islamic and Catholic political teaching. However, it would be wrong to compare religions. Religious movements constitute a social and political phenomenon that cannot be reduced to the religions from which they sprang up; in fact their practice more often than not diverges in significant ways from their religious matrices (Kalyvas 1997).

Both movements developed in the context of a broad societal religious revival, characterized by the enforcement of stricter standards of piety and the wide diffusion of religious symbols (Dessouki 1982; Buchanan and Conway 1996). European Catholic movements aspired to revive Catholicism and “christianize” modernity in response to the rise of liberalism and the secularization of European states. The Catholic church and lay Catholic thinkers produced an ideological project (called ultramontane or integrist), which unequivocally rejected political liberalism, democratic government, and the separation of church and state.⁸ Indeed, the German historian C. Weber (1991) terms this project “ultramontane fundamentalism.” The revival and radicalization of Catholicism was not a matter of mere ideological declarations. The Catholic church became the agent of sustained mass mobilization, in its own words “a crusade against Liberalism,” which began in the religious realm but quickly acquired a social and political character (Lamberts 1984). The objective was to use liberal institutions in order to destroy them. As the prominent Belgian Catholic thinker Camile de Hemptinne (1877a:11-12) put it:

⁸ The papal encyclical *Syllabus Errorum* (1864) denounced concepts such as the freedom of speech, the freedom of the press, the freedom of conscience and religion, the legal equality of cults, the sovereignty of the people, the doctrine of progress, the separation of state and church, liberalism, and the modern conception of civilization. The church condemned as a grave error the belief that a regime which did not repress the violators of Catholic religion could be good.

What should subjects do if the law is indifferent and places error and truth on the same level, as it does in Belgium? (...) They must lament having to live under a regime so opposed to the rule of God and do everything they can to change it. To this effect, and since the law allows them to, they will use freedom to do good: to redress the ideas, expose the true principles, and spread the understanding of how much God abhors these general freedoms.

Catholic movements combined this regressive message with the most sophisticated political weapons of the day, such as mass organization and partisan press. Hundred of associations were created, ranging from charitable neighborhood groups and moral leagues to Catholic worker clubs and credit associations. They were built outside liberal political institutions as a distinct Catholic counter society which would eventually grow to submerge the liberal state. The populist dimension of the Catholic movement was reflected in the prominent role played by laymen and the lower clergy, and their critique of the Catholic hierarchy for being too moderate and unwilling to engage in unconditional political action. It was also embodied in a revolutionary form of organization, built outside the church's clerical structure: the mass organization of laymen (Kalyvas 1996).

Islamism, a recent and modern phenomenon, emerged as a potent force in Muslim politics during the 1970s and 1980s. Indeed, it is possible to speak of a resurgence of Islam in Muslim politics, an Islamic revival, or even an attempt to islamize modernity (Beinin and Stork 1997; Esposito 1995). Islamist movements seek power using a religious appeal and promote a theocratic project antagonistic to secular and liberal democracy. Islamism diverges from traditional Islam in that it is thoroughly modern in its leadership, organization, and the articulation of its message. Islamist movements developed a new and modern form of organization based on the primary role of social and political action. In contrast to traditional religious organizations, Sufi mystical brotherhoods and ulama associations, modern Islamist organizations have a lay

rather than a clerical leadership and are urban-based. The ulamas were often criticized for being too moderate. The Islamist thinker Ali Shariati argued that since the “return to Islam” was not a retreat to the medieval Islamic worldview of conservative ulamas, but a revolutionary vision of early Islam which would provide the inspirational basis for its modern reinterpretation, it required Islamically oriented laymen with a knowledge and command of modern thought and methods (Esposito 1995:107-8).

Parallels between the two movements can be observed as well in their social composition, structure, and leadership. Both movements were socially heterogeneous, weaving together disparate, even competing social groups (Labat 1995:184; Witte and Craeybeckx 1987:87). They both had a structure based on local cells (*al-usar al-nizamiyya* in Algeria, *cercles catholiques* in Belgium).⁹ Contrary to what one might imagine, their leaders were often the very products of modernization: graduates of major universities in medicine, science, and engineering (Esposito 1995; Lamberts 1984).

The Algerian FIS exemplifies many of these features. It appeared on the Algerian political scene during the October 1988 riots--a reaction in great part to shortages of a range of essential consumer commodities and policies of economic restructuring. In their aftermath, the government initiated a gradual process of political liberalization, first expressed in the 1988 constitutional revision which ended the FLN's (National Liberation Front--the ruling party) monopoly of power. The FIS was authorized in September 1989. Using both mosques and modern communications technology to propagate its message, it evolved into a mass movement thoroughly integrated into the fabric of Algerian society (Roy

⁹ Social organizations included *Dawa* (call) societies which provided social services (hospitals, clinics, legal-aid societies), economic projects (Islamic banks, investments houses, insurance companies), education (schools, child-care centers, youth camps), and religious publishing and broadcasting (Esposito 1995). The ability of Algerian Islamists to provide first aid and substitute the state after a murderous earthquake hit the country is an example of the movement's effectiveness.

