Transformations of Political Islam: a Reading of Asef Bayat's Concept of Post-Islamism

Hazem Almassry
Junior Research Fellow
Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Institute- Taiwan
E-mail: hazem.secs04g@nctu.edu.tw, hazemassy@gmail.com

Abstract

Sociology and anthropology witnessed numerous studies that provided an analysis of the transformations that the Islamic movement and its discourse witnessed in the Arab world since the early 1990s. Among these contributions are Olivier Roy's writings on the future of political Islam, and Asef Bayat's analyses of the concept of post-Islamism, which Roy himself proposed in his study "The Failure of Political Islam", in addition to Salwa Ismail's writings on the Islamic movement in Egypt.

In this study, we explored the concept of "post-Islamism" as an interpretive entry into the study of transformations within Islamic movements and we criticized what Asef Bayat reached out in his thesis "post-Islamism" by presenting his perspective, interpreting and discussing it. The main question will be: Can the description of "post Islamism" be generalized to the ongoing transformations within Islamic movements towards the formulation of more modern concepts? The study concluded that post-Islamism thesis is predictive theory so we can't use it to deconstruct an already existing phenomenon.
Keywords: Islamism, post-Islamism, Asef Bayat, Muslim Brotherhood, and Islam.

Introduction

Since the beginning of the current century, Islamic thought on which Islamic movements are fed has been experiencing a phase of transformation, although the transformations did not come all at once and have gone through several stages since the events of September 11, 2001 and it came with the spread of global waves of violence among those movements under the concept of Cross-border jihad, however, on the other hand, some Islamic movements reproduced themselves by integrating into the modern nation-state and adapting to its values, and they presented their perspectives on democracy, citizenship and minority rights, the new perspectives are more appropriate to reality (Roy, 2017).

In the 1990, the American sociologist of Iranian origin, Asef Bayat, drafted his thesis in an article on the concept of "post Islamism" for the first time. There were many discussions about the new thesis in which a number of researchers interested in studying Islamic movements around the world participated in these discussions measuring this concept on some countries. The perspectives on this thesis intertwined and tried to apply it to some cases in parts of the Islamic world, from Egypt, Turkey, Sudan, Iran, Morocco, Tunisia, Indonesia, Pakistan, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia.

Bayat, published a book on the same topic in 2013 after the first wave of the Arab revolutions in Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, Yemen and Libya, when the Islamic movements went through a period of transformations due to the new situation that accompanied the Arab revolutions. The Arab Spring revolutions were a blow to the jihadist trend that espouses violence for change (Schwedler, 2011, 187). On the other hand, however, it caused a mobilization within the nonviolent Islamic current after the participation of Islamic movements in the process of political transformation in the countries of the Arab revolutions; the new situation prompted those non-violent Islamic movements to answer questions related to the nature of their work within the framework of the national state. Most of the opinions and answers presented by political Islam were realistic and characterized by political pragmatism. Regardless of some skepticism about the credibility of the political Islam movements, this led to a re-discussion on the post-Islamism thesis discussed by Asef Bayat.

This paper tries to explore the concept of "post-Islamism" as an interpretive entry into the study of transformations within Islamic movements and we will criticize what Asef Bayat reached out in his thesis "post-Islamism" by presenting his perspective, interpreting and discussing it. The main question will be: Can the description of "post Islamism" be generalized to the ongoing transformations within Islamic movements towards the formulation of more modern concepts? From which a sub-question branches out: Is the "post-Islamism" thesis theoretical or deconstructive of an already existing phenomenon? Is it permissible to generalize that description to the Islamic movements that have begun to adopt more modern theses?

What is "Islamism"?

