



# WILBERFORCE

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## NORTH AFRICA: THE DILEMMA OF THE SECULARISTS

BY: ANOUAR BOUKHARS

The absence of competitive-democratic patterns in North Africa cannot be ascribed solely to the actions of the undemocratic regimes of the region. The latter have certainly done very little to strengthen brittle governance structures, deepen government accountability and widen the scope of participatory politics. But this cannot fully explain the enduring democratic deficit that still plagues North Africa. In fact neither the intimidating coercive capacity of the state nor the fear of the formidable powers of political Islam can account fully for the durability and resilience of state authoritarianism.

The problem of democracy in North Africa is the weakness of secular parties and their inability to mobilize mass constituencies. Their organizational inefficacy and inability or unwillingness to lead meaningful tangible reforms have largely discredited them in the eyes of populations increasingly depoliticized and tempted by radicalism. In all the countries of North Africa, secular parties appear stuck and trapped in political decrepitude. With few exceptions, they have failed to take advantage of opportunities to press for improvements in governance and accountability. Even those allowed to serve in government have demonstrated a troubling ambivalence toward reform. Most secular parties are so weak and scared of losing “power” and privilege to a vibrant and dynamic Islamist movement that many of them have sacrificed the ideals they once stood for.

In North Africa, secular parties suffer from a number of structural deficits that underline their current intellectual, political, and organizational stagnation. Despite all their rhetoric in defense of democracy and reform of fossilized institutions, they are uncertain about how to come out of their own institutional stasis and break their political stagnation. The absence of even a semblance of a vision for the future and an inability to offer effective and coherent alternatives to a failed status quo reflect a disquieting reality of secular politics in North Africa. Whether working from within the state apparatus or outside it, secular parties have proven unwilling to venture beyond the top-down nature of state-managed liberalization for fear of alienating the regimes they ironically need in order to survive politically and compete against the ascendancy of moderate Islamist movements.

Therein lies the dilemma of secular liberal and leftist parties: how do they escape acquiescing to authoritarian regime diktats without sinking into political obsolescence? Or how would they survive the onslaught of moderate Islamism without allying themselves with undemocratic regimes determined to crush any challengers to the status quo? Secular parties are keenly aware of their weaknesses and inability to compete with better organized Islamist movements. They are equally aware that to translate their lofty rhetoric into reality, they need reach out to moderate Islamists. For now, however, most secular parties prefer holding on to their privileges by being close to authoritarian regimes rather than collaborating with powerful Islamist reformers to help strengthen the rule of law and the capacities of political institutions.

Today most parties, whether in office or in opposition, claim they are democratic. In reality they represent almost everything they once stood against. Most are in collusion with regimes they once abhorred. Of course, secular parties would like their shrinking constituencies and the public at large to understand the rationale behind their tactical support of undemocratic regimes. Support for state secular authoritarianism is seen as necessary to stem the tide of religious “fundamentalism”. But secular parties are not just concerned about radical Islamism. What they are really worried about is their growing irrelevance and inability to compete with even moderate Islamist movements in a free, democratic environment.

In countries like Morocco, the historical secular opposition parties that are today in power have lost so much of their prestige and reputation that without gerrymandering of the electoral system and manipulation of district lines, they might end up being trounced in the forthcoming election by the moderate Justice and Development Party (PJD). If King Mohamed VI were to outlaw the PJD, he would have the full support of most secular parties, especially those who stood for decades against his father’s reign of terror.



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As the case of Morocco clearly demonstrates, secular parties are mainly interested in pursuit of narrow self-interest. They allow themselves to be used and abused by regimes whose sole focus is self-preservation and maintenance of the status quo. All North African rulers accentuate the fear of Islamism and play on secular parties' insecurities to consolidate their hold on power and propagate the perception that they, and only they, can act as a bulwark against religious fundamentalism.

For now, secular parties are unwilling to move beyond their comfort zone despite the damage that their close association with the current status quo has done to their reputation. But for the sake of stability, democracy and progress, secular parties need to reform and democratize themselves. Their internal lack of transparency and debate has done incalculable damage to their efficacy. The development of strong secular parties would serve the interests of the people of North Africa, not because they are better poised to reform their countries than the moderate Islamists, but because political pluralism is necessary to put pressure on authoritarian governments and especially to prevent a lapse back into further deliberalization.- Published 28/6/2007 © bitterlemons-international.org

*Anouar Boukhars is assistant professor of political science and director of the Center for Defense and Security Policy at Wilberforce University. He is also editor of the Wilberforce Quarterly Journal.*