# Book Review: Islamist Parties and Political Normalization in the Muslim World by Quinn Mecham and Julie Chernov Hwang

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24/11/2014

*Since 2000, more than twenty countries around the world have held elections in which parties that espouse a political agenda based on an Islamic worldview have competed for legislative seats. This book aims to examine the impact these parties have had on the political process in two different areas of the world with large Muslim populations: the Middle East and Asia.* **Amani El Sehrawey** *is impressed by the fascinating case studies.*

**Islamist Parties and Political Normalization in the Muslim World. Quinn Mecham and Julie Chernov Hwang. University of Pennsylvania Press. 2014.**

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Islamist political parties have been an area of interest for scholars for quite some time. In their work *Islamist Parties and Political Normalization in the Muslim World*, Quinn Mecham and Julie Chernov Hwang attempt to analyze the phenomenon of Islamist parties and their behavior within national systems, bridging the gap between studies of Arab Islamist parties and Asian Islamist parties in this context, which they perceive to be a deficit in the literature. They address this deficit in this short anthology, by examining political Islamist parties in Turkey, Indonesia, Malaysia, Morocco, Yemen and Bangladesh—the selection provides a comprehensive overview of the swath of countries "in the Muslim world". Mecham and Hwang begin by establishing the pedagogy of the study, and postulate a series of hypotheses modeling the behavior of Islamist parties. This review will examine these hypotheses before considering their application in the cases of Turkey and Malaysia.
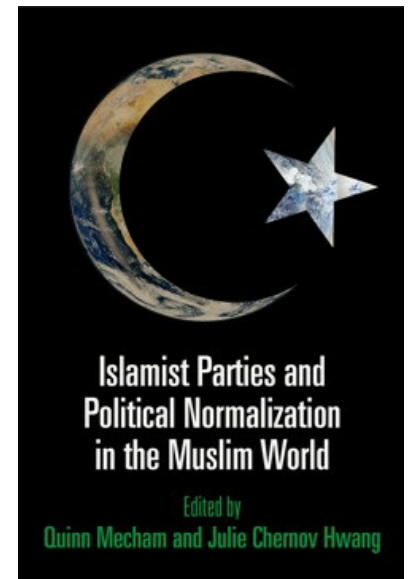
The framework guiding this body of work is political normalization. In order to increasingly participate in the political system, parties choose to deprioritize certain content of their platform in favour of more mainstream political priorities (p.20). In the case of Islamist parties, their unique identifier is their common rooting in Islamic teachings and narratives. Their normalization process therefore refers to deprioritizing the religious content in their platforms in order to greater participate in the political system. Fundamental to understanding this need to politically normalize is the fact that Islamist parties frequently have a dual constituency comprised of those who support the party for their religious platforms, and those who support it due to deep dissatisfaction with the political alternatives (p.21). Additionally, Islamist parties are often compelled to build political alliances with other parties who may not hold the same religious motivations, which dilutes the Islamic elements of the parties' original platform (p.23). Alternatively, when Islamist parties operate in a system with multiple competitor Islamist parties, they may highlight their Islamic elements to differentiate themselves from competitors (p.23). Thus, Islamist parties will behave differently dependent on the specific constraints of the regime, and the further integrated into the system they become, the less likely they are to withdraw from the political process (p.24).

The case studies elucidate Mecham and Hwang's claims. The book opens with the case of Turkey. Turkey's political centre has long been nationalist and secularist focused. Because of this, Islamist parties with the premise of defending Islamic values and indigenous development streams stood in opposition to the state (p.45). Over time, Islamist parties were able to capitalize on a conservative stream in Turkish politics and gain real presence in the