A single definition of "post-Islamism" cannot be formulated without mentioning the opposite, which is the definition of "Bayat" of what he called "Islamism" which he sees as ideas and movements that seek to establish the Islamic system of government represented by the "state" that is governed by Islamic Sharia and its applications through laws that affect the peoples' lives (Hamid, 2017, 241). The adherence of this "Islamist" pattern to the state is a key feature that distinguishes them, as they link the realization of their ideas to the state, as well as to the belief community that works to establish "good" and eradicate "evil". These movements consider that securing welfare and social services are achieved in succession with the achievement of these two Strategic goals (Bayat, 2013, 166). In this sense, "Bayat" excludes some groups that manifest Islam from being "Islamist" movements as long as they do not link their goals with "the state," such as the "Tabligh and Da`wah" group, because their project is centered around an uprising for the sake of "uplifting effective spirit and piety" in a direct proclivity towards "individualism", and a return to what the righteous predecessors recognized of rituals affecting the individual, not for the purpose of the "Islamic" state, but for the sake of restoring the Muslim spirit. That is, establishing a Muslim society in which rituals are represented according to the jurisprudence of worship.

The "Islamist" movements rely on "enjoining the good and forbidding evil," which, according to Bayat, is an ambiguous concept in which the state does it, and it is mainly represented by the two divergent models "Saudi-Wahhabi" and "Iranian Shiite." From this one can be reduced what Bayat saw in that Islamism imposes on citizens or subjects more "duties" than giving them "rights," and thus "citizens" are seen as obedient subjects rather than citizens with rights and duties. Among the representations of the "Islamism" phenomenon, according to Bayat, the "Muslim Brotherhood" MB group that emerged in the 1920s in Egypt by Hassan Al-Banna, and the MB model has spread in a number of countries around the world in an interactive manner in societies in both opposition and authority (Burga, 2008, 87). Asef Bayat did not present an explicit model for tracking the transformations within the "Islamism" phenomenon. For example, the MB does not have the same narratives from its inception until its rise to power and its fall from it in Egypt, and each stage necessitated some kind of transformations that the MB presented in the form of new theses or revisions. However, Islamism presented a coherent concept, especially in the order pertaining to "access to power," but it cannot be applied to all the movements.

Post-Islamism

All the terminologies of "post" are copious in terms of definition, and it has been known philosophically that "post" refers to the end of a certain era without success in establishing another, that is, the end of "Islamism", without succeeding in formulating a clear state project or a ruling theory, or Creating profound transformations within the phenomenon that may change it from its origin (Ibid, 204). However, the Islamism phenomenon did not end as it reproduced itself again without abandoning its constituent origins, or deviating from the vision that links it to accessing power, that is, the notion of the state didn't end from its literature. To some extent, that reproduction, especially in "Arab Islamism", differed between the Arab east "Mashreq" and the west "Maghreb" (Ismail, 2006, 76), where the eastern Islamic movements seemed to adhere to the traditional tendency than in the Maghreb, that is, those movements that reproduced concepts again without prejudice to the origins but in a new form[1] it adopts the separation of preaching -religious- from "the political", which denies that the "Islamism" is not available in it, as formulated by "Asef Bayat".

---

[1] Generalization may not be useful, but most of the Islamist movements at the forefront of the scene in the Western Maghreb made a considerable transformation in their paths.

The concept of "post-Islamism" has taken the place of a new narrative or analytical model through which it is possible to describe and explain developments in the structures and ideas of groupings, their historical relations to which they belong, as well as their future orientations, that is, it has become a network of concepts interconnected with each other indicating the establishment of a new intellectual stage under the name of "post-Islamism." (Bayat, 2013, 42).

Bayat observed the beginning of the "post-Islamic" trends in his study of the Iranian case after Khomeini, and in he discussed the emergence of new social currents and reformist religious ideas, after reviews by the reformist elites, and he noticed the existence of several interpretive models outside Iranian borders that the same concept could apply to them (Ibid, 90).