1994:4). It combined an electoralist and a grassroots strategy, weaving the fabric of a veritable counter society (Mediene 1995:114-5). Groups such as charitable neighborhood associations were gradually transformed into FIS local cells (Bekkar 1992:15). The party blended a critique of the existing regime with a utopian project: the Islamic solution and the Islamic state, concepts as vague as they are malleable. As Roy (1994:195) points out, the FIS mobilized the masses “around the myth of a return to an Islamic authenticity that never existed.” Although the FIS represented the urban poor, it would be wrong to view it only as a movement of disenfranchised people. The party enjoyed the support of middle strata, including state functionaries, shop owners, lawyers, and teachers (Chhibber 1996; Stora 1994:175).

The extent of the FIS’ appeal was first suggested by the June 1990 municipal and regional elections--the first multiparty elections since the country’s independence: the FIS won 55 percent of the popular vote (and control of 856 municipalities out of a total of 1,541, and two-thirds of all regional assemblies). The FLN’s performance (28 percent of the popular vote) was dismal. Following this shock, the government redrew electoral districts and introduced a single-member constituency-two round electoral system. Parliamentary elections were scheduled for June 27 and July 18, 1991. The FIS reacted to the new electoral law by calling for a general strike (May 1991), asking for a revision of the electoral law and an early presidential election (normally scheduled for December 1993). Riots erupted and the government proclaimed the state of siege, arresting the FIS leaders Abassi Madani and Ali Benhadj. Elections were rescheduled for December 26, 1991 (the first round); the state of siege was lifted at the end of September 1991.

The FIS won an impressive victory, inflated by the electoral system which worked against its designers: 47.2 percent of the vote and 188 seats, 28 short of a majority--as opposed to 23.4 percent and just 16 seats for the FLN, and 7.4

percent and 26 seats for the regionally based center-left party FFS. The second round, scheduled for January 16, 1992, was widely expected to produce a huge parliamentary majority for the FIS: "The unthinkable now seemed to be on the horizon: an Islamic movement would come to power not through bullets but through ballots, not by violent revolution but by working within the system" (Esposito and Voll 1996:150). President Benjedid entered into secret negotiations with the FIS, but the military intervened four days before the second round. The electoral process was aborted, Benjedid resigned, a state of emergency was declared, the results of the elections were annulled, and the FIS was banned (it was officially outlawed in April 1992). The army arrested thousands of FIS activists and incarcerated them in desert camps. The process gradually escalated into a bloody civil war which has already cost an estimated eighty thousand lives.

The strategic problem

In both Belgium and Algeria, liberalizing incumbents faced a similar problem: uncertainty about whether democratization will lead to democracy or theocracy. They also faced competition from within the ruling bloc, by hardliners who reject democracy. Given a balance of power unfavorable to challengers (power lies with incumbents and challengers cannot subvert them), the challengers' accession to power presupposes the successful completion of the democratization process.¹⁰ This in turn requires that they credibly ex ante guarantee not to hijack democracy. Hence it was in their self-interest to provide guarantees to incumbents. However, their credibility, that is, their ability to

signal credibly that once in power they will not subvert democratic institutions, was undermined by their reputation (attached to their religious identity) for zealotry, intolerance, and inability to compromise, as well as by their rejection of liberal democracy *as a principle*. These features scared reformers and reinforced the hardliners within the ruling bloc, thus undermining the process of democratization. However, democratization was not precluded altogether because religious challengers, although rejecting democracy as a principle, were divided in terms of actual practice into two distinguishable blocs: moderates, willing to provide guarantees to incumbents, and radicals unwilling (or less willing) to compromise their principles. In both cases this division followed a similar institutional pattern, a result of the dual (party and social movement) nature of religious challengers: moderates prevailed in the party apparatus and radicals in the grassroots (the “movement”).

As a Belgian politician pointed out in 1879, “there are two Catholic parties, one favorable and the other hostile to the constitution” (van Zuylen 1955:1906). The parliamentarians of the Conservative party made up the moderate faction of the Catholic movement. Their ideal was, as one of their leaders put it, a “Christian monarchy,” but they were willing to compromise and “loyally accept” the liberal constitution, “a situation which is quite away from this ideal” (Hauleville 1876:138). They justified this choice in strategic, rather than ideological terms: they argued that “by wanting that which we regard as the absolute good, we often jeopardize and lose the relative good” (*Journal de Bruxelles*, 10 November 1877). They controlled the party, but were weak at the grassroots, where the radicals predominated. Radicals openly rejected liberalism and the separation between the religious and civil sphere. Their project was the “restoration of the social reign of Jesus Christ,” epitomized by the motto *Instaurare omnia in Christo* (Simon 1956:108). They called for the overthrow of

¹⁰This is a central assumption. When antidemocrats possess the power of subversion they will not hesitate to destroy a democratic regime--as in Weimar Germany, where the shift of the political center toward the Nazis

the liberal order which was defined as “the negation of the supernatural order applied to politics: exclusion of all religious influence in social relations, full emancipation of social power from divine revelation” (Hemptinne 1877b:6). They flatly rejected the constitution: “We believe, together with the Church and like the Church, that the principles which flow from the Belgian Constitution are false and subversive, that the separation of Church and State is bad, and that the Constitution, in itself, is bad” (Verhaegen 1878). Radicals were supported by the lower clergy, controlled almost all the Catholic press, and were building a growing network of popular associations.

