

Party Systems in Muslim Societies

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Abstract and Keywords

Are party systems in Muslim-majority societies different from those in non-Muslim-majority societies? If so, how—and more importantly, why? Cross-national time-series data demonstrate that party systems in Muslim-majority countries are consistently less competitive, less open, and less institutionalized than party systems in non-Muslim-majority countries. This chapter synthesizes existing theories of party system formation to argue that the traits of party systems in Muslim-majority countries are best explained by both shared experiences and systematic variation in historical developments related to colonialism and the path dependence of institutions, rather than by the political institutions prescribed by Islamic tenets. The chapter concludes by outlining a series of unanswered questions about the differences between party systems in Muslim-majority and non-Muslim-majority societies.

Keywords: Muslim-majority societies, party systems, religion and politics, postcolonialism, political institutions

This chapter explores whether and how existing theories of party system formation can help us to understand the institutions that have developed in Muslim-majority societies. I ask the following questions: Are party systems in Muslim-majority and non-Muslim-majority societies systematically different from each other? If so, how—and more importantly, why? I rely on cross-national time-series data of party systems and draw on the rich literature on politics in the Muslim world to answer these questions. The data demonstrate that party systems in Muslim-majority countries are consistently less competitive, less open, and less institutionalized—though I note important exceptions located in Muslim democracies.

I argue that the traits of party systems in Muslim-majority countries are better explained by specific historical developments in the Muslim world and the path dependence of party system institutions than by the political institutions prescribed by Islamic tenets. More specifically, patterns of governance and institutions adopted by European authorities during colonialism coincided with a consequential period of state-building in the Muslim world, and this in turn shaped the rules of the game in postcolonial countries. This find-

ing is not unique to Muslim-majority societies; scholars have made similar arguments about postcolonial political institutions in other parts of the world, with variation produced through the nature, timing, and duration of the colonial experience. I conclude the chapter by outlining remaining questions about party systems in Muslim-majority societies that might shape a research agenda on the topic.

Defining and Measuring Party Systems

The study of parties and the systems in which they are organized is central to the study of politics. Drawing from the experience of early democratizing countries in Western Europe, scholars reached an early normative consensus that parties are of the utmost importance in democratic politics (White 2006, 5–15). As democracy spread beyond Europe, political scientists employed measurements of the emergence of party competition as a proxy for successful democratization. Scholars continue to deem parties “absolutely essential for the proper functioning of representative democracy” (Montero 2003, 3).

Parties represent collective interests in political competition; in politics, “no idea has ever made much headway without an organization behind it” (Sartori 1976, 85). In their idealized form, parties simply reflect the shared, aggregated political preferences of their constituent members; they “crystallize and make explicit the conflicting interests, the latent strains and contrasts in the existing social structure” (Lipset and Rokkan 1967, 3). But, in practice, parties exert influence on the creation and nature of collective interests. Parties have agency in choosing which constituencies to mobilize and under what banner, and in this way can exert influence on the dimensions of political contestation. The political relevance of “class, ethnicity, religion, race or nation do[es] not happen simultaneously . . . as a reflection of the objective conditions in the psyches of individuals” (Przeworski 1985, 99–101). Instead, parties may “establish themselves as significant poles of attraction and produce their own alignments independently of the geographical, the social, and the cultural underpinnings of the movements” (Lipset and Rokkan 1967, 3). Neto and Cox (1997, 150) similarly argue that “politicians can take socially defined groups and combine or recombine them in many ways for political purposes.”

Parties are a function of the broader political context in which they exist. The amorphous concept of a party system refers to the interaction of parties competing with each other within a given country.¹ Scholars rely less on a clear definition of party systems and instead used different criteria to identify and compare different types. Duverger (1954) first discussed the importance of the interactions between parties as part of a larger system, in order to understand the relative options offered to voters within a given context. In addition to the characteristics of individual parties, he noted that it is important to consider the “numbers, respective sizes, alliances, geographical localization, [and] political distribution” of parties competing with each other within the same political space. As the result of this interactive process, “a party system is defined by a particular relationship amongst all these characteristics” (203).

