POLITICAL INSTRUMENTALISATION OF ISLAM, PERSISTENT AUTOCRACIES, AND OBSCURANTIST DEADLOCK

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ABSTRACT

The empirical literature has established a strong link between the fact of being a Muslim-dominated country and indicators of political performance and democracy. This suggests the possible existence of a relation between religion, Islam in this instance, and societal characteristics. Bernard Lewis and others have actually argued the case for such a relation, pointing to aspects of the Islamic religion and culture that make the advent of democracy especially difficult. These arguments fall into the general idea of the "Clash of civilisations" put forward by Samuel Huntington. In this paper, we discuss this sort of argument and show that there is a systematic misconception about the true nature of the relationship between Islam and politics: far from being merged into the religious realm, politics tends to dominate religion. Because of the particular characteristics of Is-lam, namely, the lack of a centralised religious authority structure and the great variability of interpretations of the Islamic law, there is a risk of an "obscurantist deadlock" in the form of a vicious process whereby both the ruler and his political opponents try to outbid each other by using the religious idiom. This risk looms particularly large in crisis situations accentuated by international factors.

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1 Introduction[1]

Cross-country regressions that attempt to explain differences in economic growth and political performances among countries of the world have become a familiar exploration tool to investigate the influence of particular factors, such as physical and human capital, institutions, the abundance of natural resources, initial conditions, *etc*. The role of religion has also been explored in this manner, and, since the Muslim world has recently attracted much attention due to the existence of radical Islamist movements and the perceived state of crisis in many of its parts, the possible adverse effects of Islam on economic and political achievements have been under particular scrutiny. The central lessons from these efforts can be summarised as follows.

To begin with, no clear conclusion emerges from the study of the impact of Islam on economic growth and development. For example, La Porta *et al.* (1997) found that countries with more dominant hierarchical religions (Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity, and Islam clubbed together):

> "have less efficient judiciaries, greater corruption, lower-quality bureaucracies, higher rates of tax evasion, lower rates of participation in civic activities and professional associations, a lower level of importance of large firms in the economy, inferior infrastructures, and higher inflation" (pp. 336-37).

Barro and McCleary (2003) only partly agree, since they found that Hinduism, Islam, Orthodox Christianity, and Protestantism are negatively associated with *per capita* income growth relative to Catholicism. As for Sala-i-Martin *et al.* (2004), who use a larger sample, they propose a diametrically-opposed result, in the sense that Islam now appears as a positive, rather than a negative, factor for growth.

This is confirmed by Noland (2005, 2008), for whom the notion that Islam is inimical to growth is not supported by his data. If anything, the effect is positive rather than negative (at least when the sample consists only of developing countries). As for Pryor (2006), he reaches the conclusion that no special Islamic economic system can be isolated upon the basis of a cluster analysis and on data on forty-four economic institutions used to define economic systems. Moreover, the share of Muslims in the population is unrelated to the presence or absence of most particular economic institutions and, when the sample is limited to developing countries from which Muslim countries that are too small or too rich (from oil resources) are excluded, it does not explain variations in economic growth performances.

The influence of Islam seems to be much clearer on politics than on economics. Indeed, the available evidence converges to suggest that Islam is negatively related to political performance as measured by some index of democracy. Thus, whether democracy is measured by the Polity IV index (which provides ratings of the standards of democracy along several dimensions including openness of executive recruitment, constraints on the chief executive, and competitiveness of political participation), the index of Liberal Democracy (which measures the extent of political rights and the degree of political competition), or the Freedom House index (which measures political rights and civil lib-

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erties), it appears to be significantly less developed in Muslim-dominated countries.[2] It bears emphasis that scores of democracy are not only lower in Muslim, than in non-Muslim, countries, but also in Arab, than in non-Arab, countries.

Thus, the so-called MENA Development Report of the World Bank focuses on comparisons between the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and other regions of the world. A salient conclusion emerging from the 2003 Report is that there exists a significant governance gap between MENA and the rest of the world, meaning that countries belonging to the former region display consistently lower levels of governance quality than would be expected for their incomes. Driving this governance gap are comparatively low scores in the area of *public accountability* – how well citizens can access government information and hold their political leaders accountable – rather than in the area of the *quality of public administration* – the efficiency of the bureaucracy, the strength of the rule of law and the protection of property rights, and the control of corruption and the quality of regulations. In other words, all countries belonging to MENA, whatever their income, score well below the world trend with respect to external accountabilities and access to basic political and civil rights. While some of these countries are institutionalised autocracies, others are one-party systems, and those which are parliamentary democracies are generally subject to various restrictions, foremost among which is the restriction of press freedom (World Bank 2003, Chap. 1).

Among the reasons mentioned to explain the governance deficit of MENA countries, if we except the cultural/historical factors to which I shall return below, oil wealth (which gives rise to the "resource curse"), geopolitics (foreign powers have generally found it convenient to work with authoritarian regimes), and interstate conflicts (which tend to concentrate power in the hands of the executive, and encourage coercive organisations) stand foremost. Regarding the latter two factors, it is striking that military spending represents a much larger proportion of Gross Domestic Product in MENA (about 6 percent) than in any other region of the world (about 2 percent in all developing countries or in all developed countries) (World Bank, 2003, pp. 65-71). Moreover, scores of democracy are lower when Arab countries have been involved in a regional conflict (El-badawi, and Makdisi, 2008). Oil wealth, however, cannot provide a complete explanation of the democratic deficit in Arab countries. Indeed, scores of democracy appear to be lower in Arab oil-rich countries than in non-Arab oil-rich countries, and lower in Arab oil-poor countries than in non-Arab oil-poor countries (see Weiffen, 2008). On the other hand, within the MENA region, no clear relationship emerges between conflict or the threat of it, and the weakness of political contestability (World Bank, 2003, p. 68).

Cross-section studies of the determinants of the Arab governance deficit are fraught with serious empirical problems. First, there is the problem of measuring and aggregating religious affiliations (for example, do we need to distinguish between Sunni and Shia Islam?). Second, strong multi co-linearity exists between Islamic faith, Arab identity, and regional conflicts. This feature makes it hard to disentangle the respective contributions of each of these factors to the dismal political performances of Muslim countries, particularly in terms of political participation, inclusiveness and accountability. It is true that certain variables, possession of oil wealth and Islamic cultural influence, have been shown not only to yield separate (negative) effects on democracy scores, but also to

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[2] Note incidentally that the simultaneous presence of a statistically significant relationship between, say, being a Muslim-dominated country and political performance, on the one hand, and the absence of relationship between the former and economic performance, on the other hand, is not really surprising since we know that there is no simple robust relationship between democracy and economic growth (see, for example, Bardhan, 1999). More particularly, in the MENA region the association between public accountability (measured by the Index of Public Accountability) and income is not clear on the empirical level, unlike the association between the quality of administration (measured by the Index of Quality of Administration) and income which appears to be strong and robust. Such a pattern is actually consistent with worldwide trends (World Bank, 2003, p. 83).

give rise to a significant additional (negative) effect when mutually interacted (Weiffen, 2008). But, again, it is not clear what is exactly meant by Islamic cultural influence, and whether it is Islam or Arab identity that matters.

The third, and probably the most nasty problem, arises from the endogeneity of the cultural/religious variable. The core of this paper's argument is, indeed, that Islam is highly vulnerable to instrumentalisation by political rulers. As a result, it is difficult to determine to what extent Islam hampers politics or politics subverts Islam. Since (instrumental) variables that influence religion with no bearing upon politics are very hard to find, the identification problem caused by endogeneity is unlikely to be resolved satisfactorily (the cultural variable is correlated with the error term).

Partly because of these problems, it is not surprising that existing econometric studies suffer from a striking lack of soundly elaborated explanations of the Arab (or Muslim) governance deficit, in the sense of explanations that go sufficiently deep into the causal mechanisms behind the effects uncovered. One exception, however, concerns the cultural/historical argument that rests upon the idea of a "clash of civilisations", a doctrine that assumes that each civilisational group has a number of key features and values which are both projected and protected by the core states of that group (Allawi, 2009, p. 144).[3] According to this view, Islam is a retrograde civilisation incompatible with the requirements of modern growth and development in general, and with participatory forms of governance, in particular (Huntington, 1993, pp. 22-49; Hudson, 1995). This line of argument has been most elaborately pursued by Bernard Lewis in his recent book entitled *What Went Wrong?* (2002). The central point is that, unlike in Christianity, the separation between politics and religion, God and Caesar, church and state, spiritual and temporal authority, has never really occurred in the Islamic world. To the Western perception of the separation of religion from political life and the assertion of individual rights, the Muslims oppose an all-encompassing view of the divine law that implies the amalgamation of religion and politics and the recognition of collective rights for all the Muslim faithful (Chap. 5). As a consequence, individual freedom, social pluralism, civil society, and representative government, were prevented from evolving in Muslim societies. Since obedience to religious tenets is inherent in Islamic religious doctrine, "Islam and democracy are antithetical" (Lewis, 1993, p. 91).

The aim of the present contribution is double: (1) to provide a critical appraisal of Lewis' thesis based upon a historical investigation of the relationship between society and politics in the lands of Islam, and (2) to propose an explanation of the persistence of authoritarianism in many of them that combines most of the roughly-sketched explanations mentioned above. In the process, a better underthanting can be obtained of why reforms towards more participatory forms of governance in MENA have stalled irrespective of the type of government regime – monarchy or sultanates (Jordan, Morocco, Oman, Saudi Arabia), socialist (Syria, Iraq), Islamic (Iran), secular or nationalist (Algeria, Tunisia) – and irrespective of whether they are single or multiparty systems (World Bank, 2003, pp. 204-5; Lust-Okar and Jamal, 2002). An interpretative approach using relevant historical materials is followed throughout the whole paper conceived as a complementary effort to the many econometrical estimates that have been so much in vogue recently. The findings reported below are, therefore, the outcome of an economist's long and ascetic retreat into the domain of history.

The outline of the paper is as follows. In Section 2, the main thesis advanced by the proponents of the thesis of the "clash of civilisations" is criticised in the light of historical evidence relating to the entire history of the Muslim world. A view of the dominant politico-religious equilibrium in Muslim countries is then sketched. In Section 3, the first type of circumstances under which religious authorities tend to rise to prominence is dis-

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[3] We leave aside the work of Timur Kuran (2004a, 2004b), who addresses more specifically the role of Islamic institutions as an impediment to capital accumulation and a cause of retardation of economic growth.

cussed, namely, political vacuum created by a weak central power. The case of modern Iran is used as the main illustration. Section 4 directs attention to the second, and opposite set of circumstances under which religion gains ascendancy, *i.e.*, despotism. What is stressed here is the easiness with which Islam, very much like ethnic identity, can be instrumentalised by political rulers. Several recent examples from Muslim countries are provided, which help unveil the underlying logic of an "obscurantist deadlock". In Section 5, the international, conflict-ridden context in which the rise of Islamist movements has occurred is underlined together with the role of oil abundance in the Arabian peninsula. Section 6 concludes.

