

# Is There an Islamist Political Advantage?

Melani Cammett<sup>1</sup> and Pauline Jones Luong<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Political Science, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island 02912

<sup>2</sup>Department of Political Science, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48104;  
email: pjluong@umich.edu

Annu. Rev. Polit. Sci. 2014. 17:187–206

First published online as a Review in Advance on  
February 21, 2014

The *Annual Review of Political Science* is online at  
[polisci.annualreviews.org](http://polisci.annualreviews.org)

This article's doi:  
[10.1146/annurev-polisci-071112-221207](https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-071112-221207)

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## Keywords

religion and politics, Islamism, popular support, reputation, ideology, organizational strength

## Abstract

There is a widespread presumption that Islamists have an advantage over their opponents when it comes to generating mass appeal and winning elections. The question remains, however, as to whether these advantages—or, what we refer to collectively as an Islamist political advantage—actually exist. We argue that—to the extent that Islamists have a political advantage—the primary source of this advantage is reputation rather than the provision of social services, organizational capacity, or ideological hegemony. Our purpose is not to dismiss the main sources of the Islamist political advantage identified in scholarly literature and media accounts, but to suggest a different causal path whereby each of these factors individually and sometimes jointly promotes a reputation for Islamists as competent, trustworthy, and pure. It is this reputation for good governance that enables Islamists to distinguish themselves in the streets and at the ballot box.

## INTRODUCTION

The strong performance of Islamists<sup>1</sup> in the first competitive elections held in the wake of the Arab uprisings—particularly in Egypt and Tunisia—seems to confirm the widespread belief that Islamists have an edge in the electoral arena. Although liberal, secular, and youth groups were the initiators of protests that led to the ouster of long-standing dictators in both countries, it was Islamist parties that won the plurality (Tunisia<sup>2</sup>) or majority (Egypt<sup>3</sup>) of seats in their respective national parliaments. The results of Tunisia and Egypt’s “founding elections”<sup>4</sup> also appear to lend empirical support to a related benefit that Islamists are presumed to enjoy over other nonstate actors: broad mass appeal under conditions of political repression. Political opponents and scholars alike have interpreted Islamists’ victories in these and a handful of other competitive elections in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) since the late 1990s—including the Party of Justice and Development (AKP) in Turkey in 2002, Hamas in the Palestinian Authority in 2006, and the Party of Justice and Development (PJD) in Morocco in 2011—as evidence that Islamist parties are in fact both more popular and more credible alternatives to incumbent governments than their opponents.

The question remains, however, as to whether these advantages—or, what we refer to collectively as an Islamist political advantage—actually exist. Owing to a dearth of both empirical evidence and systematic analysis across countries, the existence of such an advantage has been widely presumed rather than demonstrated. Consequently, scholars have focused on explaining the rise of political Islam (or Islamism) rather than the variation in popular support for Islamists, particularly when it comes to winning elections. The purpose of this article is to shift our analytic focus toward the latter question, which will only become increasingly relevant as access to reliable data improves and more cross-national cases emerge. Thus, rather than taking the Islamist political advantage for granted, we seek to identify when, where, and how we should expect Islamists to enjoy widespread support—in the streets and at the ballot box.

We begin by clarifying the nature of the two spheres that constitute the Islamist political advantage and by addressing related data and measurement issues. We then explore a range of possible explanations for why Islamists uniquely possess such advantages, focusing on clarifying how each of these is linked to Islamists’ ability to excel in generating mass appeal and winning elections. Existing accounts emphasize the direct effect that welfare provision, organizational capacity, and ideology have on Islamists’ ability to garner popular support. In contrast, we argue that—to the extent Islamists have a political advantage—each of these factors has an indirect effect on what is the primary source of this advantage—a reputation for good governance.<sup>5</sup> Mainly (albeit not exclusively) because they provide essential social services, have strong ties to the community, and possess a strong spiritual foundation, Islamists as both individuals and organizations are able to

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<sup>1</sup>We define political Islam as a political ideology rather than a religious or theological construct based on the principle that “political power is an essential instrument for constructing a God-fearing society” (Sadowski 2006, p. 219). Islamists are individuals and organizations that share this conviction and thus work actively to institute Islamic legal and political structures. Islamism is synonymous with “Islamic activism” or “the active assertion and promotion of beliefs, prescriptions, laws, or policies that are held to be Islamic in character” (Int. Crisis Group 2005, p. 1; see also Hirschkind 1997).