Party systems are measured by several distinct attributes. These include the number of parties contesting elections and the number of effective parties, or parties that actually win seats in government (Blondel 1968; Laasko and Taagepera 1979; Siaroff 2000). Party systems can also be categorized by the relative size, strength, and balance of parties (Rokkan 1970; Wolinetz 2006). Party systems also differ on the distribution and polarization of parties, measured by the distance separating parties on salient axes of contestation and in affect.² In addition, party systems differ in the degree to which competition for government is open or closed—meaning whether all parties can enter elections without any constraints or whether contestation is restricted only to certain parties or combinations of parties (Mair 1996, 2002). In terms of linkages with voters, party systems may revolve around programmatic, ideological, clientelist, or charismatic competition (Kitschelt et al. 1999, 2010). The nature of competition within a given party system determines the degree to which it is institutionalized and structures the electorate (Mainwaring 1999; Mainwaring and Scully 1995).

These measurements help us characterize and compare party systems. The criterial approach to defining and measuring party systems bridges the divide across regime types, linking democratic and authoritarian systems on a spectrum of competition and institutionalization.

Comparing Party Systems in Muslim-Majority and Non-Muslim-Majority Societies

Are party systems in Muslim-majority and non-Muslim-majority societies different? And if so, in what ways? To unpack this, I turn to data from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project (Coppedge et al. 2020). V-Dem is an ideal data set to use for my analyses because it includes an extensive set of indicators capturing different aspects and dimensions of party systems, as well as important correlates. In addition to aggregate scores measuring a party system's level of competitiveness or democratic quality, the data set includes fine-grained constitutive measurements capturing indicators central to comparing party systems, such as the number and relative strength of effective parties, the distribution of parties on salient axes of competition, and the nature of voter-party linkages. Moreover, the project's expansive country and temporal coverage is helpful for measuring trends and differences in party systems across time and space. I subset version 10 of the V-Dem data set from 1900 on, and separate countries with Muslim-majority populations to those without a majority Muslim population. The charts plot the raw data as well as fit lines, indicating trends in the data. All data have been recoded so that the plots read as more "democratic" (with specific meaning depending on the index or variable) as the y-axis approaches 1. The x-axis measures year.

Two indices demonstrate how party systems in Muslim-majority societies differ from those in non-Muslim societies. For each index, individual components trend the same way as the index, with some variation in the degree of difference between party systems in Muslim-majority and non-Muslim-majority societies, though not the level of significance.

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The first index, *electoral democracy*, combines a number of subcomponents measuring the openness and level of competition of party systems. The index ranges from 0 to 1, with a higher score indicating more clean, fair, and competitive electoral institutions. The index combines measurements of freedom of expression, universal suffrage, and frequency of voting irregularities. In addition, the index includes a measurement of freedom of association, which captures whether parties are banned, what if any barriers exist to party entry into electoral competition, the level of autonomy of opposition parties, and whether multiparty elections occur. The index also includes a component capturing pluralism in elected officials holding office, similar to the idea of effective parties outlined in the previous section.

Figure 1 demonstrates that all party systems become more open, inclusive, and competitive over time. However, party systems in non-Muslim-majority countries consistently score higher than those in Muslim-majority countries, suggesting they are relatively more open to competition, more competitive, and fairer. The gap between party systems in the two groups of countries is persistent but appears to increase starting in the 1970s.

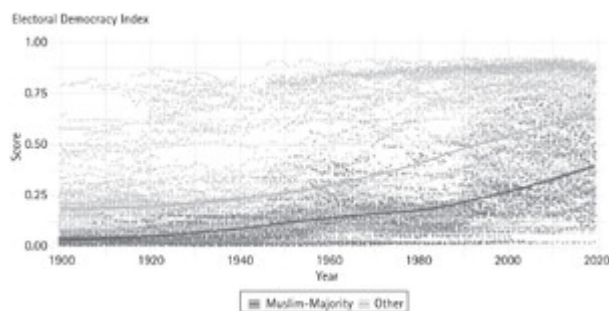


Figure 1. Electoral democracy, 1900-2019.