Likewise, the FIS was divided between moderates and radicals (or reformers and conservatives, technocrats and theocrats, *djaz’arists* and *salafists*) (Touati 1995; Labat 1995). Both Abassi Madani, the party’s primary leader and chief ideologue, and Ali Benhadj, a younger, radical preacher, called for substantive Islamic reforms. However, Madani was moderate in his discourse and publicly supportive of democratic elections and pluralism (Labat 1995:74). Moderates were part of what could be termed a “modern” elite: many were engineers and teachers (Labat 1995:138). Like their Belgian counterparts, they were opposed to democracy in principle but justified their institutional choices in terms of strategy (Esposito 1995:177). They recognized implicitly the existence of a political order distinct from the religious order, did not advocate the destruction of the existing system but its amendment, and sought to delimit religious from political functions (Labat 1995:173-175). Radicals, on the other hand, belonged to more traditional sectors of Algerian society and were close to conservative Saudi *wahhabism* and traditionalism (*salafiyya*) rather than to the majority malekite rite of the technocrats. In contrast to Madani, Benhadj was dismissive of democracy, which he saw as but another tool of the West, and often declared his intention to abrogate the constitution once in power and to outlaw any non-Islamic parties (Esposito 1995:169-70; Kapil 1994:41). Like the Belgian

tipped the balance of power in their favor.

activist laymen and lower clergy whose action bypassed the traditional structures of Catholic hierarchy and undermined the authority of the bishops, radicals sought to replace the traditional class of ulamas as the religious avant-garde.

A conflict between moderates and radicals raged in both cases. Many Catholics agitated for the formation of a “truly Catholic” after Liberals began to curtail church privileges in the 1860s and Conservatives failed to respond vigorously. At stake was the definition of political Catholicism and the control of the Catholic party. Moderates accused radicals of seeking “to substitute constitutional politics with theological ones,” aspiring “to overthrow all our political organization,” and “unfurling a revolutionary flag” (*Journal de Bruxelles*, 27 July 1878). Radicals, on the other hand, accused moderates of opportunism: failing to promote the program “of the Church itself,” and sacrificing ideological principles to political expediency. They argued that if the moderates accepted as individuals the authority of the church in their private life, they ought to do the same as politicians in their public life (Verhaegen 1878). Likewise, Algerian moderates and radicals battled relentlessly over the control of the FIS and the definition of political Islam. According to Touati (1995:70), “the evolution of the party was marked by a leadership war which raged up until June 1991.” Disliking “theological digressions,” moderates accused radicals (sometimes disparagingly dubbed “dervishes”) of being “incapable of understanding political action,” since they were “men of religion.” In turn, they were accused by radicals of practicing opportunistic and unprincipled politics which deemphasized faith (*boulitique* in French-Algerian parlance) (Labat 1995:147-171; Touati 1995:71; Bessis 1994:197).

In both Belgium and Algeria, moderates were willing to compromise and play by the rules. They were able to control their parties despite the radicals’ strength in the grassroots. Belgian moderates kept proclaiming their attachment

to the constitution; they controlled the party and locked the radicals out of the parliament. In Algeria, the party leadership which emerged in June 1991, adopted “a particularly moderate attitude,” focused on the “necessities imposed by politics,” promoted an “institutional and political strategy” built around participation in elections rather than religious projects or armed action, and “disclosed its readiness to cohabit with president Chadli” (Lavenue 1993:137; Touati 1995:71; Khelladi 1994:181-82; Zoubir 1995:129). In his recently published memoirs, Ghazi Hidouci, a presidential adviser and member of the reformist Hamrouche cabinet which promoted economic and political liberalization, points out (1995:267) that following the May 1991 strike and ensuing government crackdown, the new FIS leadership “displayed a scrupulous respect of the Constitution, froze street actions, and demanded legislative elections so that legality could return. It appropriated the reformist discourse.” In short, as Rouadjia (1994b:202) points out, the FIS was a legalist party. If moderates were in control and willing to provide guarantees to incumbents in both cases, why was democratization successful in Belgium but not in Algeria? What accounts for this divergence?

The divergent outcome can be explained in two ways: one emphasizes the role of incumbents, while the other points to the political consequences of religious institutions.¹¹ According to a first account, Algerian incumbents could (depending on the perspective) either afford to be uncompromising, or not afford to compromise: they clung to power, were divided, lacked a strong leadership, and had much to lose from an Islamist victory. In contrast, Belgian incumbents were more unified and had less to lose. According to a second account, the hierarchical and centralized nature of Catholicism (as opposed to the loose and

¹¹ France kept a close look on Algeria where it had a serious material and strategic stake (the same was true for nineteenth century Belgium). However, no author I am aware of imputes the failure of the transition to foreign intervention or even pressure. Charef (1994:138) even claims that “France was not opposed to a FIS victory, quite the contrary.”

decentralized nature of Islam) allowed the religious challenger to send a credible signal that it would not subvert the institutions.

1. *Incumbents*

In 1878 Belgium was governed by the Liberal party, representing the interests of a state-building and secular bourgeoisie, and the king, heading the state bureaucracy and the army. This was not a unified elite. The Liberal party was divided in two factions, usually at odds with each other: a moderate one (the *doctrinaires*) led by the party leader W. Frère-Orban, and a radical faction, responsible for most of the party's anticlerical policies. Both were unwilling to allow a theocratic experiment. While the moderates and the king wanted to avoid destabilizing the regime, many radicals looked with envy at the German *kulturkampf*, which provided a contemporary example of state repression of Catholics. Algeria, after the end of French colonization and the protracted war of independence (1954-1962), was ruled dictatorially by the National Liberation Front (FLN) and the army. Thus, the Algerian bourgeoisie was closely linked to a rentier public sector and the army was more of an autonomous actor within the ruling bloc. Hardliners were unwilling to allow the FIS to come to power. Many reformers, however, including president Benjedid, were willing to cut a deal with moderate Islamists, provided they received credible guarantees about an FIS-ruled Algeria (Labat 1995:220; Zoubir 1995:129).