political arena. The Welfare Party (RP), AKP's predecessor, became a dominant party, primarily due to its ability to expand its platform beyond exclusively Islamic issues, which appealed to a larger segment of voters (p.47).
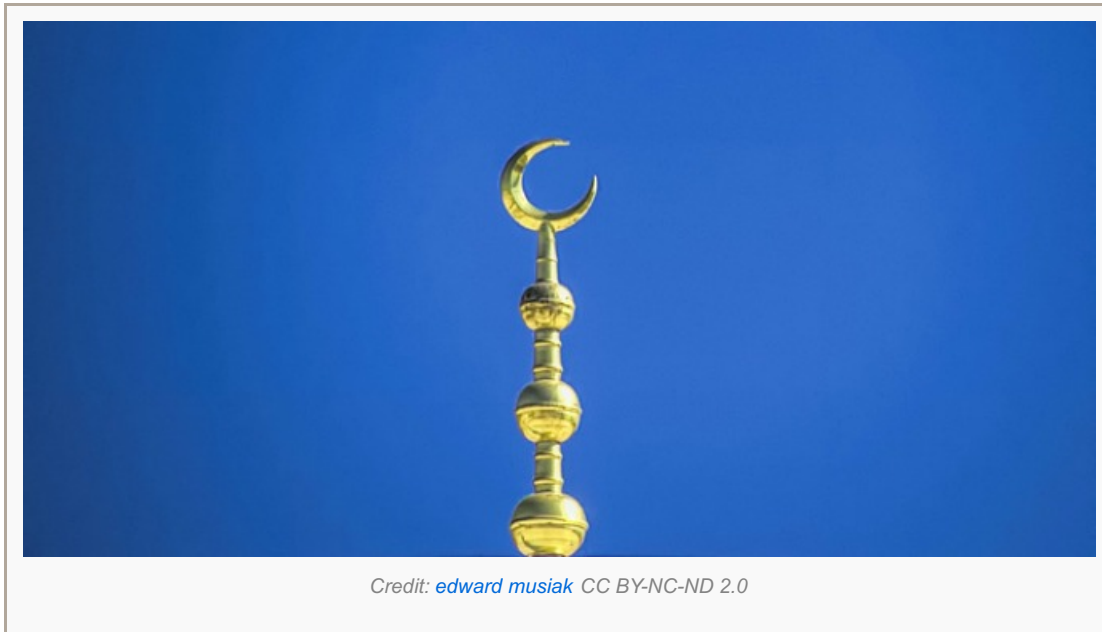
From the RP came the AKP, the ruling party in Turkey today. Initially, AKP prioritised democratisation and Turkish accession to the EU (p.52). In subsequent years, AKP consolidated their power within the Turkish political arena. As constraints within the system became fewer for AKP, a more authoritarian, religiously conservative platform emerged. AKP seems for the time being to have embraced Turkey's historically state controlled secularism for its own goals (p.55). The Turkish case does provide supporting evidence for the permanence of normalization, but not democratic normalization. It demonstrates a political party strategically reprioritizing Islamic issues depending on the party's strength within the system (p.56). As Mecham and Hwang duly note, we must not forget that normalization can be a double-edged sword.

Another case study in the Asian context is the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS). PAS has consistently been the primary Malay-based opposition group in the country, and as such has operated under significant system constraints (p.85). Although PAS has consistently vocalised their interest in an Islamic caliphate in Malaysia, they have nevertheless has collaborated with non-Muslim parties and even inducted non-Muslims into the party itself (p.87). In order to succeed electorally, PAS recognized the need to expand their voting base and capture important protest voters. In their 2008 upset victory in the national election, PAS's strategy heavily relied on distancing themselves from their Islamic objectives in favor of more universal aims (p.88). This approach created tension within the party, drawing criticism from its Muslim base supporters, and causing the party to backtrack on its secular-focused agenda items. PAS also reinforced their Islamic distinctiveness when provoked by rival Islamic parties. The case of PAS demonstrates another Islamist party whose success was a result of the ability to conform and adapt within the existing political norms of its system, which at times has meant de-emphasizing Islamic aims, and at others re-emphasizing them. What has remained fairly consistent was a desire and need to cooperate with voters and parties within the system, as a means of ensuring continued electoral success.

The additional case studies in Indonesia, Morocco, Yemen, and Bangladesh provide further evidential support for the claims outlined by Mecham and Hwang in this body of research. We consistently see Islamist parties adapting their platforms and political messages in order to gain electoral success, even if this may be at the temporary or long-term expense of their Islamic aims. Their success is often derived from their ability to capture protest voters, maintain an amiable relationship with the non-Islamist dominant regime, or ally with non-Islamist partner parties. The overarching phenomenon is one of adapting to the rules of the game within their respective systems.

Mecham and Hwang do well to highlight the diversity of the various systems within the Muslim world, each of which presents its own set of constraints on Islamist parties. Furthermore, these constraints change over time within a country, and with them the behaviours of the Islamist political parties. As the literature in this area continues to develop what would be interesting to interrogate would be the long-term outcomes for Islamist parties, once electoral success and political dominance within a system has been achieved. As we have seen Mecham and Hwang demonstrate in the cases of Turkey, and later in their analysis of the Bangladeshi context, that stable political success and normalization over time has not necessarily translated to sustained commitment to democratic values. What seems to be emerging is an early pattern suggesting that normalization does not necessitate democratic normalization. Further analysis of this trend would provide a valuable contribution to the literature both in the areas of political normalization but also democratization in the Islamic world.

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**Amani El Sehrawey** recently completed her Master's degree in European Public Policy from King's College London. She also holds a BA (Hons) from Boston University in International Relations and Muslim Studies. Her Master's dissertation research focused on British and French policies towards Muslim minority integration. Her research interests include immigration and integration policy, European governance, and Middle Eastern politics. She is currently conducting research on European foreign policy and the future of the Common Foreign Security Policy.