2 The thesis of the "clash of civilisations"

2.1 The argument in a nutshell

According to Bernard Lewis (2002), the reason behind the lack of separation between the religious and the political spheres in the Muslim world is historical: the Prophet Muhammed became the political leader of his own city (Medina), causing a complete merging of religion and politics, and suppressing any move towards building a religious establishment. Unlike the Christians, Muslims had no need to isolate the religious sphere from the political one: in contrast to Christianity, which rose within the Roman Empire, Muhammad was born in a context in which he had to construct a political, economic and social order. As cogently put by Lewis (2002):

> "Since the state was Islamic, and was indeed created as an instrument of Islam by its founder, there was no need for any separate religious institution. The state was the church, the church was the state, and God was head of both, with the Prophet as his representative on earth… From the beginning, Christians were taught, both by precept and practice, to distinguish between God and Caesar and between the different duties owed to each of the two. Muslims received no such instruction" (pp. 113, 115).

The same historical logic implies that there is no room for a laity in the lands of Islam:

> "The idea that any group of persons, any kind of activities, any part of human life is in any sense outside the scope of religious law and jurisdiction is alien to Muslim thought. There is, for example, no distinction between canon law and civil law, between the law of the church and the law of the state, crucial in Christian history. There is only a single law, the *sharia,* accepted by Muslims as of divine origin and regulating all aspects of human life: civil, commercial, criminal, constitutional, as well as matters more specifically concerned with religion in the limited, Christian sense of the word… One may even say that there is no orthodoxy and heresy, if one understands these terms in the Christian sense, as correct or incorrect belief defined as such by duly constituted religious authority…Even the major division within Islam, between Sunnis and Shi'a, arose over an historical conflict about the political leadership of the community, not over any question of doctrine" (Lewis, 2002, pp. 111-12).

To sum up, Islam has been born in historical circumstances that radically differ from those surrounding the birth of Christianity, but evoke the origin of Judaism (Greif, 2006, p. 206; see, also, Lilla, 2007, p. 318). Because it emerged within the Roman Empire, which had a unified code of law and a rather effective legal system, Christianity did not have to provide a code of law governing everyday life in creating communities of believers. In contrast, Islam (like Judaism) is a religion that regulates its adherents' behaviour in their everyday, economic, political, and social life.

2.2 Discussion: a retrospective look

Lewis' point regarding the historical origin of the conflation of religion and politics in the lands of Islam is undoubtedly correct. Unless we adopt a deterministic approach to history, however, the implications of these initial conditions for the destiny of Muslim countries are far from clear. Historical evidence actually shows that the ideal has been impossible to achieve since the time of the Prophet for the simple reason that:

> "no other human being can enjoy the Prophet's combination of religious and political authority... That experience was unique and cannot be replicated, because Muslims do not accept the possibility of prophets after the Prophet Muhammad" (An-Naim, 2008, p. 53).

The central lesson to draw from the history of early Islam points to the essentially political nature of the whole process of consolidation of power throughout the Arabian Peninsula. As attested from the very beginning by the murders of three of the four caliphes who succeeded Muhammad, the history of Islam is full of violent confrontations between various factions vying for power and adhering to different interpretations of the Quran/Koran, each claiming legitimacy for its own version of inheritance from the Prophet. What appear at first sight as conflicts between various religious factions or interpretations of the faith often conceal more down-to-earth struggles between different clans or tribes over access to political power and the economic privileges that go with it.

During the first centuries of Islam, the core conflict saw the group of Muslims who migrated with the Prophet from Mecca, those belonging to Muhammad's clan, in opposition with those who welcomed and supported him in Medina by converting to the new faith. In other words, claims of early conversion and close links with Muhammad clashed with claims to the nobility of ancient and honourable ancestry. The Umayyad state, which moved the capital city from Mecca to Damas in 657, sought to maintain the fiction that the authority of their caliphs was an extension of the authority of the Prophet. Yet, it established a hereditary dynasty and resembled the Sassanian and Byzantine models of monarchical rule (Lapidus, 1988, Chap. 4; An-Na'im, 2008, pp. 61-62). Again, rather than originating in a doctrinal conflict, Shi'ism (the Shia are the followers of Ali) began as a movement of support for the leadership of certain Arab candidates in the caliphate, in opposition to the hegemony of Syrian Arab tribes ruling from Damascus.

The Abbasids (from Bagdad) destituted the Umayyads on the grounds that they were unrighteous and had turned their authority into secular kingship. Founding their claim to rule on shared lineage with the Prophet, the early Abbasid caliphs attempted to revitalise the sacred function of the caliphate, and to return to the model of the unity of religious and political leadership. Yet, the inherent contradictions of their claims to this dual leadership were soon exposed and, as early as the middle of the tenth century, the institution of the caliphate declined after less than two centuries of glory (Meddeb, 2002, pp. 96-99).

The separation on an institutional level of state institutions and religious associations became the norm for the late Abbasid caliphate, the Seljuq and Mamluk sultanates, the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal empires, and other Muslim regimes. It became a landmark of pre-modern Islamic societies that, contrary to the Muslim ideal, the caliphate transformed itself into "a largely military and imperial institution legitimated in neo-Byzantine and neo-Sassanian terms", while the religious élites developed "a more complete authority over the communal, personal, religious, and doctrinal aspects of Islam" (Lapidus, 1996, p. 12; see, also, 1988, p. 881). In the worst circumstances, such as towards the end of the Abbasid period, the caliphs were mistreated by their praetorian guards, who did not hesitate to depose, maim, and blind them at will (Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, 2007, p. 11). In the most benign circumstances, such as occasionally happened under Ottoman sultans after Murad II, the title of caliph was used "in a rhetorical sense

rather than as a straightforward political-legal assertion of sovereignty over the Muslim community" (Finkel, 2005, p. 111).

2.3 Discussion: the dominant politico-religious equilibrium

As the foregoing account suggests, and as confirmed by Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im (2008), the states under which Muslims lived in the past were never Islamic: "the state was inherently political and not religious because of differences between the nature of religious authority and political authority" (p. 49). The fact that rulers often deemed it desirable to claim a measure of Islamic legitimacy to sustain their political authority over Muslims did not make the state that they controlled Islamic (p. 52). They just followed a long tradition in which political power in Muslim lands was exercised by military figures who dressed themselves as emirs.

Throughout history, political rulers tended to have the upper hand in their dealings with religious authorities, and the principle of non-attachment of the *ulema* to worldly affairs seems to have generally prevailed. While accepting the necessity of political order, the latter disdained political involvement and withdrew into communal and personal religious affairs (Lapidus, 1988, p. 882; Saint-Prot, 2008, pp. 312-13). According to Albert Hourani (1991, pp. 143-45, 458), if rulers had to negotiate with the *ulema*, and their authority was legitimate only if it was used to maintain the *sharia*, and therefore "the fabrics of virtuous and civilised life" (a caliph's main duty was to watch over the faith), a powerful tradition among the *ulema* (among both Sunni and Shi'a Muslims) provided that "they should keep their distance from the rulers of the world" (p. 458). This implied that they ought to avoid linking themselves too closely with the government of the world, while preserving their access to the rulers and their influence upon them. Such a passive approach of religious authorities towards political power, it may be noted, was legitimized by the fact that the jurists of Islam were primarily concerned to regulate the relationship of the individual Muslim with his or her God. This led them to formulate standards of conduct which represented a system of private, and not of public, law (Coulson, 1964, pp. 120, 123).[4] The fact of the matter is that the Quran/Koran does not cover genuine constitutional or administrative law. Revealingly, besides mentioning that it is the duty of the ruler to ratify and enforce the standards of conduct prescribed by the *sharia*, it contains only two points about the proper system of government – consultation (*meshverret*) and obedience to authority (*ulu'l emr*) – and does not insist on any particular form of government (An-Naim, 2008, p. 199). Even if the ruler was unjust or impious, "it was generally accepted that he should still be obeyed, for any kind of order was better than anarchy" (Hourani, 1991, p. 144).[5]

Accommodation with the existing power was thus seen as desirable by the *ulema* for whom denouncing a ruler who claimed to be a good Muslim was unjustified.[6] In the words of N.J. Coulson (1964):

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[4] For example, in fiscal law, *ulema* were primarily concerned with those limited aspects of public finance which were deemed to constitute a man's obligations towards God, such as the payment of the *zakat* tax (Coulson, 1964, p. 124).

[5] In Afghanistan, for example, the *ulema* advocate the implementation of the *sharia* "but do not care who is in charge of the state, provided that he supports the *sharia* and protects the religion" (Roy, 1993, p. 494).

[6] Sufism, an important strand of Islam, often manifested under spiritualist and syncretic forms, generally adopted an attitude of detachment from worldly powers, which brought Sufi masters much social prestige and spiritual authority. For example, the Chistis who played such a major role in the pattern of Islamisation of India (see *supra*) "implicitly accepted the political cadre of the Sultanate and indirectly validated the authority of the Sultans by advocating a concept of universal hierarchy which Sultans could use to validate their claims to be the heads of a temporal world order" (Lapidus, 1988, p. 451).

> "Might, in fact, was right, and this was eventually recognised by the scholars in their denunciation of civil disobedience even when the political authority was in no sense properly constituted. Obviously, the effective enforcement of the whole system of *sharia* law was entirely dependent upon the whim of the *de facto* ruler" (p. 83).

Also revealing is the fact that the classical doctrine, according to which a ruler ought to be a genuine descendant of the Prophet, "was really of no consequence": what mattered most was the military strength and financial wealth of the willing ruler (Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, 2007, p. 14).[7] This is in stark contrast to the view of Islamists for whom no compromise can be struck with any state whose foundations are not thoroughly Islamic (Roy, 1993, p. 495). Thus, if the merger of religion and politics is a classic Islamic ideal, it is only recently that they have actually been brought together (Lapidus, 1988, p. 889).