The argument about incumbents comes in two variations. According to the first one, a process of democratization engineered by a divided elite lacking a strong leadership is likely to backfire; conspiracies by various groups, including the secret police, are likely to undermine the process (Leca 1994:76). However, the division of the ruling elite is the rule rather than the exception in transition processes (Przeworski 1991). According to the second variation, the Algerian

elites, because of their close connection to the public sector had too much to lose and, hence, no interest in compromising with the Islamists (Hidouci 1995; Touati 1995). Reforms had been initiated only because the regime “feared for its survival” (Zoubir 1995:117). According to Charef (1994:242), the military outrightly manipulated the FIS to get a handy pretext for intervention. Hence the failure of the transition was caused by the regime’s absolute unwillingness to cede power. However, Latin American and Eastern European elites were, and to a much greater extent, identified with the state, while their countries were undergoing extremely severe economic crises caused by bloated and corrupt public sectors. These factors certainly hinder processes of democratization but do not preclude them. As Malley (1996:248) points out: “the same totalitarian statism and vilification of dissent (only worse) could be found elsewhere, yet change has not always come at such price--witness the case of so much of the former Soviet bloc.” Moreover, it is rarely the case that ruling elites initiate liberalization processes with the intention of totally ceding power: they begin with limited prospects. In addition, there are clear indications that significant groups within the regime were really pushing for reform. Luciani (1994:147) underlines the “clear will on the part of the government to engage in democratization.” This was expressed, among others, in its willingness to concede the electoral victory won by the FIS in the municipal elections of June 1990 (Anderson 1991:108), the victory of the moderate FLN faction in the internecine FLN conflict in June 1991, and the openly expressed willingness of an important number of FLN deputies and dignitaries (including the president of the national popular assembly) to recognize an FIS victory in the elections (Carlier 1995:383). Both the Hamrouche (September 1989-June 1991) and the Ghozali (June 1991-January 1992) cabinets attempted to encourage the emergence of moderate FIS elements, particularly during the fall 1991 (Charef 1994).

Finally, the army was not a monolith. Some officers even favored a dialogue with the FIS (Tahi 1995:212). It also appears that up until the May 1991 FIS strike, the military's position was ambiguous: Madani even thought that the army might side with the FIS during this strike (Touati 1995:45; Zoubir 1995:126). Furthermore, the military did not instigate a coup following the riots, when the pretext of an insurrection was very handy. Indeed, intentions and preferences can change over time. Instead of positing absolute and unchanging preferences, it is more helpful to think in terms of varying preferences and shifting coalitions within the ruling block. In addition, it is possible to find ways to accommodate the military during and after transitions: the Chilean case points to the possibility of negotiating a long-term shielding of the military's corporate and political interests. Most importantly, the army was not the sole player within the ruling bloc. The role and intentions of reformers, including francophone elites, secular intellectuals, and assorted democrats, cannot be underestimated. Indeed, Charef's (1994:242) suggestion that the military were looking for a pretext in order to intervene points to a key factor.

The agitation in favor of a military intervention between the two rounds is a key factor in understanding the move by the military. This agitation was fueled by the shock felt by many reformers after the FIS performance in the first round. Significant segments of the civil society were genuinely scared by the prospect of an FIS victory and did not shy from expressing their fear. For them, there was no doubt that "Islamism is like death: we experience it only once" (Touati 1995:225). One after another, parties, unions, women's groups, newspapers, and various associations agitated in favor of an army intervention and the cancellation of the second round. A *Comité National pour la Sauvegarde de l'Algérie* was formed to coordinate their action. It was headed by the leader of the biggest labor union (UGTA), who warned that "the UGTA is legalist, but if the institutions do not fulfill their functions and others [i.e. the FIS] take over them, our duty is to respond" (quoted in Touati 1995:126). On January 2, 1992, an

estimated one million people demonstrated in Algiers after a call by the center-left FFS to “Save Algeria and Democracy.” Those opposed to the elections pointed to this giant demonstration as proof of popular support for a military intervention. Hachemi Naït-Djoudi, an important political personality (formerly part of the FFS leadership) asked publicly (quoted in Touati 1995:126): “shall we, in the name of formalism and democratism, take the risk of an opening with fascist overtones?” The agitation of significant segments of reformers is essential to understanding how the balance tipped in favor of the hardliners within the ruling bloc, and cries for explanation.

2. Religious Institutions

Both variations of the previous argument share the same assumption: the outcome of the transition hinged exclusively on the incumbents. However necessary is a focus on incumbents, it is impossible to account for the outcome without examining the dynamic that developed inside the religious movements.

According to Labat (1995:291), the transition in Algeria failed because the FIS, despite being controlled by moderates, proved eventually incapable of managing its internal contradictions and divisions and hence of appeasing the ruling bloc--a view shared by many analysts (see below). This was a matter of inability rather than unwillingness since appeasing the incumbents was “a necessity felt by the [FIS] leadership” (Labat 1995:16). A quick overview of the events leading to military intervention illustrates this point.