The second index, *party institutionalization*, combines a number of subcomponents measuring the balance and function of parties within a given system. The index ranges from 0 to 1, with higher scores indicating a more institutionalized party system that structures political competition. The index includes measurements of the level and depth of party organization and internal party cohesion in structure, platform, and ideology. In addition, the index includes a measurement capturing the extent to which party platforms are distinct from each other. The index also includes a measurement of the nature of voter-party linkages, whether these are clientelist, local collective, programmatic, or mixed between types.

Figure 2 demonstrates that, over time, party systems have become more institutionalized. Party systems in non-Muslim-majority countries consistently score higher than those in Muslim-majority countries, meaning they are more institutionalized. The gap between party systems in the two types of countries is persistent and consistent in size from initial differences over time.

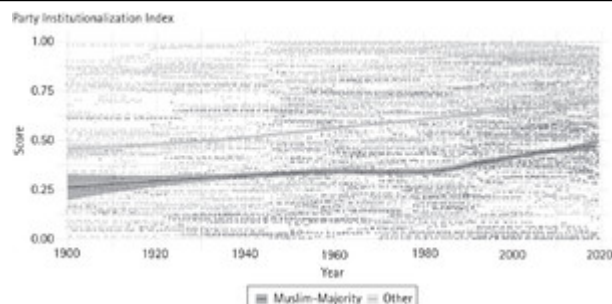


Figure 2. Party institutionalization, 1990–2019.

Sociological Explanations for Party System Divergence

What helps to explain the persistent differences between party systems in Muslim-majority and non-Muslim-majority societies? Explanations for how parties and party systems form, and why they differ, fall into two broad categories: sociological or institutional (Boix 2009). Sociological explanations outline a bottom-up process through which societal divisions external to the political system shape the nature and function of political contestation. Underlying factors refer to the demographic distribution along social, political, and economic cleavages. Broader historical processes of nation-building, state consolidation, development, modernization, and industrialization create meaningful underlying divisions within society and variation across societies, which in turn influence party formation, placement, and function (Deegan-Krause 2007; Evans and Whitefield 2000; Haggard and Kaufman 2016; Lipset and Rokkan 1967). Variation in party systems across cases stems from different underlying cleavage structures, and shifts within cases result from the shifting of underlying cleavages (Lupu and Riedl 2013; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006; Sigelman and Yough 1978; Ura and Ellis 2011).

How would a sociological explanation account for party system differences in Muslim-majority and non-Muslim-majority societies? It would mean that the nature of cleavages in Muslim societies would both explain the initial divergence and the persistent difference from party systems in non-Muslim majority societies. V-dem includes a proxy measurement of polarization of society, asking coders to “characterize the differences of opinions on major political issues,” presented in Figure 3. The data is limited from 2000 to 2019, but does not indicate that Muslim- and non-Muslim-majority societies are differently polarized; both, on average, score a medium level of polarization. While the data does not include indicators for the early 1990s, the available contemporary data suggests there is no relationship between societal polarization and party systems.

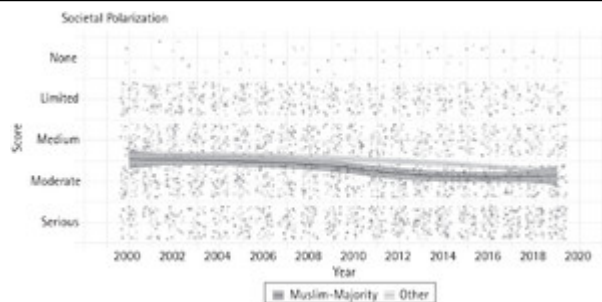


Figure 3. Societal polarization, 2000–2019.