In a striking manner, the traditionalist and most influential philosopher al-Ghazali (1058-1111) wrote, on the one hand, that "the jurisconsult serves as master and director of conscience for political authority in administrating and disciplining men that order and justice may reign in this world", and, on the other, that "the tyranny of a sultan for a hundred years causes less damage than one year's tyranny exercised by the subjects against one another… Revolt was justified only against a ruler who clearly went against a command of God or His prophet" (cited from Kepel, 2005, p. 238; and from Hourani, 1991, p. 144). In short, communal strife (*fitna*) or chaos (*fawda*) was the most abhorred state and, to prevent it from emerging, despotism was justified. Religious authorities thus tolerate an oppressive or even an illegitimate political ruler as the lesser of two evils (An-Na'im, 2008, p. 52).

Gilles Kepel (2005) conveys the same Hobbesian idea when he writes that "the excommunication of the prince, be he the worst of despots, was pronounced only exceptionally, for it opened the prospect of considerable disorder and created dangerous jurisprudential precedents" (p. 59). Excommunication was deemed an especially dangerous weapon because "it could all too easily fall into the hands of sects beyond the control of the *ulema* and the clerics" (*ibidem*, p. 56). It bears emphasis that this tradition developed in spite of the professed aim of Islam to establish a righteous world order and to provide guarantees against despotic rule. Under the Mamluks, the *ulema* often declared outright allegiance to whatever military commander ruled over the city of their residence (for example, Damascus), because they believed that this would help restore order as quickly as possible. In times of war, this attitude implied that they authorised new taxes and even the diversion of funds from religious foundations for military purposes. When a rebel religious leader emerged from among the *ulema*, such as Ibn Taymiyyah, he was rudely repressed by the sultan on the grounds that his religious beliefs contradicted the consensus of the scholar community and that his *fatwa* disquieted the minds of the common people (Na'im, 2008, pp. 75-76).

With the case of Afghanistan in mind, Olivier Roy (1990) again observed that:

> "Public order, which is a pre-requisite of all what is socially desirable in society (*maslahat*) has always seemed, to the *ulema*, preferable to the demand that politics should be completely open to the promptings to religion."

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[7] When al-Muizz arrived in Egypt in 973, and the *ulema* asked him to present them with his credentials and his genealogy so that he could be accepted as a descendant of the Prophet, al-Muizz is reported to have shown his sword and said: 'here is my genealogy'. "Then, he showered the floor with gold coins and said: 'here is my lineage'. The *ulema* had nothing further to say" (Lutfi al-Sayyid Lufti al-Sayyed Marsot, 2007, pp. 16-17). One of Muizz's successors, Hakim, who was obviously an eccentric man, went so far as pretending to be the incarnation of the godhead (p. 19).

In accordance with this principle, the Afghan *ulema* have never opposed the power of the emir, and have rarely become involved in his appointment, a prerogative that is considered to belong to the tribes (pp. 49-50). Angelo Rasanayagam (2005), another expert on Afghanistan, points out that "in traditional Islamic theory, a *de facto* government rules by 'divine sanction' that can only be withdrawn or refused by his Muslim subjects if the ruler openly violates the law of Islam. In practice, however, an autocratic ruler with strong powers of coercion at his command continues to have his way in spite of such theories" (p. 35). Such a perspective is clearly incompatible with the idea of a theocratic state.

The position of the Islamic judges (the *qadis*), who had become the central organ for the administration of law by the end of the Umayyad period, reflects the above-described pre-eminence of the established political power. As a matter of fact, they "were in no sense an independent judiciary": their judgments were subject to review by the political superior who had appointed them, and they were entirely dependent upon his support for the enforcement of their decisions (Coulson, 1964, p. 121). Although their declared policy was to implement the system of religious law elaborated by the *ulema*, the Abbasid rulers were never prepared to allow independence to the religious courts. Despite their self-posturing as the servants of the *sharia*, they were used to issue peremptory directives to the judiciary, and to reverse whatever decision displeased them, and arbitrarily dismiss those judges who had dared to confront them (pp. 121-23). This is a general feature of Islamic history: being in a subordinate position, the *qadis* were never able to deal effectively with claims directed against a high official of the state. The latter would simply refuse to recognise the decision of the judge in these cases, and, as a consequence, the machinery at his command would not be activated to enforce it. In short, "supreme judicial power was vested in the political sovereign", and "the jurisdiction and authority of *sharia* courts were subject to such limits as he saw fit to define" (p. 122).

In the hierarchy of judicial authority, the so-called courts of Complaints (*Mazalim*) were standing above the *qadi* courts. Their pronouncements are "the direct expression of the supreme judicial and executive powers combined in the sovereign" and their jurisdiction is "superior particularly because of their recognised competence to formulate principles of substantive law additional and supplementary to the scheme of strict *sharia* doctrine" (Coulson, 1964, p. 130). Moreover, the sovereign could always decide to sit himself as a *Mazalim* court, for example, to deal with complaints against the behaviour or the judgments of the *qadis* themselves, as a result of which he could always have his own views prevail in the event of severe confrontation (p. 122).

In actual practice, the distinction between the *Mazalim* and *sharia* jurisdictions came very close to the notion of a division between secular and religious courts, with the former assuming to represent the ruler's law (Coulson, 1964, pp. 128-29). As a general rule, the competence of the *qadis* was restricted to private law, in particular, family law, inheritance, civil transactions and injuries, and religious endowments (see *infra*). In contrast, criminal law was the domain in which the sovereign had the widest discretionary powers: here, he could freely determine what behaviour constituted an offence and what punishment was to be applied in each case (p. 132). In all spheres of life in which the so-called public order or public good considerations were involved, the way of political authority dominated. For example, land law was a matter of special concern to rulers because political allegiance was often secured through land concessions. For this reason, "the political authority himself chose to exercise jurisdiction in this sphere, on the basis of a discretionary system of procedure, and indeed of substantive law" (p. 128).

To sum up, let us again cite N.J. Coulson:

> "The wider and supreme duty of the sovereign was the protection of the public interests; and in pursuance of it he was afforded an overriding personal discretion to determine, according to time and circumstances, how the purposes of God for the Islamic community might best be effected…. Doctrine had granted the ruler such

wide discretionary powers on the assumption that he would be ideally qualified for office. But it is precisely here that the idealistic nature of the doctrine is at its most apparent; for there existed no constitutional machinery, and in particular no independent judiciary, to guarantee that the ruler would be so qualified and that those powers would not be abused… [the doctrine] never seriously challenged the ruler's autocratic power to control the practical implementation of that law; and it finally reached the point of abject surrender and recognition of its total impotence by acknowledging the principle that obedience was due to the political power whatever its nature, and that even the most impious and tyrannical regime was preferable to civil strife… the only limits upon the *de facto* power of the ruler were those that he found in his own conscience" (pp. 129-130, 133-134).

It is now evident that, in the dominant type of politico-religious equilibrium prevailing in the lands of Islam, political rulers have had their way, implying that religious leaders were either seduced into co-operating with the political agenda of rulers or coerced to do so to avoid facing harsh consequences (An-Na'im, 2008, p. 56). If rulers needed to concede the autonomy of religious scholars, it was precisely because they were eager to gain Islamic legitimacy from these scholars' endorsement of the state: "rulers needed to balance their control of religious leaders by conceding their autonomy from the state, which is the source of the ability of religious leaders to legitimize the authority of the rulers" (p. 52, also p. 81). The examples of the Ottoman empire and Safavid Persia readily come to mind here.

In all what has been said above, it is hard to detect genuine differences between Islam and Christianity. In particular, the principle "render unto God that which is God's and unto Caesar that which is Caesar's" (Matthew 22:21) appears to apply to the former civilisation as well as to the latter. As for the strategy of seeking religious legitimacy in order to buttress political power, it was not only followed by Muslim despots but also by ambitious European rulers.[8]

3 The rise of religion in times of state crisis: The case of weak states

The above-described relationship between politics and religion could be deeply disturbed when the state fell into a state of prolonged crisis. This typically happened under the two polar circumstances of lawlessness and unrestrained despotism: (i) a political vacuum created by weak central power (state collapse), and (ii) a despotic rule resulting in acute oppression of the people and deeply entrenched corruption of the leadership (oppressive state). Under such circumstances, there was a tendency for religious authorities and groups to play a more active role in politics, and to reassert themselves as the most effective shield against the vicissitudes of power. In the words of Roy (1990), the *ulema* are better described as "reacting to events, not directing them" (p. 50). Let us consider these two situations in turn in this and in the subsequent section.

In periods of power vacuum, contending political factions vie for political power causing a state of anarchy and lawlessness under which people endure many hardships. Religious figureheads are then tempted to come out of their seclusion in order to substitute for missing central power or to help people in distress. Two illustrations are provided below, one taken from Egypt, and the other, more lengthily elaborated, from modern Iran.

Toward the end of the Eighteenth century, the Ottoman rule in Egypt had become extraordinarily chaotic. The French conquest (1798) had shown that the Mamluks were now unable to defend the country against a foreign invasion, which was the only reason

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8   Thus, for example, Friedrich II (1194-1250), a Hohenstaufen, obtained the title of king of Jerusalem to enhance his powers in Europe in the same manner that the Mamluk sultan al-Zahir Baybars used the prestigious figure of the caliph to sanctify his own worldly glory (Meddeb, 2002, Chaps 16-17).

why the Egyptians put up with their continuous exactions. The Ottoman sultan responded to the crisis by allying himself with the British forces and re-occupying the country. However, the governors appointed by the Ottomans were "rapacious, incapable, and they had little authority over their own soldiers", who treated the land as though it were conquered territory to be sucked and looted at will (Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, 2007, p. 62). Military factions and regiments, based upon ethnicity, fought each other for power, and one governor was assassinated after another. The situation became particularly desperate when Syrian soldiers known as the *Delhis*, or madmen, were imported by the Ottoman governor with a view to controlling his undisciplined army. These soldiers behaved even worse than anything the Egyptians had seen before. In desperation, the *ulema* of the country looked for a providential man able to restore law and order. They found him in Muhammad Ali (Mehmed Ali Pasha), who was the commander-in-chief of the Albanian (mercenary) regiment of the Ottoman army: "They asked him to become governor of Egypt, according to the will of the people, so long as he undertook to govern in accordance with their advice, and abide by their norms, that is, that he would agree to rule in consultation with the *ulema*" (p. 63). He accepted their proposal, which was also ratified by the Ottoman sultan, and he became governor of Egypt in 1805, a position which he held until 1848. Muhammad Ali immediately embarked upon establishing a centralised authority that brought back law and order, thereby reviving trade and commerce. His whole effort was aimed at modernising the country (including the army) so as to make it a stable, independent, and prosperous political entity (pp. 65-97; see, also, Finkel, 2005, pp. 411, 427-28).