At the end of May 1991, the FIS called a general strike in support of its demand for a new electoral law and early presidential elections. It is still unclear why its leaders decided to move in this direction (Hidouci 1995:253; Crenshaw

1994:268). It might be that Madani felt threatened by the radicals within his own party and attempted to short-circuit them through a spectacular action (Touati 1995:22; Charef 1994:137). In practical terms, this was an opportunity for Madani to assess how far he could get--particularly since he ignored what the military's attitude would be. Sure enough, the ensuing street riots and crackdown clearly circumscribed the limits of FIS action, "mark[ing] the end" of the radicals' power within the party, and making possible the complete take-over of the party by the moderates who, under the leadership of the 35-year old engineer Abdelkader Hachani, initiated a massive overhaul of the FIS, nothing less than the formation of "another FIS" (Charef 1994:188), even a "new FIS" (Touati 1995:75).

The moderates "took over the totality of the party structures" at the national FIS congress held in Batna, in July 1991 (Touati 1995:9). They controlled the party's candidate nominations, locking out of the party lists most radicals and replacing them by technocrats and members of the moderate Djaz'ara faction (Labat 1995:119-124; Touati 1995:74; Charef 1994:219). Confronting the radicals who were arguing against participation in elections, Hachani declared that he had been instructed by Madani to pursue "legal and public competition" (Labat 1995:119). The new leadership went to great lengths in order to signal that its future intentions were not threatening. As Kapil (1994:43) points out, the FIS took care "not to give the army a pretext for intervention." The party condemned explicitly all revolutionary discourse and suspended from the *Majlis* (the party's executive body) five prominent radical figures; it even expelled some prominent radicals in June 1991, like Saïd Mekhloufi, a past director of the main Islamist newspaper and the author of a leaflet on civil disobedience. In addition, Hachani focused exclusively on issues of electoral strategy rather than religious or societal projects (Labat 1995:105-108).

The effort by the FIS to transform itself from protest movement into responsible party was reflected in its giant rally, held in Algiers on November 1, 1991. The establishment of an Islamic state was no longer presented as a revolutionary rift with the past, but rather as a new step in a movement of continuity. As Touati (1995:102-3) points out, this was a new mild FIS which projected “a calm change in continuity” and emphasized slogans that no longer scared. Following the first round of the elections, the moderates reinforced their grip on the party, called for “moderation” and “reconciliation,” and agreed to collaborate with President Benjedid (Burgat 1996:158-9; Labat 1995:106). On December 29, Hachani (quoted in Charef 1994:243), declared that “the FIS will guarantee the individual and collective freedoms in the context of Islamic law and will tolerate the existence of non Islamic parties.”¹² According to Bekkar (1992:15) the attitude of the FIS was one of “incredible restraint.” Even after the coup, Hachani declared that the party “will continue to work through peaceful means” (Charef 1994:262).¹³

If the FIS did try to signal that it was willing to play by the rules, why did the prospect of its victory appear so threatening? The question that increasingly hung in the air as the elections approached concerned the intentions of the FIS and its willingness to submit to democratic control: “was it a party like all other parties, or a revolutionary movement intent of winning power at any cost?” (Charef 1994:189;196). Despite its efforts, the FIS never provided a clear answer to this question. The reason is that it never spoke with one voice (Kapil 1995:5). Instead, it oscillated between its two poles (Bessis 1994:197). Labat (1996:8)

¹² It is important to emphasize that while many of the FIS positions on societal issues and its references to the Islamic law and the Islamic state appear extremist in a western context, they were less so in the Algerian context: Islam occupied a central place in the country’s constitution, while the existing family code already impaired the position of women.

¹³ Almost all authors reject the position according to which the FIS had unequivocally decided to implement “the brutal death of both democracy and secular or atheist democrats” (Lahlou 1995:168). In fact, the FIS did little to implement its vision of society in the municipalities under its control: beaches remained “mixed,” restaurants continued to serve alcohol, and nightclubs were not forced to close (Kapil 1994:41).

refers to the “duality” and “double nature” of the FIS. Despite a facade of agreement, Hachani (and his strategy) never won unanimous support within the party. The Batna party congress was dominated by a climate of “general suspicion” (Touati 1995:91). Party statements remained vague or contradictory (Esposito 1995:177; Zoubir 1995:120). As Carlier (1995:370;376) points out, “the FIS had almost always two discourses, one maximalist, the other minimalist. One threatened, the other appeased; one accelerated, the other braked. It handled confrontation and negotiation ... the desire for a radical rupture with the existing order coexisted with the electoralist strategy.” Charef (1994:109;195) points to “innumerable cases of people speaking in the name of the FIS and saying the same thing and its opposite during the same day. Even at the top, leaders were unable to avoid such contradictions. ... [The FIS] has always been ambiguous, lacking official and definitive public positions allowing to determine [its intentions].” Indeed, at the November 1st rally, which the FIS used as a showcase of its new image, the seven-year old son of Benhadj reminded party supporters of his father’s favorite dictum: “neither Chart, nor Constitution, only God and his Prophet.” The crowd responded by yelling *thaoura islamya*, Islamic revolution (Touati 1995:103-4).