<sup>2</sup>Al-Nahda won 37.5% of the vote and 41% of seats to the Constituent Assembly in elections held in October 2011.

<sup>3</sup>In elections to the People’s Assembly held between November 2011 and January 2012, the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), which is tied to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, won 47.2% of seats, and the al-Nour Party, founded by the ultraconservative al-Da’wa movement, won 24.3% of seats.

<sup>4</sup>We define a founding election as one in which a government office “. . . was openly contested following a period during which multiparty politics had been denied” (Bratton & van de Walle 1997, p. 196).

<sup>5</sup>As we clarify below, each of these factors also has a direct effect on generating popular support, but unless we assume that Islamists have face-to-face interactions with the majority of the population or that the majority of the population shares an Islamist ideological agenda, this cannot explain broad popular support.

foster a reputation for being uniquely competent, trustworthy, and pure vis-à-vis the alternatives. It is this reputation for good governance that enables Islamists to amass popular support and make electoral gains beyond those segments of the population with which they have come into direct contact or enjoy ideological affinity.

And yet, reputation is a tenuous basis for popular support. Cultivated under authoritarian rule, Islamists' reputation for being uniquely competent, trustworthy, and pure does not automatically transfer to the democratic context and can easily be dispelled once Islamists compete for and hold the reins of power. Thus, voters tend to punish Islamist parties more severely than their secular rivals for being ineffectual, dishonest, and especially corrupt because they have failed to live up to these expectations. Whether Islamists can campaign effectively based on reputation is also contingent on the performance of the previous regime and the political competition they face in the electoral arena. Where rampant corruption is not a valence issue or other parties can legitimately claim to be incorruptible, for example, Islamists will be less inclined to emphasize their purity. The key to explaining the variation in Islamists' ability to enjoy widespread support, therefore, lies in their ability to sustain and exploit the reputational source of their political advantage.

## **NATURE OF THE ISLAMIST POLITICAL ADVANTAGE**

Both the scholarly literature and popular accounts emphasize two spheres in which Islamists have distinguished themselves in predominantly Muslim countries: generating mass appeal under repressive regimes and performing well in postauthoritarian elections. Although these two types of advantages are clearly related, the distinction is crucial because they operate under very different political contexts, suggesting that Islamists enjoy an advantage and thus pose a threat under radically different circumstances. As we clarify below, the former suggests that Islamists are the most viable challengers to incumbent authoritarian regimes, whereas the latter suggests that Islamists are the most likely victors of regime transition. Distinguishing between these two political advantages, moreover, enables us to better understand how they are related—both empirically and theoretically. For example, is popularity under authoritarian rule a necessary or sufficient condition for Islamists' postauthoritarian electoral success?

### **Mass Appeal Under Authoritarian Rule**

Islamists are commonly presumed to enjoy broad popularity among Muslim populations (Woltering 2002). In particular, scholars assert that they have “widespread appeal in the low strata of society” (Anderson 1997, p. 23) or among those who are dispossessed such as the “young urban poor” and the “devout bourgeoisie” (Kepel 2002, p. 67; Evans & Phillips 2007). What this often means in practice is that Islamists are perceived as being more capable of generating and mobilizing broad mass support in an authoritarian context than their competitors—whether nationalists, leftists, or liberal democrats (Fuller 2004, p. 15; Yavuz 1997, p. 65). In other words, the nature of this particular advantage is the Islamists' position relative to other oppositional groups when it comes to both dominating social discourse (Burgat 2003) and marshaling resistance to the incumbent regime (Wickham 2002, p. 1; Fuller 2004, p. 15).