The case of Iran deserves special attention in the light of the comparatively strong influence exerted by the religious authorities in modern times and up to the present day. The Safavids largely succeeded in making religion subservient to their own ends, and in building a strong and centralised state that created political stability and economic prosperity in a country in which a large part of the population was made of nomadic tribes equipped with powerful militia. Success was reflected in the splendours of Isfahan, designated as the new imperial capital by Shah Abbas (1598) whose reign marked the apogee of the Safavid state. Abbas managed to control the unruly Qizilbash leaders (who helped him conquer the country) by building up a standing royal army directly financed by the shah and directly responsible to him. The Safavid state could also rely on the strong support of an organised *ulema* bureaucracy which was committed to the regime. It directly organised or controlled Muslim judicial, educational, and social functions, thus transforming Muslim associations into "virtual departments of the state" (Lapidus, 1988, p. 882).

The collapse of the Safavids at the hands of a rebellious Afghan chieftain (1722) occurred in a context of an incipient economic decline caused by the increasing bypassing of Iran as a trade route following the development of overseas trade by Europeans (Cleveland, 2004, pp. 51-55, 109-116). There followed a long period of chaos dominated by warfare between contending tribal confederations and weak, short-lived states, until the Qâjar dynasty was eventually consolidated (1794) to remain (nominally) in power until the 1920s. The Qâjars, however, never succeeded in recreating a strong centralised state as epitomised by the royal absolutism or the bureaucratic centralism of the Safavids (p. 55). In actuality, powerful centrifugal forces had taken root in Iran during almost the whole of the Eighteenth century, and the Qâjar shahs were never able to mobilise sufficient resources to bring them under control. Administrative instability, insecurity and low legitimacy resulting from widespread corruption and little concern for the people's welfare were the hallmarks of most of their rule.

From an early stage in the development of Shi'ism, reverence for the *imams* had been particularly strong, tending to turn them into more than human figures, visible manifestations of the spirit of God (Hourani, 1991, p. 184). What is noteworthy in the case of Iran, however, is that the Shi'a religious establishment rose into prominence during the chaotic times that followed the demise of the Safavids. Indeed, the *ulema* began to function independently of the government, and, backed by a population which

granted them extensive authority in religious and legal matters, they constituted a powerful force of support of, or opposition to, the policies of the shahs. Popular belief held that the rulings of *mujtahids* (learned individuals qualified to exercise *ijtihad* to give new interpretations of law and doctrine in response to new questions) were more authoritative statements of the will of the *Hidden Imam* than the proclamations of the shahs who made no claims to divinity (Cleveland, 2004, p. 111; Keddie, 2003, p. 28).

An intense debate took place between the *Akhbari* and the *Usuli* schools regarding their precise role in society. For adherents of the former (including some of the *ulema*), who wanted to lessen the *ulema*'s role, each Muslim believer could rely on, and interpret, the Traditions of the Prophet and *imams*, so that *ulema* were not needed to interpret religious tenets. For adherents of the latter, in contrast, ordinary believers were not competent to interpret the foundations (*usul*) of the faith and, therefore, they needed to be guided by *mujtahids,* who were less fallible than any temporal ruler. In the course of the Eighteenth century, the *Usuli* school won a decisive victory over the *Akhbari* school, thus preparing the ground for awarding *mujtahids* far more power than that granted to Sunni *ulema* in other parts of the Muslim world. Even more importantly, "there was now a clear doctrinal basis for appeals to the *ulema* over the head of a ruler, and for claims by the leading *mujtahids* to make political decisions, provided they touched on Islamic principles, independently of temporal rulers" (Keddie, 2003, p. 20). These powers were increasingly used from the early Nineteenth century onwards.

It therefore appears that the special importance of the clergy in Iran cannot be entirely or mainly attributed to the Shi'a character of Iranian Islam. The difference between Shi'ism and Sunnism appears to have developed over recent times, and "many points often made about Shi'ism are really only, or mainly, true during the past century or two" (Keddie, 2003, p. 4). It is thus useful to look into some key events that have shaped the historical trajectory of Iran during these recent times. As hinted at above, the rise to prominence of the clerics in the post-Safavid era must be understood against the background of the weakness of central power, its inclination to surrender to the pressures of foreign economic exploitation, severe injustice and the intense corruption of the royal court, the bureaucracy, and the judicial system. When the Qâjars attempted to bring reforms, these reached only a small élite but did not touch the mass of the population (Lapidus, 1988, p. 575). A long tradition took roots in which socio-economic and cultural grievances tended to be "expressed in the only way familiar to most people – a religious idiom arraying the forces of good against the forces of evil and promising to bring justice to the oppressed" (Keddie, 2003, p. 3).

Especially worth stressing is the role played by several unfortunate acts of foreign economic policy, which gave the *ulema* the opportunity to act as effective leaders of the opposition against an unpopular regime. The first event came in 1872 when the reformist government of Mirza Hosain Khan granted to a British baron, Julius De Reuter, an extensive concession involving exclusive rights for an impressive array of economic activities. Lord Curzon called it "the most complete and extraordinary surrender of the entire industrial resources of a kingdom into foreign hands that had probably ever been dreamed of" (cited from Keddie, 2003, p. 54). This concession was granted in return for a modest royalty, but the prime minister, Khan, personally profited from it. Following protests by a mixed group of patriotic officials, *ulema*, and economic agents damaged by Khan's reforms, the shah felt eventually compelled to annul the Reuter concession and to dismiss his prime minister. Nevertheless, a new series of economic concessions of a similar kind were soon to follow, testifying that Iran continued to fall prey to British and Russian interests. Since they brought only small returns to the government, while bribes to the shah and officials to promote them were quite large, tensions between the state and society remained high.

From 1890 onwards, an important change occurred in the formation of political opposition to the shah. Whereas, before, most secularist reformists, typically educated people influenced by Western ideas, had been rather hostile to the *ulema* – which contrasts

with the traditionally close ties between *ulema* and the bazaar classes – they started to reconcile themselves with the clerics willing to fight against the regime's policies, particularly against the sale of Iran's resources to foreigners. The opportunity was again created by an important economic concession to foreign interests considered to be a sell-out of the country's resources. In 1890, indeed, the corrupt and inefficient government of Nasir al-Din awarded a British capitalist (G.F. Talbot) the exclusive right to produce, sell and export the country's entire tobacco crop. Since tobacco was such a vital commodity in the economy, this decision immediately aroused tumultuous mass protests (Keddie, 1966, pp. 59-60; Rodinson, 1966, p. 166; Lapidus, 1988, pp. 576-77).

The first major protest flared up in Shiraz and the revolutionary movement, known as the Tobacco Protest, spread like wildfire to Tabriz, Mashhad, Isfahan, Tehran, and elsewhere. These popular demonstrations were organised by members of the Shi'a *ulema*, who "urged the population to join them in preserving the dignity of Islam in the face of growing foreign influences; they portrayed the shah's concession as a transgression of the laws of Islam and used their independent power base to denounce the government" (Cleveland, 2004, p. 115). In December 1891, a *mujtahid* from Shiraz issued a *fatwa* declaring tobacco consumption as an impious act that would be considered as unlawful until the cancellation of the concession. The Iranian people responded by boycotting all tobacco products forcing the government to cancel the whole concession in early 1892. Considerably weakened by this event, it completely reversed its policy and became openly hostile to contact with the West.

This was a significant moment in modern Iran's history, not only because the movement was the first successful mass protest against government policy, but also because it rested on the co-ordinated actions of *ulema*, secular or modernist reformers, bazaaris (especially merchants), and ordinary townspeople. It had been proved that a religious authority could use its power of interpretation (*ijtihad*) to confront a government's economic policy, and to the class of the *ulema*, it had become clear that "the Iranian people were receptive to calls for political activity based on Islamic frames of reference" (Cleveland, 2004, p. 115). As attested by later events, what Nikki Keddie (2003) calls "the religious-radical alliance" had shown its potential for changing the course of Iranian policy (pp. 61-62).

On the occasion of bastinado punishments meted out by the shah to two sugar merchants (December 1905), the bazaar, and soon the whole city of Tehran, closed down expressing unrest and dissatisfaction with the Qajar government, which had been growing for years. Many merchants and mullahs took sanctuary in nearby shrines and refused to return until the shah met their demands for some voice in the government. The shah eventually gave in after a month of stalemate, which marked the beginning of the first Iranian revolution (Mottahedeh, 2000, pp. 35-37). The next demonstration of popular anger was directed against new concessions granted to the Russians. In protest, a great mass of mullahs and bazaar merchants left Tehran to take refuge in the city of Qom (1906), bringing business to a standstill in Tehran. Later on, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the alliance between religious clerics, merchants, and radical reformers was re-activated again, and *fatwa*s were issued for the purpose of nationalising the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (Lapidus, 1988, p. 591; Rahman, 1982, p. 105). The protest movement eventually culminated in the 1978-79 revolution, which brought to political power a leader of the regular clergy.

4 The rise of religion in times of state crisis: The case of despotic states

4.1 Political instrumentalisation of Islam and the risk of obscurantist deadlock

Under normal circumstances corresponding to the dominant politico-religious equilibrium (see Section 2), the importance of religious beliefs is the answer to Acemoglu and Robinson's question of why institutions provide commitment (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2006, pp. 177-79). As seen earlier, and in a way reminiscent of European rulers in the Christian world, rulers conceded some measure of autonomy to religious scholars and institutions in order to gain Islamic legitimacy and consolidate their temporal power. The politico-religious equilibrium thus obtained is, nonetheless, more inherently unstable than might appear at first sight. Using his double quality as both a political leader and the guardian of the faith, the ruler may, indeed, be tempted to confer upon himself the legitimacy accorded by Islam with a view to getting rid of countervailing forces and concentrating the all power in his hands.