The inability of the moderate FIS leadership to silence the radicals came to a high point between the two rounds. As Charef (1994:243) points out, “moderate declarations were stifled by radical ones.” A traditional FIS leading figure, Mohamed Saïd, declared that the “nutritional and clothing habits of Algerians” would have to change after the party’s victory, a statement amplified by the media which sent shivers among secular Algerians. Hachani was extremely upset. The party’s executive bureau was called in and a press release issued: the party reiterated its decision to protect freedom and condemned “irresponsible declarations which are susceptible to threaten the country’s civil peace and unity” (Touati 1995:122). However, the damage was done. As Touati (1995:123) concludes, Hachani was overcome by the developments.

Obviously, this attitude left the Islamists “vulnerable to criticism and skepticism regarding the true nature of their ultimate agenda” (Esposito 1995:177). As Charef (1994:254) notes: “Was a negotiation with the FIS possible, so that it could accede to power without destabilizing the country? Would [the FIS] be able to manage things without too many pitfalls and play the democratic game? ... This was a risk military leaders did not want to take, because they thought that the moderates within the FIS would be beaten by the more radicals.” In short, the FIS failed to signal in a clear and unambiguous way that once in power it would not establish a religious dictatorship. Contrast this situation to the Belgian case, where the moderate Catholics were able, in their own words, to put a swift end to the “confusion between politics and religion” well before the 1884 elections (Vander Vorst-Zeegers 1965:237).

Although this failure is identified in the literature, its cause is left unexplained. One argument points to the mass character of the Islamist movement: the radicals, stronger at the grassroots, effectively constrained the party leadership (Touati 1995:9). Indeed, grassroots radicalism is a key feature of the civil war that erupted in the aftermath of the transition’s collapse: the main Islamist guerrilla organization (the GIA--*groupes islamiques armés*) is composed of radicals who have abandoned the FIS. This argument assumes that grassroots strength should translate into party decisions; however, this is not necessarily the case (Michels 1911/1962). The evolution of the Belgian Catholic movement shows that moderate leaders are able to impose their strategy, despite pressure from the radical rank and file. The question should be restated: why did the moderate FIS leadership (unlike the moderate Catholic leadership) fail to show the required determination in dealing with the radicals--particularly since it was aware of the problems this caused?

The comparison with Belgium suggests a better place to look for the source of the FIS’ failure to send a credible signal. Credibility can be signaled by the

cost it induces to the sender. In the case at hand, a credible signal could be a declaration by the highest religious authority, openly condemning extremist criticism of existing institutions and enforced by the expulsion from the movement of prominent radicals. Such a move signals determination, subdues the radicals, and indicates that the religious movement is under the firm control of the moderates who are willing to assume the considerable cost of expelling prominent radicals from the party. Hence a credible signal requires the presence of an authority able to implement and enforce it. Such an authority was present in Belgium but absent in Algeria.

The conflict between Catholic moderates and radicals reached its resolution only when the church, after much vacillation, decided to openly back the moderates and repudiate the radicals. In 1879, the pope Leo XIII declared that although the Belgian constitution consecrated principles that he could not approve of, Belgian Catholics should abstain from attacking it (van Zuylen 1955:1733-4). Following the papal announcement, the Belgian church openly endorsed the moderates and moved swiftly against the radicals, forcing the ultramontane press to stop all attacks against the constitution and the moderates; most importantly, it purged prominent radical leaders, including the bishop of Tournai Mgr. Dumont and the ultramontane ideologue Henri Périn, a professor of law at the University of Louvain, both of whom were forced to resign in a particularly humiliating way and had to retire from public life. The highly visible decision of the church in favor of the moderates and the purge of prominent radicals sent a credible signal about the intentions of the Catholics. As the moderate leader Charles Woeste pointed out (1927:160), to stop the attacks against the constitution “it was imperative that orders came from the highest possible instance, so that Catholics could continue to participate in public life.” It is important to note that credibility did not require a statement certifying a deep shift in ideological principles. Rather, the church’s decision was couched in openly strategic terms: the Vatican’s secretariat of state pointed out

that although modern constitutions were unacceptable on principle, open and loud criticism with the approval of the church might “provoke innumerable consequences, especially with regard to the situation in Belgium” (quoted in van Zuylen 1955:1718). Leo’s official statement was clear in this respect: “*L’Eglise est contrainte de tolérer quelquefois des maux qu’il serait impossible d’empêcher sans s’exposer à des calamités et à des troubles plus funestes encore*” (quoted in Launay 1997:48).

The diverging ability to silence the radicals displayed by the two religious movements’ moderate leaderships can be explained by a key difference in the institutional structure of Catholicism and Islam. While the former possesses a hierarchical and pyramidal organization, the latter has a loose and decentralized structure. To put it bluntly, “there is no clergy in Islam” (Roy 1994:28). There is a body of lettered men, the ulamas or doctors of law, who fulfill a variety of functions but lack a monopoly over worship and, except in Iran, do not answer to any higher authority. The Algerian state (like other Muslim states) made consistent efforts to create an institutionalized clergy which it could control. Imams became state functionaries under the jurisdiction of the ministry of religious affairs and their education was centralized in 1983 (Stora 1994:175). As an observer noted at the beginning of the 1980s (Vatin 1982:237), “it is quite possible that after the system [of state controlled religious institutes] has been extended to the whole country, nobody will be able to lead the prayer in a mosque without being graduated from one of those institutes.” However, the regime failed to complete its ambitious program. The rise of the Islamist movement interrupted the attempt of state regulation of religion and created a situation of institutional anarchy in the religious field. Hundreds of mosques, known as *ash-sha’b* (popular) and *hurra* (free), were built without official permit. The official priests, or “state ulamas,” became totally discredited because of their association with the regime. A new generation of unofficial young clerics, lay preachers or self-proclaimed imams, free of any religious authority, marginalized the official clerics and preached the message of radical Islam from the thousands