Whereas the exact origins and taxonomies of political Islam are disputed (Sadowski 2006, Ismail 2006, Burke & Lapidus 1988), the ascendancy of Islamism as the basis for mass mobilization in predominantly Muslim countries is widely considered to be a fairly recent development. Most scholars identify the crucial turning point as the late 1970s, when Islamism “gained a strong foothold within society” (Kepel 2002, p. 41; Tessler 2011, p. 39), and argue that its dominance continued for approximately three decades. Wickham (2002, p. 1), for example, opens her

path-breaking book on Islamic activism in Egypt by declaring that “Islam has eclipsed secular ideologies as the primary source of political activism in much of the Muslim world,” and Fuller (2004, p. 15) boldly describes Islamism as “the only realistic major alternative movement to most of today’s authoritarian regimes.”

Those who advance these claims share a thorny measurement problem. In short, because most predominantly Muslim countries have long been ruled by authoritarian regimes that exercise tight control over civil society in general and religion in particular, there is a dearth of reliable observational data. First, Islamists are often forced underground and must operate as secretive organizations, which makes an accurate assessment of their size difficult. Scholars are thus tempted to invoke estimates of the size of their membership provided by the groups themselves as an indicator of their grassroots support, even while acknowledging the inherent limitations of doing so (Entelis 1997b, pp. 45, 54–55). Second, mass protests or demonstrations are infrequent occurrences, can be orchestrated from above, and do not necessarily indicate broad popular support beyond a single issue or set of issues. The fact that Islamists organized the majority of protests in predominantly Muslim countries following the United States–led invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001, for example, does not in and of itself indicate mass support for Islamism. There is, nonetheless, a tendency to conflate the two (Wiktorowicz 2004, pp. 2–3). Utilizing demonstrations as an indicator of mass support for Islamists is also problematic because it equates organizational capacity with ideological resonance, and it thus invokes one of the primary explanations for Islamists’ popularity as an indicator for their popularity. Third, in most countries it has long been difficult (if not impossible) to conduct interviews with grassroots members of Islamist organizations or to field mass surveys, which would arguably provide a more accurate assessment of popular attitudes toward Islamists. Where survey research has been possible, moreover, the results are subject to multiple and sometimes contradictory interpretations (Harik 1996; Tessler 2011, pp. 48–54). And finally, if elections are held they are at best semicompetitive elections in which Islamists either cannot or will not fully participate (Langohr 2001, p. 592; Brown 2012). As a result, they produce electoral returns that are either completely fallacious or, like public opinion data, very difficult to interpret, because they are likely to underestimate or overestimate Islamists’ popularity depending on a variety of factors, including whether the Islamist group in question considers holding political office to be a legitimate strategy (Zubaida 2001) and whether the regime considers robust party competition to be a threat to its continued rule (Lust & Jamal 2002).

Thus, scholars have rarely been able to demonstrate that Islamists do indeed enjoy “wide appeal” (El-Khawass 1996, p. 386)—both within the MENA and beyond. Instead, many have relied solely on anecdotal evidence, such as the emergence or proliferation of Islamist movements alongside an increasingly religious population (Esposito 1997, p. 3; see also Voll 1997) or their mere visibility vis-à-vis other oppositional groups (Fuller 2004, pp. 9–10; see also Entelis 1997a). Consequently, there is a tendency to conflate both religiosity with the rise of Islamism (Lewis 1988, Mandaville 2007) and the emergence of Islamists with popular support for Islamism, as we discuss further below. Other scholars have generalized from the experience of individual countries—particularly Egypt, Jordan, and Algeria, where some data collection has been possible and Islamist activities have been more detectable (Ayubi 1991, Kepel 1993, Faksh 1997, Tessler 2011, Wickham 2002, Clark 2004), despite the acknowledged exceptionalism of such cases (Moaddel 2002)—and from singular (albeit seminal) historical events. Perhaps the event that is most commonly cited as evidence of the growing mass support for Islamists since the 1970s is the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which brought a theocracy to power (Parsons 1988). However, as Zubaida (2001, pp. 60–62) argues, broad-based participation in the overthrow of the Shah’s regime did not necessarily indicate sincere ideological conversion of the Iranian masses to Islamism. Nor did its victory necessarily increase the resonance of Islamist ideas elsewhere in the Muslim world, as some have claimed (e.g.,