An obvious circumstance which favours the concentration of religious and political powers into the hands of an ambitious ruler occurs when the banner of Islam is used to extend his control over a rebellious territory, or to unify a fragmented political space. For example, when Timur (1336-1405), known as Timur Lane or Tamburlaine, began to reconquer the old Mongol territory, he not only claimed Mongol descent, but also developed a bigoted version of Islam that bore little relation to the conservative party of the *ulema*: "he saw himself as the scourge of Allah, sent to punish the Muslim emirs for their unjust practices" (Armstrong, 2001, p. 91). A similar tactic was observed in the ancient kingdoms and empires of West Africa, such as when an ambitious warlord, Askiya Muhammad Ture (1493-1528), who became one of the most renowned rulers of the Songhaï Empire, took the title of "Caliph of the Soudan/Sudan" upon his return from a pilgrimage in Mecca (in 1496). Using his new Islamic credentials, he embarked upon a *jihad* and quickly displaced political contenders (Lapidus, 1988, p. 494; Davidson, 1991, p. 106). In the early Twentieth century, El Hadj Oumar Tall, at the age of 23, went on pilgrimage to Mecca and came back with the title of "Caliph of the brotherhood *Tidjaniya* for the Soudan/Sudan". After taking temporary refuge in the Fouta-Djalon (in today's Guinea), he launched a *jihad* which ended with the destruction of the Muslim kingdoms of the Khasso and the Masina (Fage and Tordoff, 1995, pp. 209-11).

To cite a last, striking example, the first (internationally recognised) king of Afghanistan, Emir Abdul Rahman Khan (1880-1901), worried about the threats to his central power coming from the main tribes of the country, constantly referred to Islam as a way to establish his authority and legitimise his power. In order to pacify the northern opposition and to extend his authority to the east and the centre, and to overcome the profound sense of tribal identity among Afghan people, he took the title of "Protector of the nation and of the religion" (*Zia-ul Millat wa Din*), thus claiming the spiritual leadership of the Afghan *millat* (a sub-division of the *umma*). Ruling by "grace and will of Allah", he fulfilled the dual role of leader and interpreter of Islam and Islamic law (*mujtahid*). Ushering in the theory of the divine rights of kings for the first time in Afghan history, he enlisted high-ranking *ulema* in defence of the country, and took various measures aimed at undermining the power of the *ulema* as a class. He also decided that he was the only person entitled to declare the *jihad*, a necessary precaution in the face of so many rebellions from different quarters in his kingdom. Rahman was eager to guard himself against the possibility of *fatwa*s for *jihad* issued by religious figures close to his enemies, as happened when he was driven into war with Ishaq Khan in the north (Magnus and Naby, 2002, pp. 89-90; Rasanayagam, 2005, pp. 11-12). It was, of course, the duty of all good Muslims to support their king in his efforts to unify and strengthen the country against the infidels, for example, by dutifully paying taxes (all taxes collected locally

were to be remitted to the centre) and delivering fighting men (a responsibility that accrued to village and clan leaders). The central principle buttressing Rahman's rule was that, to overcome the factionalism of tribal life, the leader must appear as coming from outside the tribal world, having its legitimacy in the *umma* which transcends all the differences between the Muslims (Roy, 1990, pp. 15-6, 59; 1993, p. 493; Magnus and Naby, 2002, pp. 36, 89; Rasanayagam, 2005, p. 12).

Even when a country is politically integrated and independent, the instrumentalisation of Islam may be an attractive option for contested rulers willing to quash opposition and establish an autocratic system free from all genuine countervailing powers or buffers. Here again, the growing role of religion is the outcome of a deliberate strategy of the political ruler. Recent history actually offers us many striking examples to the effect that cynical political rulers, often with a secular background, use Islam as a readily-available ideology and instrument of legitimacy to deflect criticisms, entrench their power and privileges, or bolster their nationalist credentials. They are thus able to escape the consequences of their misrule, which includes an almost complete absence of channels of communication between the rulers and the ruled, and to avoid the hard task of trying to understand the causes of their country's predicament and undertake the necessary reforms, or else quit power.

This is dangerous game, though. Indeed, if autocrats can refer to Islam as a justifying ideology, political opponents to their misrule may also avail themselves of such a possibility. When both opposition groups and the state thus invoke Islam as the main justification for their actions, thus triggering a religious bidding war, an obscurantist deadlock is created in which all political opinions and judgements have to be expressed in the language of religion. Religious reference is used by rulers in self-defence, or as a counter-attack tactic, against opposition groups frustrated at the failures of corrupt, secretive, authoritarian, and ineffective states which did not deliver what they promised (Hourani, 1991, pp. 452-53; Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, 2007, pp. 166-72). The situation is particularly absurd when Islamist movements have been actually nurtured by despotic rulers eager to quash secular, left-oriented opposition, much in the same way that ethnicity-based extremist movements have often been used by such rulers in order to tame political opposition (see, for example, Posner, 2006; Lemarchand, 2008). Clearly, therefore, rather than a conflation of religion and politics, the problem appears to be the easy manipulability of religion by the state.

Before turning to concrete examples, it is important to bear in mind three central characteristics of Islamic law and jurisprudence that make the obscurantist deadlock a possible outcome of authoritarianism in Muslim countries (for more details on these characteristics, see Coulson, 1964; Rahman, 1982; Bowen, 2003; Kuran, 2003, 2004a, 2004b; Platteau, 2008, forthcoming). To begin with, as indicated in Section 2, the Quran/Koran does not cover constitutional law, and contains only two broad principles regarding a proper system of government – consultation and obedience to authority. This leaves religious authorities relatively free to pronounce judgements that carry political implications as they see fit, whether in support of (the most frequent case), or in opposition to (in the case of state crises) the ruling élite.

Relatedly, Islamic jurisprudence as it crystallised in the Tenth century contains a few precise legal injunctions, and they are all concerned with private matters (family relationships and civil transactions, in particular). In the words of El-Affendi (2008),

> "…not only did Islam *not* have a rule for every conceivable situation, but it is moreover *a fundamental rule of Islam not to have such rules.* This leaves the widest possible margin for initiative and fresh thinking on the most appropriate ethical conduct in all areas…" (p. 20).

Moreover, there is great scope for variations, owing not only to the existence of four different schools in Islam (Hanefite, Malekite, Shafeite, and Hanbalite), but also to differences of opinion within each school and to "hybridisation" of Islam through incorpora-

tion of local customs that sometimes blatantly violate Islamic tenets. Here, again, more flexibility exists than is usually thought for expressing differentiated views and accusations in the public arena.

This appears especially true in the light of the last characteristic: there is no such centralised institution as the Vatican in the Muslim world. As rightly pointed out by Bernard Lewis (2002), in Islam, no ecclesiastical body exists, nor any vertical chain of command to direct the believers (except in Iran): Muslim believers directly refer to God and his law on earth, the *sharia* (pp. 113, 115). Religious dignitaries may indulge in preaching and teaching the faithful in the numerous existing madrasas and mosques, which implies that the messages conveyed can vary considerably from one place to another.[9] *Fatwa*s are thus opinions or judgements which just carry the legitimacy of the *ulema,* or the group of *ulemas*, issuing them, so that their influence depends on the number and prestige of the *ulemas* involved (Filiu, 2008). The absence of centralised religious establishment facilitates the task of rulers with authoritarian tendencies, who want to secure the allegiance of some religious authorities in order to back unpopular policies. But this is a two-edged sword which can backfire. While, in the Catholic church, the right to excommunicate is monopolised by the Vatican, in the lands of Islam any judge can issue a *fatwa* against an individual, a group or a political regime considered to be impious or infidel:

> "the decision to oppose the state on the grounds that it is insufficiently Islamic belongs to anyone who wishes to exercise it" (Zakaria, 2003, pp. 124-25, 144).

Since Muslims can turn to preachers of their own choice, and these preachers are not subject to the rigid rulings of a priestly caste acting as the representative of God, the possibility of both anarchy and the manipulation of religion by despotic rulers is distinctly wide in these lands. Such a possibility is all the more serious as preachers can always accuse *imams* of having unduly interposed themselves between God and the believers, as attested by the criticism raised against the feudal-like élite of maraboutic power by rich Wahhabite merchants in Senegal (Miran 2006, p. 250).[10]

4.2 A few examples

It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide an extensive review of situations of political instrumentalisation in Islam (see Platteau, forthcoming, for such a review). For our purpose, it is sufficient to stress that these situations have multiplied in recent times and involve important Muslim countries such as Egypt, the Sudan, Pakistan, Indonesia, Algeria, and Iraq. Especially worth emphasising is the fact that the process of Islamisation of politics and society has often been initiated by secular leaders who did not hesitate to adapt or completely change their ideology for the sake of suppressing dissent and achieving absolute power. In the following, attention is restricted to a few particularly striking episodes that illustrate this blatant form of political opportunism.[11]

The first case study is Egypt. When King Faruk came to power in 1937, he perpetuated the conflict between the palace and the majority party in parliament, the Wafd, which his authoritarian father (King Fuad) had initiated. To silence the liberal opposition, he was advised by his entourage to get closer to the men of religion in al-Azhar (Egypt's leading mosque and university), and attempted to use them as a lever against the Wafd

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[9] In Egypt, for example, if the *ulema* belong to institutions designed to control access to religious status, in reality, room for expression has always existed for Muslim thinkers whose initial training was not controlled by the institutions officially in charge of dispensing religious knowledge (Kepel, 2005, pp. 57-58).

[10] Shukri Mustafa, the Egyptian leader of the Society of Muslims, considered the *ulema* as "no more than lackeys of the prince, 'pulpit parrots'" (Kepel, 2005, p. 101).

[11] For the cases of Sudan and Algeria, we rely on Platteau, 2008.

(Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, 2007, p. 117-18). Anwar al-Sadat followed suit when he resurrected the Muslim Brethern (gradually releasing those who had been imprisoned under the regime of Nasser), officially "to co-operate in the service of the country", in reality, because he wanted to use them against two political forces that threatened his power: the forces of the political left (Marxists, Socialists and Nasserites) which criticised his economic liberalisation policies, and the forces of the extreme religious right (the *takfir* organisations). Thus, the reformist and pragmatic faction of the Brethern represented by the magazine *al-Da'wa*, known as the neo-Muslim Brethern, were in complete accordance with the official ideology of Sadat when they fought against communism (which is tantamount to atheism) in all its forms (Ramadan, 1993, p. 167; Kepel, 2005, pp. 16, 105-31, 150).[12]

However, after Sadat accepted a peace treaty with Israel (1979), the enemy against which both the left and the Islamists wanted revenge, this climate of co-operation suddenly deteriorated, and it became impossible for the neo-Muslim Brethern to refrain from consistently challenging this decision of the regime. As for more radical Islamist groups, such as the Islamist student associations (the *Jama'at Islamiyya*) which rapidly developed after 1972, thanks to discreet, tactical collaboration with the regime, which was keen on breaking the left's domination of the campuses, they went much further by openly questioning the Islamic legitimacy of the "iniquitous prince" (Kepel, 2005, pp. 137, 148). And when, under the impulse of the Muslim Brotherhood, a coalition of Islamic groups came together to form a consolidated organisational framework (the Permanent Islamic Congress for the Propagation of Islam), it became clear that Sadat's policy of balancing the political left had created a counterforce endangering his foreign policy and threatening his regime: the regime had nurtured "the snake that would later strike it" (p. 138). Sadat was assassinated in October 1981 by an extremist from the *al-Jihad* (Sacred Combat) group, of which many members previously belonged to the *Jama'at* (Ramadan, 1993, pp. 164-78; Ibrahim, 1995a, pp. 53-68; Kepel, 2005, pp. 51-59, 105-68; Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, 2007, Chaps. 6-7).