of mosques that escaped the control of the state (Malley 1996:241; Labat 1994:87). The FIS attempted to establish its own authority over the religious field and get imams to be approved by the party. However, a divided and young party is hardly a substitute for a centralized and well-established religious authority. As a result, the absence of an authority with the power to swiftly and effectively implement costly decisions, placed the burden of credibly signaling future compliance on the FIS moderates alone.¹⁴

In sum, the centralized and hierarchical organization of Catholicism allowed moderate Catholics to overcome the credibility problem, while the absence of a comparable structure in Algeria contributed to the inability of the moderate leadership of the FIS to signal its future intentions in an unambiguous and credible way. It is ironic that the open and decentralized nature of Islam eventually contributed to the failure of the transition to democracy, while the autocratic organization of the Catholic church eventually made possible a democratic outcome.

I have argued that religious institutions are crucial in democratization processes involving religious movements: they mediate in nonobvious ways between actors and their actions. However, the fact that a centralized religious hierarchy *could* have provided ex ante credible guarantees to incumbents on behalf of the religious challenger does not necessarily imply that it *would* have done so. This is a counterfactual question: there is no way to know for sure what would have happened had a centralized Islamic authority existed. While this question is important enough to warrant a separate study (see Kalyvas 1998), it is worth asking why a hypothetical centralized Islamic hierarchy would have supported the FIS moderates. I can point to three reasons (again, under the

¹⁴ Note that the absence of a centralized religious authority does not explain the division of the FIS *per se*, which was due to factors such as its youth, social movement nature, etc. This division was also a feature of the Belgian Catholic movement. The nature of religious institutions explains the credibility failure *given* the party's existing division. The presence of centralized institutions becomes a key factor when the religious party is young and divided. In turn, the party's division and youth are associated with the youth of the democratic regime itself.

assumption of a balance of power unfavorable to the religious actor): first, religious hierarchies tend to be conservative and risk-averse: when given a choice, they tend to opt for fewer but certain over bigger but riskier gains--especially when the risks entail harsh repression. The Belgian bishops were closer to the radical Catholics in terms of ideology and were evenly divided in terms of strategy. However, when they realized that significant losses could be averted with a moderate Catholic victory at the polls, they sacrificed their theocratic dreams and came out in support of the moderates. Second, religious hierarchies tend to collude with party elites rather than grassroots underdogs, because they seek to maximize their political impact. Finally, they dislike and fear over-zealous laymen who threaten to usurp their authority and attempt to supplant them. This was the case in Belgium, and the rest of Europe as well (Kalyvas 1997). It was also the case in Algeria: recall, for instance, Shariati's vision of "a religiously minded lay intelligentsia" that would supplant the ulamas; the marginalization of the Algerian ulamas by lay preachers; and the pronounced radical criticism against the ulamas' moderation, conservatism, and "servility to the powers in place" (Esposito 1995:152; Roy 1994:36-7).

Do credible signals guarantee future compliance? A different way of asking this question is, what would have been the fate of the emerging democratic institutions in Algeria, had the FIS managed to appear credible and the electoral process not been aborted. For some, the FIS would have hijacked democracy and turned Algeria into "a second Iran" (Bessis 1994:196) by using the liberal institutions as "an avenue to power, but an avenue that runs one way only" (Lewis 1996:54). For others, such as Huntington (1996:9) "it is by no means clear that a fundamentalist movement that comes to power through the electoral process will necessarily act in the same way as one that achieves power through a revolution (as in Iran) or a coup (as in Sudan). In addition there would have been powerful incentives for the FIS to act in a moderate and reasonable manner."

Sending credible signals is a first step in a longer process. On the one hand, it produces a change in the structure of incentives of political actors: once religious moderates have embarked on the road to compromise, they will generally have the incentive to continue to play by the rules, since democratic institutions empower them vis-a-vis radical grassroots activists. On the other hand, credible signals launch a process of negotiations leading, either explicitly (through a pact) or implicitly (through adherence to existing institutions), to tangible guarantees for former incumbents. These include security guarantees, such as control by former incumbents over military resources, and power-sharing arrangements, such as powerful non-competitive presidencies or second chambers which make future noncompliance prohibitively costly.¹⁵ In Belgium, the Catholics had to adhere to the constitution explicitly. By allowing the king wide executive prerogatives, such as the right to appoint and dismiss ministers, a provision the king had always taken at face value (Fitzmaurice 1996), the constitution limited the power of the government. For instance, the king used his veto power in 1884 to force two ministers out, thus compelling the new Catholic government to make crucial amendments in its education bill (the Jacobs law) and limiting its clerical bias. Credible signaling is, thus, a first (but key) step in a process eventually leading to the establishment of a democratic regime.