Institutional Explanations for Party System Divergence

Institutional explanations for party system formation outline a top-down process through which formal institutions shape the nature and function of political contestation (Boix 2009). Most influential are those features that define the internal workings of the political system, primarily electoral rules and institutions. Formal institutions can complicate the translation of underlying interests into political competition, enhance or diminish polarization, and shape what parties compete over by requiring certain thresholds for participation, forcing certain partnerships and patterns of strategic placement, and distributing public goods based on representation in elected bodies (Cox 1987; Shugart and Carey 1992; Taagepera and Shugart 1989).

How would an institutional explanation account for party system differences in Muslim- and non-Muslim-majority societies? It would mean that the nature of institutions in Muslim societies would both explain the initial divergence and the persistent difference from party systems in non-Muslim-majority societies. Historical institutionalism suggests strong path dependence after an initial critical juncture establishing institutions, so I spend more time theorizing why Muslim societies may have come to possess different kinds of political institutions in the first place.

There are at least two possible ways in which Muslim societies may have come to initially possess certain political institutions. The first is through Islamic culture. Scholars have previously questioned whether the religion of Islam is the reason behind the predominance of authoritarianism in Muslim-majority societies. The focus has largely been on whether Islam prevents the development of democratic citizens, building on the implications of canonical comparative politics texts on political culture, such as those by Almond and Verba (1963) and Lipset (1969). Islam and its prescribed behaviors are argued to create a culture that is inhospitable to democracy.³ While this claim remains influential in academic, policy, and public debates about the Muslim world, it largely lacks empirical support.⁴ Islam may also influence the nature of political institutions through cultural prescriptions. Much debate has revolved around two specific institutions derived from the practices of the Prophet Mohammed and the early Muslim community. The first is *shura*,

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translated as “consultation.” This concept refers to a process of collecting and discussing different opinions on a particular subject in order to reach a decision. The second institution is that of *bay‘ah*, an oath of allegiance to a leader.

There is no theoretical or empirical consensus that these concepts deterministically translate into institutions lacking democratic qualities. Islam is a discursive tradition and is interpreted and practiced very differently by individuals across time and space (Asad 2009). For example, *shura* has been argued to both be the basis for the implementation of representative democracy as well as the basis for the tyranny of the majority, a critique notably also levied against secular institutions. Further, both in theory and in practice, Muslim polities have differed in whether consultation occurs with experts, those affected by a decision, or representatives of these groups, resulting in more and less direct representation. Similarly, interpretations of *bay‘ah* differ in whether it implies a social contract in which a leader is responsible to and limited by the people he represents, or unquestioning loyalty to a leader in order to prevent disorder and thus inhibits the establishment of institutional checks and balances of executive power (Abou El Fadl 2004; Tezcür 2007). While many party systems in Muslim-majority societies demonstrate undemocratic characteristics, there are important exceptions in countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, and Tunisia, all of which host highly competitive and open political systems that include Islamist parties and draw on religious tenets in the constitution, undermining a deterministic relationship between Islam and undemocratic political institutions. Quantitative studies demonstrate that denser and more encompassing Islamic political, educational, and financial institutions correlates with political institutions of higher democratic quality (Achilov 2010).

The second way in which Muslim societies may have come to possess different political institutions is through colonial endowments. This argument rests on a close reading of the historical political development of the Muslim world, with attention paid to when and how party systems emerged, what their initial purpose was, and how this influenced their shape and nature. European colonialism coincided with a consequential period of modern state-building in Muslim-majority societies for subsequent patterns of state capacity, the nature of coercive institutions, and economic development. The development projects that significantly shaped the institutions of states in Muslim-majority societies were guided by an overarching colonial strategy that favored the interests of the colonizer. In line with their material and strategic interests, colonial powers created or co-opted a variety of governance institutions to control local populations and channel dissent rather than to represent and respond to local interests (Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson 2001; Anderson 1986; Méouchy and Sluglett 2004). The institutional inheritance with which independent states were endowed shaped post-independence institutions in significant ways through mechanisms of path dependence. Party systems were no exception. Foreign colonial powers created legislative institutions that were unrepresentative, promoting certain favored groups integral to colonial rule at the expense of other groups. They also fostered, politicized, and institutionalized certain societal divisions and certain modes of

contestation and redistribution that were highly contentious in order to divide and conquer local populations (Laitin 1985; Mahoney 2010; Mamdani 1996).