It is easy to see a weak framing of the concept in the Iranian case, whose Islamic movements differ from other Islamic movements in countries with a Sunni majority, the fact that Islamic movements in Iran, for example, originate in a theocratic state that adopts the Shiite doctrine. That is, there is a peculiarity even for the Islamism movements that exist inside Iran, from which an explanatory model cannot emerge for Islamism movements outside its borders, but the presence of similarities is what calls for a comparison between them and the Islamism movements in countries with a Sunni majority.

Bayat defines post-Islamism: "it represents a situation and a project that resulted from the political and social transformations that followed the stage of experimenting with Islamism that derives from Sharia, the Islamists became aware of their discourse and their differences at a time when they were trying to establish future stages of rule, and then their political frameworks became subject to questions and criticisms, and this prompted some of them to reproduce some of the Islamic principles in a new form under the pressure of circumstances and transformations at the regional and international levels, represented by the formation of more modern religious and political discourse (Ibid, 197)". It is noteworthy that Bayat did not mention specific examples.

By this, Bayat believes that (post-Islamism) is not only a case as much as it is a project. He tries to formulate new concepts and frame a more modern strategy that goes beyond the "Islamism" stage in the political, social and religious fields, thus he tries to present a new image of religion in line with the times, that is, neither secular nor Islamic, nor against Islamic teachings, insofar as it's a reproduction of new visions in which religiosity with rights and belief in freedom and Islam are mixed with liberation (Ibid, 209).

And here is the first reversal of the principles of "Islamism", that is, the affirmation of the rights of people, instead of focusing on duties only, pluralism instead of individual and historical authoritarianism instead of texts, and the marriage between the values of Islam and liberal democracy (Hafez, 2019, 17), in order to form an "alternative modernity", despite the assertion of Bayat that the case of" post-Islamism" is not secular in its disconnected sense from the evocation of religion at least in the political field, but he acknowledged its recognition of some secular foundations, and described it in broad terms such as" freedom from puritanism "," rupture with the monopoly of religious truth ", and affirmation on freedom of religion and the role of religion in the public sphere, as well as emphasis on the civility of the state (Hashemi, 2009, 65).

We see a broad concept of "post-Islamism" which Bayat formulated with this description, and mixed it with secular concepts that may strip Islam itself, not Islamism, of its basic principles. Therefore, it is not possible with this description to accept the concept of "post-Islamism" on what Asef Bayat adopted, that is, there is a contradiction in his assertion that there will be no disconnection with religious origins, but the image will be clearer if we consider there is a new formulation that has nothing to do with religion itself, especially with regard to the discontinuity in dealing with the text and judging by the "historiography of texts", which is a Marxist view that deals with the sacred texts and consider them historiographical texts, that is, it is a dialectic that is not suitable for dealing with the current reality.

The post-Islamism concept of Asef Bayat was intertwined with what was formulated by the famous French religious sociologist Oliver Roy in his book The Failure of Political Islam (Roy, 1992, 87), who spoke about the failure of political Islam movements that use violence in its attempt to establish a state governed by Islamic law contradicting the concepts of the modern nation-state, that is, he integrated movements that accept democracy, freedom, pluralism and citizenship within the framework of his concept of "post-Islamism".

Roy used the post-Islamism stage to describe a state of deficiency and stagnation that Islamic movements and organizations had reached in the early 1990s, especially after the failure of the "Islamic Salvation Front" experiment in Algeria, and the escalation of confrontations between Islamic radical groups and the Egyptian regime (Al-anani, 2018, 101).

Therefore, the concept of "post-Islamism" differs between "Asef Bayat" and "Oliver Roy" despite the identical name, but the meaning differs as it was shown previously, and accordingly, the description of a post-Islamism may be between formulating a new case that turns against the Islamic fundamentals and disconnects from them (The case of Asef Bayat) or just a renewal and abandonment of some branches that are no longer appropriate for the contemporary temporal state (the case of Oliver Roy).

How does Islamism move to post-Islamism?