Anderson 1997, p. 23). Those scholars who have attempted to provide more systematic evidence of Islamists' popularity, moreover, tend to utilize available electoral data that can at best only approximate their appeal among a specific subset of the population. A common indicator across these studies, for example, is the performance of Islamist movements in elections to university student unions and the boards of professional syndicates (Roy 1994, Kepel 2002, Wickham 2002, Fuller 2004). And yet, Islamists' electoral sweeps of these organizations are not an accurate measure of broad popular support—electoral<sup>6</sup> or otherwise—particularly among the dispossessed. What they indicate instead is the relative organizational strength of Islamist movements among certain segments of society—a subject to which we will return.

## Electoral Performance During Regime Transitions

Although not always made explicit, there is also a widespread presumption that Islamists will benefit most from regime change and, in particular, the introduction of free and fair elections because they “are the only ones capable of winning [such] elections” (Hamid 2011a, p. 68). Indeed, this has undergirded much of the reluctance from both US policy makers and incumbent regimes to support democratization in the MENA or even the participation of Islamists in competitive elections (Langohr 2001, pp. 591–92; see also Brumberg 2002b, Masoud 2008). It also drives preferences for delaying such elections: Some secular opposition groups in Tunisia and Egypt, for example, were wary of holding national elections and referenda so soon after the uprisings (Hamid 2011b). Importantly, the Islamists' presumed electoral advantage is directly connected to their other alleged political advantage. In short, it is precisely because Islamist movements not only are popular but also dominate the oppositional space under authoritarian rule that they are poised to sweep democratic elections. The nature of this advantage, then, is that Islamists are better positioned to exploit revolutionary moments and win founding elections than their challengers.

Here, too, scholars have been constrained by the shortage of reliable data. In the context of authoritarian (or semiauthoritarian) regimes, the default indicator for Islamists' prospects for winning competitive elections has often been their performance in semicompetitive elections. Although this seems plausible, it ignores the difficulty of interpreting the results of such elections raised above. It also takes for granted that we should expect parties and voters to behave the same way under a different set of electoral rules and a different playing field. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's (MB's) strong showing in the 2000 parliamentary elections under a repressive regime, for example, has been interpreted as an indication of its even greater electoral prospects following political liberalization (Shehata & Stacher 2006). And yet, the MB's ability to win seats in parliament increased not as a consequence of less repression, which persisted over time, but rather because of its gradual adaptation to the political rules of the game, which simultaneously benefited the MB's grassroots-based candidates (El-Ghobashy 2005) and fostered the fragmentation of the secular opposition (Langohr 2004). Taken in aggregate, moreover, these oft-invoked examples of Islamists dominating semicompetitive elections are the exception rather than the rule (Kurzman & Naqvi 2010).

Because competitive elections have been so rare, scholars have also drawn inferences from singular and often sensational cases. The victories of the Islamic Action Front in Algeria's founding elections in June 1990 and December 1991, for example, were used to validate both the claim that Islamism had become dominant (Kepel 2002, p. 168; see also Evans & Phillips 2007) and the

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<sup>6</sup>In fact, one of the reasons that Hamas's victory in the 2006 Palestinian parliamentary elections took most observers by surprise is that it had never won more than 35–40% in student union elections.

fear that democratic transition in the MENA would bring Islamists who were not committed to democracy to power (Djerejian 1992).<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the successes of Islamist parties in the more recent parliamentary and presidential elections following the ouster of dictators in Egypt and Tunisia were deemed sufficient to confirm the premise that Islamists have an electoral advantage (Bradley 2012). The fact remains, however, that there is only a limited number of countries in which Islamist parties have participated in and won competitive elections—and most importantly, founding elections.<sup>8</sup> We should be cautious, therefore, in drawing conclusions from such cases; rather, we should utilize these opportunities to specify the conditions under which Islamists are more likely to prevail in competitive elections.