The Belgian case also suggests that democratization involving an aliberal religious movement is possible, because values are often subsumed to strategic considerations. Indeed, the Catholic experience shows that the politicization of religion can eventually contribute to the secularization of politics (Kalyvas 1996:245)--thus undermining arguments that posit "the desacralization of politics and the depoliticization of the sacred" as necessary preconditions for

¹⁵ Political actors are well aware that equal or greater force is necessary for any threat to effectively deter cheating. This was the point implied in a proposition made by the Algerian leader of the small PRA party, Nouredinne Boukrouh, who argued that "the FIS should be allowed to form its government and govern" but the army should be called in if the FIS violates the constitution" (Charef 1994:246-7).

democracy in Algeria and elsewhere (Zoubir 1995:135). Early signs of a similar trend are already discernible in the Islamist horizon. As Roy (1994:199) notes, “Islamism is actually an agent in the secularization of Muslim societies because it brings the religious space into the political arena”¹⁶--a point echoed by Lahouari Addi, who argued before the coup that the historical mission of the FIS was “to prepare *a contrario* the separation of the political and the religious spheres in the Algerians’ imaginary. From this point of view, the FIS is not a catastrophe, because there are often fecund regressions in the history of a country” (quoted in Touati 1995:125). However, a hypothetical democracy in which powerful religious movements play a prominent role (which would by no means be the case for any democracy in the Islamic world), will probably come at the price of a religious bias in the social, cultural, and political spheres--at least initially. In the case of Belgium, this bias was reflected in guarantees for church privileges, the preservation of its prominent role in education (but not a monopoly), the dominant role of the Catholic party, and the institutionalized and state-supported role of the Catholic movement in every aspect of social life (van Kersbergen 1995). Likewise, it is possible to imagine the emergence of a regime in an Islamic country, combining competitive political institutions with religious features; in other words, a regime democratic in political matters and Islamic in moral ones. As Burgat (1996:228) points out, the “South” might write its modernity with its own historical and symbolic terminology.

Conclusion

¹⁶ Roy (1994:199) adds: “Although it claims to do so to the benefit of the former, its refusal to take the true functioning of politics and society into consideration causes it instead to follow the unwritten rules of the traditional exercise of power and social segmentation. The autonomous functioning of the political and social arenas wins out, but only after the religious sphere has been emptied of its values as a place of transcendence, refuge, and protest, since it is now identified with the new power.”

The outcome of the democratization process had tremendous implications for both countries and illustrates the path-dependent nature of political developments. The 1884 victory of moderate Catholics led to a virtuous cycle of democratic politics and the construction of a tradition in which the liberal constitution became “one of the central symbols of Belgian nationhood” (Conway 1996:276). It reinforced decisively the country’s democratic institutions by integrating a large, up to then hostile segment of both the electorate and the population at large. The perception that moderation and attachment to the country’s constitution paid off for the church acquired hegemonic status among Catholics (Simon 1961:171). In contrast, the failure of the transition in Algeria led to a vicious cycle of violence. The participation of an Islamic political party in the process of political competition had begun a process of legitimation of the country’s new democratic institutions and was easing the integration of the Algerian Islamists into these institutions. As Burgat (1996:233) puts it, FIS militants did more in a matter of months to strengthen the legitimacy of elections than Algerian “democrats” did in years. The FIS leader Hachani was prompt to remind party supporters that the elections allowed the FIS to achieve “a legitimacy that nothing and no one can take away from it” (Esposito 1995:178-9). However, the coup destroyed the party’s institutional strategy. The moderate party leadership was decapitated by the army and new independent radical leaders and groups “separated from society by blood” (Charef 1994:516) filled the gap. The failure of democratization deepened the division within the Islamist camp, leading to the “polarization of the Islamist party into two apparently irreconcilable tendencies” (Labat 1995:291-2), and corroborating the radicals’ conviction about the futility of the electoralist strategy. FIS supporters became convinced that the radicals proved right. A bitter Hachani declared after the coup: “We are right not to believe in democracy and the Algerian constitution” (quoted in Lavenue 1993:129). In turn, the Islamist guerrilla war reinforced the perception of an inherently violent and dangerous “Islamic fundamentalism” held by Algerian rulers and their European counterparts.

It is important to keep in mind that strategic considerations take place under constraints and hinge on institutions. Some institutions facilitate democratization, while others impede it. This paper provides a double counterintuitive insight: first, the effect of institutions is likely to be indirect. The organizational structures of religions were obviously not designed to have any effect in processes of democratization, yet they affect them in very significant ways. Second, the effect of institutions can be unexpected and surprising: a hierarchical non-democratic organization had a positive effect on the process of transition, while a decentralized more democratic organization had a negative effect.

This paper questions two exceptionalisms. In the name of the uniqueness of their object of study, both fields of religion and politics and Middle Eastern politics have tended to shun theoretical insights and analytical tools from related fields and areas. Rather than focus exclusively on religious tradition and political theology, the study of religious movements should incorporate tools used in the analysis of political mobilization. Likewise, the study of democratization in the Middle East should not disregard theoretical insights from the transition literature.

Finally, it is worth underlining the counterintuitive nature of the comparison between European and non-European experiences. Instead of promoting a European ethnocentrism, such a comparison in fact undermines it: first, by pointing to a European past which can be substantially different from its present perception in the European consciousness; second, by showing that political conditions in many developing countries, particularly the resurgence of religion in politics, are not as fundamentally removed from the European experience as it is often thought; and third, by suggesting that religious politics can be compatible with democratic development.

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