In this section, we identify the reasons that lead to the transition from the stage of "Islamism", to the stage of "post-Islamism" as Bayat defined both concepts. It is necessary to mention the characteristics of Islamism movements first; The Islamism movements agree on the goal of "the state" and vary in the methods that they use, some groups by peaceful means, like the "reformist current" and some groups by violent like "jihadists." And we can describe what the reformists seek to establish an Islamic state through peaceful frameworks and constitutional methods. The Islamists, who prefer elections and believe in their usefulness, reject the use of violence to access power. They seek to work through democratic mechanisms and civil society mobilization, and work through professional unions, NGOs, mosques and charities.

The Muslim Brotherhood as seen by Bayat in Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Sudan, Algeria and Jordan represents this trend, as Jamaat Islami in Pakistan and the Milli Görüş movements in Turkey also belong to the same category. (Bayat, 2013, 199) These movements seek to build moral and political hegemony upward from below, i.e. to start from the Islamization of society then to the Islamization of the state that is consistent with the "Gramscian" perspective. These movements and groups use religious language and rely on religion as a general framework for their discourses.

On the contrary, the "jihadist" movements use violence against the official state institutions and Western interests, and in some cases non-Muslim civilians as well as Muslims. They use the "Leninist revolution" pattern of change by overthrowing the state through violence, I.e. it seeks change "from above" in contrast to "reformist" movements, they are also hostile to secular movements that makes it difficult to use the "Asef Bayat" model in combining the two types under one characterization of "Islamism", with the essential difference between "reformist" and "jihadist" movements in access power (Kepel, 2002, 98). That is, the concept of "Islamism" cannot be applied to the reformist Islamic movements, and at the same time to apply it to the revolutionary jihadist movements!

Characteristics of the transition from Islamism to post-Islamism

According to Bayat, the transition to "post-Islamist" begins when the calls for the principles of "democracy, individual rights, tolerance, gender equality, and the separation of religion from the state" emerge, which pushes the elite to make a qualitative shift within the intellectual paradigm (Ibid, 137), and the transition to a next stage in which the constants that have long been adhered to are abandoned. Likewise, this thought reproduces itself with a new image that Asef Baya called post-Islamism. In other words, there is a transitional stage between "Islamism" and what comes after it, which is dependent on internal dynamic changes.

Asef Bayat continues on post-Islamism, therefore, as a discourse disconnected from the Islamism model, and then he returns to assert that it is a disconnection from Islamism in the condition that he described, and not post-Islamic, meaning it is not a disconnection from religion entirely and it's not a comprehensive secularization, rather, religion has a presence in the public sphere in addition to being a component and influential, and in this case it is a more inclusive project.

The discourse disconnection with the Islamism model is the justification through which the concept of post-Islamism was established on the new discourse, with this perspective, the Turkish experience represented by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) can be described as "post-Islamism, as it is, in fact, a disconnection between the party and the "Milli Görüş" movement, as is the case with the reformists' rift in Iran with the ideas of the conservative Khomeinist movement. According to Bayat, post-Islamism shares a wide area with "liberal Islamism" which sees Islam as basically compatible with democracy, the civil state and freedom of thought. However, the difference is that post-Islamism does not seek to privatize Islam, as it considers it part of the public sphere must be supported and strengthened (Brown, 2012, 154).

Post-Islamism in the post-"Arab revolutions"

Writings on Islamists increased after the Arab revolutions, and the trends differed between supporters and opponents, and the discussion of the Islamic question focused on the participation of Islamists in the revolutions in the first place, between judging their weakness, lack thereof, or their participation in one country without another. The Arab revolutions didn't have "Islamic slogans," and they were more preoccupied with demanding "democracy, freedom and justice," and Asef Bayat agreed to launch the concept of post-Islamism on the case of Islamic movements that believed in the Arab revolutions and the values of pluralist democracy despite its adherence to the Islamic character (Al-anani, 2018, 99).