This institutional inheritance predicts subsequent political institutions. The nature of political institutions at the onset of liberalization accompanying independence from colonialism significantly influenced the creation of electoral rules in the subsequent regime. For example, elites in postcolonial countries that had previously been governed by a single-party system systematically adopted electoral laws that concentrated legislative power in the hands of the dominant party. In contrast, postcolonial countries that had formerly been governed by monarchies under colonialism adopted electoral rules that supported a balance of power among multiple competing forces, in a continued strategy of divide-and-conquer. In line with mechanisms of historical institutionalism, incumbents' preferences over the distribution of domestic political power vary across different types of inherited regimes, and this shapes their preferences for the distribution of power in the postcolonial period (Lust-Okar and Jamal 2002).

The legacy of colonialism on party system formation in the Muslim world means that parties are less likely to serve a programmatic function. Parties may also serve distributive, surveillance, and control functions unrelated to representation of collective interests (Blackman 2019; Hibou 2011). As a result, party systems are less open to meaningful competition and less institutionalized in postcolonial periods. While the colonial experience was globally consequential, it was not even or uniform throughout the world, let alone in the Muslim world. Colonial systems of control differed in the nature and form of the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized well beyond simplistic distinctions between direct and indirect rule (Crowder 1964; Méouchy and Sluglett 2004). So while colonialism generally undermined the representative and responsive functions of governance institutions, it also produced meaningful variation that is helpful in understanding and measuring its historical effect on subsequent institutions (Ricart-Huguet forthcoming).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed whether, how, and why party systems in Muslim-majority countries differ systematically and significantly from those in non-Muslim-majority countries. Cross-national, time-series data from V-dem demonstrates that while the party systems of the world are generally liberalizing, including more political interests and becoming more institutionalized, the Muslim world lags behind its non-Muslim counterpart. In my reading of existing literature, this gap is better explained by institutional endowments than by cultural ones. In thinking about party systems in Muslim-majority societies, it is necessary to interrogate the theoretical and practical differences that render party systems in nondemocratic regimes fundamentally different from those in democratic contexts. What this means substantively is that scholars of party systems in the Muslim world must recognize that political institutions do not always reflect underlying cleavages or

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unfettered mobilization of collective interests. Instead, these party systems reproduce inherited methods of control.

Future work on the subject might expand this line of inquiry in at least two important ways. First, how do party systems persist through independence, an event that is often considered a political rupture? Existing scholarship suggests the importance of initial post-independence leaders' idiosyncratic preferences for governance and perceptions of political threats. However, we might better understand the persistence of party systems by mapping those state employees and foreign consultants who continue to staff these institutions through independence, as well as the relative balance of power between political interests as similarly shaped by colonial strategies of control.

Second, how might party systems be meaningfully reformed to become more representative, more competitive, and more institutionalized? Neither decades of foreign aid to promote democracy in Muslim-majority countries nor countless domestic attempts at mass mobilization and protest demanding democratization have significantly changed the nature of these party systems. However, perhaps in further interrogating the origins and persistence of these party systems, scholars might come up with innovative solutions to overcome the challenges of institutional inheritance. Looking to successful transitions from undemocratic to democratic party systems in Muslim majority societies may shed light on best practices.

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Notes:

(1) See Kitschelt (2007) for an extensive review.

(2) For studies of preference polarization, see Sartori (1976), Ware (1996), and Mair (2002). For studies on affective polarization, see Iyengar et al. (2019) and Nugent (2020).

(3) Scholars alternatively point to the strength of [non-nationalist] identities, the creation of docile citizens, and a lack of respect for pluralism, gender equality, and protections for minorities. See Gellner (1983), Huntington (1996), and Inglehart and Norris (2003).

(4) Public opinion data largely disconfirm the hypothesized relationship between high religiosity and intolerance. See work summarized in Tessler (2011).

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