Focusing on the electoral successes of Islamists has also deterred us from questioning the assumption that Islamists face little competition in founding elections. Given Islamists' resilience under repression vis-à-vis the secular opposition, their challengers are thought to be weak, nonexistent, or greatly compromised. And yet, the relative strength of the secular opposition varies even where we should least expect it—that is, within the MENA (Langohr 2004, p. 188)—as well as in other parts of the Islamic world. Consider, for example, the robust competition that Indonesia's Islamist parties faced following the fall of the Suharto regime in 1998. Although several overtly Islamist parties emerged to contest in the 1999 parliamentary elections—the first free and fair elections held since 1955—none won a significant share of the vote compared with the two secular parties affiliated with the previous regime. In both these and the subsequent (2004) democratic elections, moreover, partisanship was one of the main determinants of party choice across voters for both president and parliament (Liddle & Mujani 2007).

## SOURCES OF THE ISLAMIST POLITICAL ADVANTAGE

The existing literature provides a long list of international- and domestic-level factors to explain the rise of Islamism across the Muslim world in the second half of the twentieth century. Although available space does not permit a full review here,<sup>9</sup> these explanations include regional events such as the Arab defeat in the 1967 war with Israel (Kepel 2002, pp. 62–65) and the Iranian Revolution (Dekmejian 1995; Esposito 1997, p. 23), international trends such as the spread of the global capitalist order (Keskin 2011, pp. 9–18) and the rise in religiosity among populations accustomed to a religious basis for political authority (Burgat 2003, pp. 43–58), and domestic factors such as political repression (Anderson 1997, p. 19) and the decline of the state coupled with socioeconomic frustrations (Ayubi 1991, pp. 158–177). This literature thus provides essential background for understanding the emergence and proliferation of Islamist movements, particularly in the MENA. It is less helpful, however, in illuminating the determinants of popular support for these movements and in explaining why support varies at the individual, subnational, and national levels and across different realms of activity. Ultimately, the emergence of Islamism and support for Islamists are related but analytically distinct phenomena that should be disentangled.

Our aim, therefore, is to shift the analytical focus to interrogate why we might expect Islamists to enjoy widespread support—in the streets and at the ballot box—rather than why they arrived on the sociopolitical scene in the first place. In other words, if Islamists do indeed have a political advantage, what are the underlying sources of this advantage? Below we discuss three factors

<sup>7</sup>This is what prompted Djerejian's (1992, p. 37) infamous declaration "one person, one vote, one time."

<sup>8</sup>For example, the AKP, which has continued to win a majority in Turkey's parliamentary elections since 2002, is a case of the former but not the latter.

<sup>9</sup>For more comprehensive reviews, see, e.g., Roy 1994, Ismail 2006, and Sadowski 2006.

that are most commonly identified in the literature as creating this advantage: (a) social welfare provision, (b) organizational capacity, and (c) ideological hegemony. We argue that although each of these factors can explain why some segment of the population might support Islamists, none alone can explain Islamists' ability to generate a widespread following and win founding elections. In short, this would require Islamists to have a much more extensive reach than we have evidence to substantiate.

## Nonstate Social Welfare Provision

A frequently invoked source of the Islamist political advantage is their effective provision of social welfare. Simply put, the supply of social services allegedly enables Islamists to burnish their good governance credentials and win the hearts and minds of populations (Harik 1994, Ismail 2001, Bayat 2002, Öniş 2006, Walsh 2006). Whether because of their gratitude for the services rendered or the positive assessment of these services, beneficiaries and their family members are believed to form a core group of supporters for Islamists. This serves them especially well during elections: A common (albeit unsubstantiated) claim is that providing social welfare acts as a form of vote-buying. In other words, service provision builds electoral support for Islamists because voters express their gratitude at the ballot box (Alterman 2000, Hamzeh 2001, Malka 2007, Flanigan 2008).