Abdel Wahab Al Afandi disagrees with Asef Bayat in calling "post-Islamism" in the case of the Arab revolutions and he prefers to use the term "trans-Islamism" in describing the Arab revolutions based on the fact that most of the Islamists 'slogans and demands for the state have gone out of date and become fused in the public sphere, according to Al Afandi , the same slogans have embodied on the ground. For example, in Tahrir Square, most of the protestors in it used to pray in congregation without the presence of a superior authority that would push them to the matter (Al Afand, 2012).

However, it is difficult to measure the state of the Arab revolutions, especially as they have undergone profound regressions that affected their paths, and the goals for which they were established, and the Islamic movements went through a stage of transformations that could not be described as "post-Islamism", and even Bayat himself did not address the post-revolution period enough and he did not indicate if these movements shifted towards a specific model.

It is possible to refer to Asef Bayat's efforts in formulating the concept of "post-Islamism" in the context of theorizing to a stage that has not yet occurred in the ideal way of what he formulated, but not in the context of his dismantling of already existing movements or tendencies. It may sometimes happen that certain movements take both sides together, they may commit to "Islamism" in certain aspects and "post-Islamism" in others. Therefore, it is necessary to critically review Asef Bayat's efforts to formulate the concept of post-Islamism in the way that it looks at a future stage that may not be fully realized for the concept, in light of the developments and transformations taking place inside the Islamic movements (García, 2012, 71).

The post-Islamism approach, which many hasten in formulating it as a theoretical framework and a conceptual entry open to all interpretations of the phenomenon of political Islam; they remain hasty approaches making judgments about a mutable phenomenon, which is characterized by the property of stability more than dynamism. The most important thing is that the Islamic phenomenon is vastly and remarkably diverse, not at the level of the phenomenon as a whole, but rather at the level of the group and the same current, there is great variation and more than one approach within a single group. Everyone thinks that he is closest to the correct interpretation of the idea putting us in front of a diverse case with which it is difficult to measure and judge the phenomenon as a whole. For example, it is noticed in the case of the MB, there are two currents ruling it: the organizational current, which finds it difficult to accept the pluralistic democratic idea; And the cultural and political current that has become godfather and fighter for these ideas and belief in them (Ibahrine, 2012, 63), that's as a way out of the contemporary political deadlock in the region as a whole.

On the other hand; a young elite group has emerged at the heart of the Islamic movement, which was an integral part of the spark of the Arab Spring revolutions and it helped coining the slogans of these revolutions, such as: justice, freedom, dignity and equal citizenship.

Most of the youth of this segment have found themselves face to face against authoritarian regimes that do not suit their orientation, temperament and the high ambitions ceiling (Abah, 2004, 53).

This young elite is not isolated from a high-level theoretical intellectual background at the heart of the Islamic movement, and those who consider at this stage the need to separate or distinguish between politics and the preaching, and the necessity to leave the state of lost- which the Islamic movements found themselves inside because of the political and religious clash based on the idea of the Sharia state and Hakimiyya[2] (Roy, 2006, 149) with the state of civil rights and liberties. But does the approach of separating or distinguishing between politics and preaching- in what it means - means that we are facing post-political Islam stage in all its manifestations, and the decline of Islamic case (preaching and politically) within the framework of a political party like other programmatic parties, similar to the Christian democratic parties in Europe?

This question also needs a more accurate approach to dismantle the angle of the problem that exists in Arab and Islamic societies, regarding the root of the existing problem related to the phenomenon of political despotism that has been hanging over these societies for several decades, we need to know before talking about the errors and complexities of the Islamic phenomenon and its confusion between the religious and the political. In other words, Talking about the phenomenon of post-political Islam as a reality with which it is not possible to escape from a opinions that contains many exaggerations and inaccuracies, despite some indications that cannot be measured on the changes in the Islamic phenomenon as a whole.