Mubarak, who succeeded Sadat, learned the lesson half-way. He followed twin tactics, which consisted in heavy-handedly clamping down on the Islamists, while keeping tight control over the official religious establishment (al-Azhar), which continued to produce *fatwa*s which suited him and his close entourage. Some of these religious edicts are so explicit in their underlying political intent that they reflect an attitude of almost obsequious submissiveness. This was clearly the case when the grand *imam* of al-Azhar, Sheikh Sayyed Tantawy, cited a passage of the Quran/Koran as support for his opinion that those convicted of libel should be sentenced to 80 lashes. This occurred after several journalists had been tried and convicted of publishing false information about members of the ruling National Democratic Party and the president in 2007. Another patent example is a *fatwa* issued during the same year by the grand mufti, Ali Gomaa. It provided that a driver who runs over and kills someone deliberately standing in the path of the vehicle is not to blame. This judgement happened a few days after a woman had been killed by a minibus under the control of the police as she tried to stop them from arresting her sister-in-law (Daily News, Cairo, December 29-30, 2007).

The situation in neighbouring Sudan is also revealing. A new constitution established Sudan as a secular state in 1973, implying that, in civil and criminal matters, civilian behaviour was governed by secular law, while personal and family matters were covered by *sharia* law for Muslims and customary law for the tribal populations of the south. At the command of a deeply corrupt patrimonial system which imposed a huge foreign debt

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[12] It is not, therefore, surprising that, on several occasions, the government authorised them to organise meetings to denounce Assad, the president of Syria, or to support Muslim fighters in Afghanistan. Even more strikingly, *al-Dawa*'s demand for the gradual Islamisation of the Egyptian state was taken up by the state itself when Abu Talib, the president of the People's Assembly and a close ally of the regime, went on repeating that Egypt would apply the *sharia* some day soon.

on the country, Nimeiri aroused bitter political opposition in both the north and the south. Liberalisation policies resulting in abrupt increases in the price of oil, bread and sugar prompted widespread riots by students and angry consumers, and sparked political activism among parties that had always been opposed to Nimeiri (Jok, 2007, pp. 72-73). Confronted with such a determined opposition, his reaction was a *rapprochement* with Islamic factions and, in 1977, the entry into his government of two prominent Islamic politicians, including Hassan al-Turabi, leader of the Muslim Brotherhood and founder of the National Islamic Front (NIF), whom he had previously imprisoned.[13] Appointed attorney-general, Turabi exerted steady pressure for the Islamic reform of the legal system (Lapidus, 1988, p. 859; Jok, 2007, p. 74).

In 1982, at the risk of losing his secular support base, he began to dismantle the accord of Addis-Ababa (1972), which had ended the first north-south civil war. He actually wanted to please Islamist groups such as the NIF, which regarded the south as a challenge to Islam and therefore believed that allowing secularism in the south was not an acceptable compromise. In September 1983, Nimeiri completely reversed his previous policy by declaring an "Islamic revolution" and transforming the Sudanese state into an Islamic republic to be governed by Islamic law, with no exemption for non-Muslim regions. Sudanese law was to be immediately reformed according to the *sharia*, and the so-called September laws gave rise to highly publicised public executions, amputations of limbs for theft, and lashing for alcohol consumption (Jok, 2007, pp. 74-76). In his quest for absolute political power, Nimeiri attempted, albeit unsuccessfully, to proclaim himself as *Imam* accountable only to Allah. Moreover, he demanded an oath of unconditional allegiance from all members of the civil service and judiciary, thereby causing the departure of prominent secularists and the dominance of the civil service, the army and the financial sector by Islamists (de Waal, 1997, p. 88). Members of the NIF and Muslim Brotherhood were thus left free to gain influence within the civil service, intelligence, and institutions of government that deal with education and welfare.

More ominously still, Nimeiri let Turabi draft the Criminal Bill (presented to parliament in 1988) which included an ominous provision for outlawing apostasy that was sufficiently vague so as to allow its application to be politically determined (de Waal, 1997, p. 91; Meredith, 2005, pp. 356-57). Nimeiri's execution of Mahmud Muhammad Taha, the founder of the Republican Brethern, on the charge of apostasy (1984), offers a perfect illustration of the cynical use that can be made of such a Bill. The fact is that "opposition to an Islamic government can be, and has been, defined as an act of apostasy", and this was directed not only against secular Muslims and other political opponents (for example, communists), but also against other Islamic sects (such as the Khatmiyya, Ansar and Ansar-Sunna) that were regarded as a threat to the ruling clique (Johnson, 2003, p. 129).

Brigadier (later General) Omer el Bashir, who seized power in 1989, immediately professed his goal of creating a theocratic, rather than a democratic, state, in the midst of the mounting influence of the party of the Muslim Brethern. The important point is that, in no time, he re-created the apparatus of Numayri's police state in a more extreme form, and he promulgated the Sudanese Penal Code of 1991, which included the aforementioned provision on the crime of apostasy. Bashir also formed his own Islamic militia, the People's Defence Force (PDF), and its training was made compulsory for civil servants, teachers, students and higher-education candidates. A major famine again occurred in 1990-91 (de Waal, 1997, p. 98; Johnson, 2003, p. 128; Meredith, 2005, p. 589).

In Algeria, the radical Islamist movement known as the FIS (the Islamic Salvation Front) was actually encouraged by President Boumediene when his hold on political

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[13] Hassan al-Turabi, a Western-educated legal scholar with strong ties to the Muslim Brethern in Egypt, returned to Sudan in 1965 and created the Islamic Charter Front, which eventually changed its name into National Islamic Front.

power was seriously challenged in 1968 by the increasing opposition made up of intellectuals, students and trade unions represented, in particular, by the UGTA (Union Générale des Travailleurs Algériens) and the UNEA (Union Nationale des Etudiants Algériens). As early as 1965, on the occasion of the state *coup* which brought him to power, a bizarre alliance was sealed between the new socialist, anti-imperialist regime and the *ulema* (represented by the *Conseil supérieur islamique*), granting to the latter the right to lead the arabisation of the country and to manage the education system (including the right to rewrite the school textbooks). It is thus in complete agreement with the regime that the religious dignitaries started to spread the message of a conservative Islam through the creation of a wide network of Islamist institutes directly governed by the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Radical views inspired by Taymiyya, Qutb and Mâwdudi were diffused in all legality and an idea which gained increasing currency was that the colonisation of Algeria had been possible only because of the degeneration of the precolonial state. The solution had to rest on a return to the sources of Islamic culture (Bouamama, 2000: Chap. 3; Chachoua, 2001, pp. 271-72).

When secular, democratic opposition intensified, the regime gave more leeway to the *ulemas* and to the more reactionary forces among them. They started to assert themselves more aggressively and to meddle openly in matters of social policy. The idea of a "renaissance" of the country based upon the Islamic tradition was explicitly taken over by the government, and the Islamic character of the Algerian state was embedded most explicitly into the National Charter considered as the ideological and political programme of revolutionary Algeria. Islam was thus "nationalised" and cynically used by the state for the legitimation of repressive policies and mobilisation (Layachi, 1995, p. 180; Owen, 1992, p. 41).

The case of Pakistan is the best documented in the literature. Especially well-known is the disastrous role of the devout Muslim, General Zia ul-Haq (1977-1988), in fostering the unhealthy alliance between the army and a reactionary strand of Islam – the Deoband school, close to Wahhabism – as well as extremist Islamist movements. What is less well-known is the compromising tactic adopted by some of his predecessors. In particular, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who was a modern, left-oriented politician with social democratic ideas, was involved in the designing of the 1973 constitution, which declared Islam to be the state religion (Article 2), provided that all existing laws were to be brought into conformity with the injunctions of Islam (Article 227), and prescribed that the tenets of Islam and the Quran/Koran should be taught in schools (Article 31).

Bhutto's proclivity to appeal to Islam and advocate the Islamisation of the country out of political expediency became increasingly apparent when he surrendered to the demands of a radical Islamist movement, the *Jamaat-i-Islami* (founded by Mawdudi), to exclude the Ahmadi sect from the Muslim community (Abbas, 2005, pp. 81-82). He took over the religious parties' agenda, encouraged the expression of sectarian opinion, and leant towards an obscurantist interpretation of Islam, partly for reasons connected to his economic and national security agendas (Haqqani, 2005, pp. 107-9).[14] In an attempt to defeat the political opposition (united under the so-called Pakistan National Alliance) which rebelled against his arrogant authoritarianism and called for the enforcement of the Islamic system of government, he declared gambling and horse racing illegal, banned the sale and use of alcohol, and declared Friday as the weekly holiday (Abbas, 2005, pp. 84-85). In order to destabilise the regime of Muhammad Daoud, who seized power in Kabul through a state *coup* on 17 July 1973, Bhutto also decided to use right-wing Islamic dissidents from Afghanistan (Roy, 1990, pp. 74-6; 1993, p. 495; Abbas, 2005, p. 81).

This political tradition of instrumentalising religion was maintained even after the demise of Zia. After he took power a second time (towards the end of 1996) from Benazir

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[14] On the occasion of the Arab oil embargo (1973), Bhutto wanted Pakistan to benefit from the flow of petrodollars, which required that the country's Islamic identity be emphasised.