The key premise behind such explanations is that Islamists are superior providers of basic social services and sometimes even of public goods—or are at least perceived to be—particularly in comparison with the state but also vis-à-vis alternative nonstate providers. Thus, it is vital to demonstrate that Islamists actually supply or are perceived to supply social services more effectively than others, or at least that beneficiaries are more grateful for welfare offered by Islamists than for welfare from other providers. Furthermore, objective and subjective indicators of the quality of social services by Islamists must be linked systematically with political support for these groups. The empirical evidence to date, however, does not substantiate these claims.

Indeed, to our knowledge, little if any research examines systematically the extent and quality of Islamist welfare programs and activities in the Muslim world. Most claims about Islamists' social welfare initiatives are based on minimal, if any, hard data. Even when scholars provide evidence to support their claims, the relative significance of Islamist social programs vis-à-vis those run by other types of religious actors, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and other nonstate providers is unclear.<sup>10</sup> Existing accounts also fail to provide systematic evidence for the relative extent and quality of services provided by Islamist organizations. Situating the quality of Islamist social welfare initiatives in comparative perspective is essential for making inferences about their alleged dominance and superiority over other types of providers operating in the same contexts. Because most claims of Islamist predominance in welfare provision rest on anecdotal observations and word of mouth, it is difficult to assess the actual importance and real and perceived quality of Islamist welfare in Muslim societies and therefore to determine whether they have an actual advantage in this realm. There is good reason to believe that more reliable data would indicate, first, that Islamist providers are less numerous than is often presumed and, second, that other types of providers (religious and secular) are more numerous but are less visible because they are less centralized. In the health care sector in many Middle Eastern countries, for example, nonstate providers primarily or increasingly consist of private, for-profit clinics (World Bank 2010).

The challenges of ascertaining the organizational affiliations of social welfare institutions also hinder systematic measurement of the nature, extent, and quality of Islamist social welfare

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<sup>10</sup>Masoud (2013) is a partial exception.

provision. It is not always clear whether providers are indeed linked to Islamist organizations, even when these connections are asserted. Observers routinely assume that an Islamic charitable society with no ties to an Islamist organization that runs a health clinic or vocational training center has Islamist linkages, without verification (e.g., Int. Crisis Group 2003). An example from Palestine illustrates this point. In 2009, Cammett went to the West Bank to construct a spatial data set on welfare institutions and their organizational affiliations as part of a cross-national research project. Some accounts claim that Hamas, the Palestinian Islamist group that has controlled Gaza since winning the January 2006 national elections, has extended its popularity through an extensive network of health clinics and other social welfare facilities (Murphy 2006; Levitt 2006; Malka 2007, pp. 99–100); however, it was impossible to code precisely which clinics are indeed linked to Hamas. Some facilities, although run by members of Hamas, were not formally linked to the organization, and it was unclear whether the local population actually viewed clinics as linked to Hamas.

Even when information on the organizational affiliations of social service providers is valid, reliable data on the content and quality of the services provided at welfare agencies run by Islamists are generally unavailable. At a minimum, an evaluation of nonstate social service provision should measure the infrastructure available at facilities (i.e., equipment, human resources, etc.), the quality of service delivery and interaction with beneficiaries (i.e., the knowledge, training, actions, and behavior of staff members in facilities), and costs of services rendered. Furthermore, these objective indicators must be supplemented by subjective measures, notably the perceptions that clientele and community members have of Islamists as providers. Regardless of the true quality of services, those offered by Islamists may be perceived to be superior. For example, when asked to evaluate the quality of services offered at an array of hypothetical health care facilities, survey respondents in Egypt reported that clinics with names that identify them as linked to an Islamic charitable association provide superior services (Masoud 2013). Making claims about the superiority of Islamist service provision, moreover, requires data on the quality of services rendered by all types of providers (state and nonstate) in a given community. Thus, structured comparisons of Islamist activities and institutions with those run by the full gamut of non-Islamist providers are essential.