In a more precise sense; the survival of the phenomenon of political Islam is fundamentally linked to the complexities and interactions of the political reality of the Islamic world as a whole. This is considering that Islam, insofar as it is a devotional religion, is also an inciting revolutionary subject against oppression, tyranny and submissiveness, making it a material and fuel for all protest revolutionary movements in societies of political despotism in which attempts for political and democratic transitions have failed, such as the societies of the Arab Spring countries whose revolutions calling for the civil democratic state were aborted. .

Conclusion

It is not necessary to accept such absolute statements as the end of political Islam, and we need to establish a different perspective that stems from the particularity of the Arab-Muslim researcher in his vision of the Islamic phenomenon, and through which he can discover a different approach of view and the position of politics in the project of political Islam.

It can be said that the Islamic project has lost on various levels: accessing power, then proposing a new form of power, in addition to painful concessions that it paid on its journey to power. However, on the level of the idea of politics or the political dimension in the Islamic movement, I am afraid that there is a big mistake in declaring the term "the end of political Islam" or "post-Islamism", the main reason for which is generalization and lack of awareness of the structure and complexity of the Islamic case. "

References

Abah, O. (2004). The Post-September 11 World: Intellectual and Strategic Problems. Beirut: Arab Science House.

Al Afand, A. (2012). "A Trans-Islamic revolution? Reflections on the fate of Islamism in the era of Arab mass revolutions." Critical Muslim 1, no. 1.

Al-anani, K. (2018). "Posts": The Muslim Brotherhood as a Model, Post-Islamism a New Phase or Ideological Delusions? FES Jordan & Iraq, p91_107.

Bayat, A. (2013). Post-Islamism: The Changing Faces of Political Islam. Oxford University Press.

---

[2] The principle of Hakimiyya is one of the most important religious terms used by the Islamic sects and currents rooting their attitude towards the government, the ruler, legislation and all state institutions and it means legislation and governance is no one but for God.

Bayat, A. (2013). The Making of Post-Islamist Iran: The Changing Faces of Political Islam, First Edition, 2016 pp. 35-65, edited by Asef Bayat. Oxford University Press.

Brown, N. J. (2012). When Victory Is Not an Option: Islamist Movements in Arab Politics? Cornell University Press.

Burga, F. (2008). Islamism in the Shadow of al-Qaeda. University of Texas Press.

García, L. G. (2012). Post-Islamism, the Failure of an Idea: Regards on Islam and Nationalism from Khomeini's Death to the Arab Revolts. Religion Compass, Vol 6 (10): https://doi.org/10.1111/rec3.12002

Hafez, F. (2019). The evolution of the Islamic view of the democratic question: pluralism of concept and the problem of employment. Believers without Borders Foundation.

Hamid, S. (2017). Islamic Exceptionalism: How the Struggle over Islam is Reshaping the World. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Hashemi, N. (2009). Islam, Secularism, and Liberal Democracy: Toward a Democratic Theory for Muslim Societies. Oxford University Press.

Ibahrine, M. (2012). New media and neo-Islamism: new media's impact on the political culture in the Islamic world. VDM Verlag Dr. Mueller e.K.

Ismail, S. (2006). Rethinking Islamist Politics: Culture, the State and Islamism. London: I.B. Tauris.

Kepel, G. (2002). Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam. Translated by Nabil Saad, Third World Writers Series.

Roy, O (1992). The Failure of Political Islam. Harvard University Press.

Roy, O. (2006). Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah. Columbia University Press.

Roy, O. (2017). "Political Islam After the Arab Spring: Between Jihad and Democracy,". Democracy Digest. Published on October 24, 2017.seen on May 14, 2021 https://www.demdigest.org/political-islam-arab-spring-jihad-democracy/

Schwedler, J. (2011). Can Islamists Become Moderates? Rethinking the Inclusion-Moderation Hypothesis. World Politics. Vol 63(02) p.p :347-376. DOI: 10.1017/S0043887111000050