



Institutionalizing Religion.

Islamic Religious Authorities and Support for Democracy in the Middle East

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Abstract

While the question of the compatibility between Islam and democracy has captured the attention of researchers, journalists and politicians for many years, Asef Bayat believes that this question is irrelevant. In his book, *Making Islam Democratic*, Bayat argues that the relevant question is not whether Islam is compatible with democracy, but rather under what conditions Muslims can make the two compatible (Bayat 2007). This new approach has opened the way for research on the conditions under which religious actors offer support for democracy. While my research starts from this same point, I have come to the conclusion that religious authorities' attitude is neither a fixed position nor an ideological one; rather the attitude of the same religious group might change from one phase to another. Hence, the research question this dissertation seeks to answer is not only why certain Islamic actors have offered support for democracy while others have not, but also why the same religious actors have shifted their position on democracy over time. The answer lies, I argue, in the institutional rules governing religion-polity relations. While the four religious actors studied here share the same material and ideational interests, they have adopted different strategies, which in turn vary with different institutional settings, in order to achieve these interests. Religious actors' attitudes towards democracy reflect a rational choice that is made after assessing to what extent democracy advances or hinders their other strategies and interests.



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Bio

Georges Fahmi is a researcher at the Arab Forum for Alternatives (AFA) in Cairo, Egypt. Fahmi obtained both his Bachelor and Master degree from the Political Science department, Cairo University, Egypt and his Ph.D. at the European University in Florence. His research interests include: religion-state relations in the Middle East, democratization, religious movements.