Bhutto, the daughter of Zulfikar, Nawaz Sharif opted for policies that went dangerously along the road towards supporting religious radicalism for the cynical purpose of consolidating his power. In August 1998, he proposed, before the National Assembly, to enforce rule by Islamic law, but on the understanding that his government would have the ultimate authority in deciding its interpretation. In the same amendment to the constitution, he proposed that "the directives of the government in this sphere would be beyond the jurisdiction of courts and judicial review", so that any impediment to the enforcement of *sharia* would be removed. Clearly, the move was "a bid to acquire unfettered power", following constant efforts to transform the judiciary, the police, the bureaucracy, and, finally, the army into partisan bodies infiltrated by political influence and patronage (Abbas, 2005, pp. 164-65). He had even planned to make further amendments to the constitution, declaring himself the absolute leader of the Muslims, *Amirul Mominin* (Hussain, 2008, p. 31). When he realised that he was short of the support needed to get his bill passed through the Senate, however, Nawaz Sharif shameless resorted to the kind of hooliganism and religion-based violence that had recently accompanied the besieging of the Supreme Court, encouraging the *mullahs* to lay siege on the Senate. It is miraculous that the Senate actually held out in such circumstances when Pakistan was teetering on the brink, within an inch of becoming a caliphate (Abbas, 2005, p. 165).

Despite the appearances, the above analysis also applies to the deceptively secular ideology of *Baathism*, which, despite its somewhat mystical and vaguely socialistic tenets, is essentially based pon an authoritarian pan-Arabist model whose spirit is Islam. The core element of this model always resided in its own past, and the consciousness of pan-Arabism has been ideologised in such a way as to borrow virtually nothing from the constellation of values associated with the European Enlightenment (Makiya, 1989, pp. 189-212; Polk, 2005, p. 109). In Iraq, in particular, such ideology stressed the exceptionalism of the Arabs, whose national awakening was bound up with a religious message and obligation (Makiya, 1989, pp. 198-211; Tripp, 2000, esp. Chaps. 5-6; see, also, Hourani, 1991, pp. 452-53; Dawisha, 1999).

As in Syria, the problem of religious opposition in Iraq has been compounded by the blatant discrimination of the majority of the population (the Shi'ites in Iraq and the Sunni Muslims in Syria) at the hands of a violent authoritarian regime. This discrimination did not prevent Sunni *ulema* from joining with Shi'a *ulema* on several occasions to protest against the harshly repressive policies of the country's rulers. Saddam Hussein was especially adept at combining measures of control, repression, and seduction to strengthen his power in such antagonistic conditions. Thus, the contents of the *ulema*'s sermons were strictly supervised while all Shi'i shrines and mosques were brought under centralised control by transforming all Shi'i *ulema* into salaried employees of the state (as their Sunni counterparts had been for some time). Repressive measures included the harassment, imprisonment and execution of thousands of important Shi'i leaders, especially clerics, as well as the expulsion from Iraq of tens of thousands of alleged "Iranian" Shi'a, and the provision of special financial incentives for Iraqi men to divorce their alleged "Iranian" wives (Tripp, 2000, pp. 208, 213, 221, 225; Polk, 2005, p. 120).

More seductive tactics were based upon the appointment of Shi'a clerics whom Saddam Hussein wanted to draw into the network of his patronage to positions of responsibility, and the simultaneous exploitation of themes of Arab identity and superiority combined with the official adoption of more overtly Islamic postures from the summer of 1977 onwards. Paying lip service to Islamic values was actually seen by the despotic ruler as part of a strategy which used both patronage and intimidation (Tripp, 2000, pp. 209-211). In Saddam Hussein's narrative of the mythical Iraqi nation:

> "a continuous line of political succession was established between the rulers of the ancient kingdoms of Mesopotomia, the Abbasid caliphs and Saddam Husain himself... no distinction was made between pre-Islamic and Islamic rulers and any lingering unease about the implications of this for Arab identity was met by transforming all the previous rulers of Mesopotomia into 'proto-Arabs'. The imaginative entity, 'Mesopotomia-as-Iraq', was thus Arabised..." (Tripp, 2000, p. 217).

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Interestingly, the significance of religion, together with the primacy of Iraq, was stressed with special vigour, on the occasion of the 9th Congress of the Regional Command of the Ba'th (1982), when Saddam Hussein's position was shaken as a result of his catastrophic miscalculation in the war with Iran (Tripp, 2000, p. 228). In particular, his fear of the allegiances of the Shi'i footsoldiers, who formed the bulk of Iraq's conscript army, prompted him to resort to stressing the Arab identity of the Iraqi Shi'a and the Islamic credentials of the regime. His seductive tactics now included rebuilding Shi'ite mosques and places of pilgrimage, making the birthday of the fourth caliph, the *imam* Ali, a national holiday, and even proclaiming that he was a descendant of this central figure for all Shi'ite Muslim believers (Tripp, 2000, p. 238; Polk, 2005, p. 120). At the same time, he never stopped clamping down in the most brutal manner on the members of underground (Shi'i) Islamist organisations, such as al-Dawa (p. 208).

5 The international context and the rise of islamist movements

A question that naturally arises at this stage is the following: Why is it that the dominant politico-religious equilibrium seems to have collapsed in important parts of the Muslim world today, and why were countries such as Egypt, Sudan and Pakistan suddenly trapped in an obscurantist deadlock opposing autocrats with Islamist movements? Given the obvious constraints of space, a detailed answer to this complex question cannot be offered here. Suffice it to say that such an answer must necessarily rest on a combination of internal and external circumstances. Since the latter tend to be underplayed, primary emphasis is place on them in the short discussion below.

The first point to stress is the economic importance achieved by Saudi Arabia in the second part of the Twentieth century thanks to its immense oil reserves. Indeed, abundance of a commodity so critical for the world economy combined with the espousal by the Seoud tribe of the puritanical doctrine of Wahhabism – inspired by Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792) – have allowed this country to exert an enormous ideological influence across the entire Muslim world. Much in the line of what has been said in Section 4, the Saudi royal family is essentially a secular polity – a bunch of hard-nose rentiers eager to provide an Islamic façade behind which to hide their unrestrained capitalist practices, writes Meddeb (2002, p. 125) – which has co-opted a religious élite and used Islam in order to consolidate a Saudi national identity and thereby reinforce its own legitimacy (Al-Rasheed, 2002; Nevo, 1998). But the key point is that many Muslims migrated to Saudi Arabia to work as migrants and later returned to their country of origin, while the government of Saudi Arabia used its considerable financial resources to disseminate Wahhabism throughout the Muslim world and beyond.[15]

The influence of Wahhabism was all the stronger as the puritanical interpretation of Islam was revived in two Muslim countries subject to extremely severe internal tensions, namely, Egypt and Pakistan. While the latter has never settled its problem of national identity and internal cohesion in a satisfactory manner (particularly *vis-à-vis* its archenemy and neighbour, India), since the time of Faruk, the former regime has not opened any channel for communication with the population, nor tolerated any expression of dissent. The key thinkers are Abû al-A'lâ Mawdûdi (1903-1979) in Pakistan, and his fervent disciple Sayyid Qutb (1929-1966) in Egypt, both of whom exerted a profound influence on the present-day radical Islamist movement (for more details, see Platteau, 2008, pp. 341-42). It is thus in continuous go-and-return movements from one bank of the Red Sea to the other that the first operational link between radical fundamentalism

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[15] This feature probably explains why variation in the political and military strength of Islamist groups, both between and within countries over time, does not appear to correlate closely with the level of political and civil liberties permitted by MENA governments (World Bank, 2003, p. 204).

and Wahhabism was woven during the 1970s. Another, far more critical conjunction of events was to happen in the early 1980s in Afghanistan and Pakistan, when Islamist movements supported by the Pakistani army and intelligence services, the American CIA and the government of Saudi Arabia ousted the Soviets from Afghanistan, eventually leading to the takeover of this country by the Taliban.

The second factor that critically impinged on Muslim politics and encouraged the radicalisation of Islamic ideology is the deep economic, social and military crisis faced by Muslim societies. According to Mohamed Chérif Ferjani (1991), the Arabs are torn between two models of civilisation, the European civilisation, which challenges them, and the Arab-Muslim civilisation, which provides them with a response to this challenge. The choice between the two models is made especially difficult because of a psychic tension amplified by the acute awareness of the reality of the decadence of the Arab world. Most contemporary political Arab writings, whether left- or right-oriented, are thus obsessed "with past grandeur", which prevents any strand of thought from envisaging progress, modernisation and development in terms of a rupture with the past. Instead of "progress", Arab authors prefer to think of a "renaissance" ("reviving the past grandeur"), that is, they prefer to think "in magical and mythical terms":

> "It is as though the present and the future cannot have legitimacy if they are not rooted in the historical and cultural patrimony" (pp. 133-34 – my translation).

As for the Islamists' view of the past, it is polarised by a "golden age" that ended fourteen centuries ago (Kepel, 2005, pp. 234-36).

Ali Allawi (2009) has recently cast the problem in a similar fashion. According to him, many Muslims "feel that the modern West 'excludes' Islam", and this feeling "feeds on the collapse in self-confidence which Muslims have undergone over the past two centuries" (p. 145). The denial in the Western public mind of the significance of the historical interchange between western civilisation and Islam, and its refusal to countenance a role for Islam on the world stage have re-inforced the idea that the West sees Islam as a retrograde civilisation supported by a backward faith. The response of the Muslim world oscillates between "a fawning desire to be acknowledged as worthy of joining the club of civilised peoples and nations", on the one hand, and "the angry rejection of those who had denied them 'respect'", on the other hand. It is the latter impulse that "drives the politics of resentment and envy, which at its edges feeds into nihilism and terrorism" (p. 146).

Other regions of the world have actually gone through such a modernisation crisis, and eventually succeeded in resolving it. What makes the present predicament of the Muslim world, and the Arab world in particular, so persisting and vicious is the fact that it is sustained by humiliating military setbacks, and an openly declared support of the Western superpower in favour of a small-sized enemy embedded in the body of the Arab world. In the words of Albert Hourani:

> "The events of 1967 [a crushing military defeat of the Egyptian Army at the hands of the Israelis], and the processes of change which followed them, made more intense that disturbance of spirits, that sense of a world gone wrong, which had already been expressed in the poetry of the 1950s and 1960s. The defeat of 1967 was widely regarded as being not only a military setback but a kind of moral judgement. If the Arabs had been defeated so quickly, completely and publicly, might it not be a sign that there was something rotten in their societies and in the moral system which they expressed?... the problem of identity was expressed in terms of the relationship between the heritage of the past and the needs of the present. Should the Arab peoples tread a path marked out for them from outside, or could they find in their own inherited beliefs and culture those values which could give them a direction in the modern world?" (Hourani, 1991, pp. 442-43).

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To the extent that the first option appears as a surrender of independence to the external world, preference tends to be given to the second option. This helps explain why, after 1967, there was a sudden reversal of the common opinion that the Arabs were determined to catch up with the West's material and technical progress: "Secular Arab nationalism had been proved a failure and was dead; the masses would reject Western progress and turn to fundamentalist Islam as their only hope" (Mansfield, 2003, p. 325). Such a reaction was re-inforced by the realisation that something was morally wrong with the West, which was adept at applying double, or even multiple, standards depending upon its own selfish interests. Were not Western powers brutal exploiters of dominated nations, although each of them could boast of nurturing a liberal democracy at home, and defending increasingly tolerant and humanitarian values or ideals (Rahman, 1982, p. 55)? In the same manner that the concept of *jihad* was heavily relied upon to arouse the sentiments of the general public against colonial rulers, it started to be used in order to protest against what was perceived as iniquitous international political standings on the part of rich countries of Europe and North America.

In a situation of protracted crisis such as that experienced by the Muslim world, a radicalisation of religious beliefs has taken place at the urging of disgruntled urban groups (often newcomers from tribal and rural origins) and, as we have seen earlier, often by political rulers themselves (as a counter-attack tactic or not). Recourse to puritanical beliefs is more tempting when people can associate the failure of their governments in meeting the challenges of modernity with the failure of secularism and the Western path (most notably in Egypt, Syria, Sudan, and Iraq where socialism, nationalism and secularism were the dominant ideologies of the post-independence ruling élites), and when military defeats were added to disappointing economic performances, corruption and inefficiency of the rulers. In the process, the achievements of Arab secularism in the field of education and legal development (civil and commercial laws were made secular early on, towards the end of Nineteenth century, in countries such as Egypt and Syria), for example, were ignored or, worse, considered a liability.

An important outcome of the perceived failure of secularism is that Islam has little competition when it comes to articulate popular opposition to corrupt and inequitable governments. This is patently true under the strongly authoritarian regimes of the Middle East in which the religious idiom is the only one left that people, especially the young, educated, lower-middle class people, can use to communicate criticism and protest "against repression, social injustice, hardening of the political arteries, and the threat to collective identity" (Ibrahim, 1995b, p. 90; Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, 2007, p. 164;).[16] In the words of Zakaria:

> "The Arab world is a political desert with no real political parties, no free press, and few pathways to dissent. As a result, the mosque became the place to discuss politics. As the only place that cannot be banned in Muslim societies, it is where all the hate and opposition towards the regimes collected and grew. The language of opposition became, in these lands, the language of religion. This combination of religion and politics has proven to be combustible. Religion, at least the religion of the Abrahamic traditions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), stresses moral absolutes. But politics is all about compromise. The result has been a ruthless, winner-take-all attitude toward political life. Fundamentalist organisations have done more than talk. From the Muslim Brotherhood to Hamas and Hezbollah, they actively provide social services, medical assistance, counselling, and temporary housing. For those who treasure civil society, it is disturbing to see that in the Middle East these illiberal groups *are* civil society… If there is one great cause of the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, it is the total failure of political institutions in the Arab world" (Zakaria, 2003, pp. 142-43).

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[16] It is interesting, here, to draw a parallel with the experience of other countries, for example, India where "it is economic stagnation, wastage, and corruption of the old [dirigiste] policies, as seen clearly in the 1980s, that have discredited secularism", and facilitated the rise to power of the Hindu Right (Desai, 2005, p. 260).

The above interpretation confirms the idea that resurgence of puritanical religious feelings tends to occur in periods of collective self-doubt sparked off by severe military defeats and economic crises combined with high-level corruption. Although the scale of today's rebellion is huge, mainly because, as we have seen earlier, Islam has now been extensively globalised (Roy, 2004), it is not a new phenomenon in Islamic history. This is attested by the Kadizadeli rebellion led against the Ottoman government in the early Seventeenth century by young and idle students from religious schools. Their leader, Kadizade Mehmed, was a gifted preacher whose puritanical message calling for a return to the fundamental tenets of the faith and its uncorrupted morality fell on receptive ears during the chaotic early years of bitter factionalism of Mehmed IV's reign (Finkel, 2005, pp. 214-15, 254-55). The followers of Kadizade considered the Ottoman military and high Ottoman society as inept and morally bankrupt, and they attributed the recurring débâcles on the battlefield (in Europe and the Indian Ocean) as well as the persistent palace scandals to a cultural and religious decay, to deviation from tradition, and a turn away from true Islam (An-Naim, 2008, p. 185). As pointed out by Daniel Goffman:

> "In important ways, they constituted a forerunner to Islamic reformers in later centuries who, whether Ottoman, Egyptian, Wahhabi, or Iranian, consistently have argued that the West has defeated Islamic states only because their ostensibly Muslim leaders have forgotten their religious roots. Bring back the Muhammedan state, they all argue, and Islam will again take up its leading rank in the world order" (Goffman, 2002, pp. 118-19).

The origins of Afghan fundamentalism can likewise be traced back to the Seventeenth-Eighteenth centuries when Indian domination under the Moghul emperors and British incursions into Afghan territory gave rise to strong reactions based upon the idea that resistance against the infidels was a religious duty and submission a sin. The thesis was indeed advanced that "it was only the rejection of Islam that had permitted the infidel to triumph, and that the way to liberation was through a return by the whole society to its former faith" (Roy, 1990, p. 56). Interestingly, the same argument was used several centuries earlier by the famous Islamist thinker Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328), whose determination to counter the Mongolian threat against Damascus led him to proclaim that Muslim leaders bore much of the responsibility "for not encouraging the proper faith and attitudes among the people and thus for the political divisions which had facilitated the Mongol advance" (Bonney, 2004, p. 114). That radical ideological movements, including religious movements, are likely to develop within the body of societies subject to foreign domination is borne out by many other historical episodes, including experiences of modern colonial rule.[17]

6 Conclusion

The various strands of the complex argument developed in the paper can now be woven together so as to provide a compact answer to the question raised in the introduction.

To begin with, there is something specific to Islam that pre-disposes Muslim societies to be caught in the trap of authoritarian regimes and makes them particularly vulnerable to the use of religion as a political weapon. It is, however, misleading to define this specificity in terms of a conflation of politics and religion, and to consider that the moment of origin of Islam has uniquely determined the historical trajectory of Muslim countries. Historical evidence shows that, in these countries, as in Western European Christianity, politics has been separated rather early from religion, and the former has gener-

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[17] For example, the creation in India of the reformist college of Deoband (by Maulana Nanautawi in 1867) was essentially a reaction of a fraction of the *ulema* to the imposition by the colonial power of the English language and Western education. The objective of the new school was to unite Indian Muslims around the leadership of the *ulema*, using the Urdu vernacular to issue all sorts of legal opinions on proper Islamic practice (Lapidus, 1988, p. 725).

ally subdued the latter.[18] It is only under conditions of state crisis, when the state is weak or excessively oppressive and corrupt, that religious authorities tend to assert themselves and gain ascendancy. In the absence of other channels to communicate anger and disappointment with the regime, the mosque becomes a central place in which political opposition is articulated. Yet, the autocrat and his ruling élite may strive to quash dissent and achieve absolute power by themselves instrumentalising religion in the most cynical manner, which relieves them of the task of facing the internal contradictions of their regime and embarking upon the necessary reforms.

Because of peculiar characteristics of Islam, namely, the lack of a centralised religious authority structure, the great variability of interpretations of the Islamic law, and the absence of constitutional law, it is relatively easy for an autocratic ruler to obtain legitimising opinions from certain religious scholars. But precisely for the same reason, it is extremely hard for him to achieve complete control of all the religious voices (as happened in Eastern Christianity, first in Byzantium, later in Moscow). Hence, the threat of an obscurantist deadlock in the form of a vicious process whereby both the ruler and his political opponents try to outbid each other by using the religious idiom. While the ruler increasingly presents himself as the true guardian of the faith with accounts to give only to God, the radical opposition portrays him as a decadent, impious and sinful monarch who has strayed away from the true path of Islam. With a strong repressive apparatus at his disposal, the ruler continues to sink his country into an ever more deeply entrenched autocratic regime pervaded by Islamic puritanism. This is doubtless a dangerous gamble as attested by the assassination of Sadat in Egypt, and the dissolution of the state in Pakistan.

It is impossible to understand properly the persistence of authoritarianism and the strength of Islamic revivalism in many Muslim countries today without bringing the international context into the picture, and without taking due account of the largely contingent nature of some decisive historical events. Several elements of this context are highly relevant. First, there is the coincidental combination of the Seoud tribe's successful conquest of the Arabian desert, its privileged link with the radical thinker al-Wahhab, and the abundance of oil resources in Saudi Arabia's soil. Indeed, it is thanks to the espousal of Wahhabism by the new rulers of a unified Arabian desert and to its immense natural wealth that this puritanical ideology could exert such a significant influence among radical Islamist movements in the second half of the Twentieth century. Second, there are the acute problems of nation-building in the Pakistan-Afghanistan region, and the meddling of the Western superpower in affairs in this region, again a largely coincidental combination of decisive events (since the central aim of the US in supporting the Afghan mujahideen and the Pakistani military intelligence was to oust the Soviets from Afghanistan). Third, and not least, there has been the unwillingness and inability of the Western countries, the US in particular, to bring about a just settlement of the Israel-Palestine conflict at the heart of the Middle East. In areas with a living memory of past glory, accumulated frustrations at the inadequacy of ruling élites in meeting the hard challenges of modernisation were combined with feelings of victimisation engendered by a series of crushing military defeats at the hands of a small neighbour strongly supported by the West.

All these elements of the international context help to explain the emergence, in many Arab countries, of a vicious circle in which the perverse effects of autocratic rule cumulate with those of Islamic revivalism. Faced with severe military defeats and strong internal criticism, many Arab rulers chose to invoke Islam (or pan-Arabism whose spirit is Islam) as a way of escaping the normal sanction for such failures, the quitting of power. By putting down all liberal and left-wing opposition, and closing all channels of communication with their citizenry, they have also forced their people into using the

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[18] In fact, the separation between the state and the Church in Western Christianity did not seriously start until the Gregorian reforms of the eleventh century (Le Goff, 2003, p. 86).

mosque as the only place left to express dissent and anger. On the other hand, the double standards so blatantly applied by the advanced countries of the West have had the effect of pre-empting more satisfactory solutions becauce they would have inevitably appeared as a surrender to the values of the victors. This specific configuration of conditions creates an environment in which all arguments become framed in the religious language. The fact that some Muslim countries (for example, Egypt, Syria, Iran, Afghanistan, etc.) have suffered more from exploitation and unequal treatment by the West than others (for example, Turkey) may partly explain why persistent authoritarianism and the threat of obscurantist deadlock are more often observed in the former.

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