In sum, the causal link between social welfare provision and support for Islamists rests on a crucial assumption that has not been empirically substantiated—namely, that Islamists supply social services both more effectively and more extensively than other providers. Both scholarly and media accounts locate the origins of this superiority in the retreat of the state, which created a void that Islamists could easily fill and granted them a near monopoly over nonstate social welfare delivery (Anderson 1997, pp. 24–25; Bayat 2002; Wiktorowicz 2004, p. 11; Ismail 2006, pp. 22–25, 82–101; Mandaville 2007, pp. 96–101, 108–112; Harrigan & El-Said 2009; Davis & Robinson 2012, pp. 24–62). Yet, these accounts tell us little about not only why Islamists fill this void so effectively but also why they opt to do so in the first place. As we will see below, the answers to these questions may lie in two other potential sources of the Islamist political advantage—organizational capacity and ideological hegemony, respectively.

## Organizational Capacity

The predominant explanation for the Islamist political advantage is their relative organizational capacity. Similar to social welfare provision, the organizational resources and capabilities of Islamists are generally presumed in both scholarly and media accounts to be far superior to those of their competitors and even to those of the state (Trager 2011). In the social movements literature (McAdam 1999, McAdam et al. 2001), these resources are considered to be both material and immaterial. They include physical infrastructure such as mosques, charities, schools, and welfare

agencies; human capital in the form of staff members, volunteers, community activists, and the beneficiaries of their programs, all of which constitute the foundation of social networks of supporters; a cell-like organizational structure that was largely forged under conditions of political repression; and the apparent management and technical skills of their personnel, which facilitate the efficient operation of their programs and enable Islamists to maintain order and discipline in specific activities and, more generally, in the territories where they are based.<sup>11</sup> In addition, Islamists have access to independent sources of financing that their nonreligious competitors lack. These include contributions from individual supporters and external donors.<sup>12</sup> Together with their physical infrastructure, local networks, and committed cadre, the ability of Islamists to self-finance serves to reinforce their ability to provide superior social welfare (Shadid 2002, chapter 4; Clark 2004; Wiktorowicz 2004, pp. 10–11; Berendes et al. 2011). Muslim welfare agencies and Islamist organizations alike benefit from a combination of Islamic charitable obligations and voluntary commitments, including *zakat*, *sadaqa*, and *khums*.<sup>13</sup> Labor remittances and businesses owned by pious supporters or Islamist organizations themselves provide another potential source of funding (Kepel 2002, pp. 69–75; Mandaville 2007, pp. 287–88; Denoeux 2012, p. 65; Gomez-Perez 2012), as does the rise of Islamic financial institutions (Kepel 2002, pp. 75–80).

Importantly, the distinct types of resources that form the basis of Islamists' superior organizational capacity have a common source: the assertion that authoritarian regimes simply can't close the mosques. Both because they faced a greater political challenge when it came to disbanding religious institutions than overtly political ones and because their initial challenge came from the left (namely, Marxists), regimes with predominantly Muslim populations across the MENA provided greater opportunities for Islamists to operate than their secular counterparts. This enabled Islamists to establish and expand their organizational infrastructure and thus encouraged their rise over other forms of opposition (Ayubi 1991, p. 74; Mandaville 2007, pp. 83–85). The same logic applies to independent sources of financing, particularly when it comes to individual contributions; the presumption is that the state cannot prevent Muslims from fulfilling their charitable obligations.

Many scholars thus attribute Islamists' ability to build mass appeal to the pivotal role that the mosque plays in creating and maintaining networks of committed cadres and sympathizers (Wickham 2002, Clark 2004). As Wiktorowicz (2004, p. 11) adeptly summarizes,

Within the physical structure of the mosque, Islamists offer sermons, lessons, and study groups to propagate the movement message, organize collective action, and recruit new joiners. Mosques also provide an organic, national network that connects communities of activists across space. In this manner, mobilization through the mosque is analogous to the use of churches by the civil rights movement in the United States.

In sum, organizational resources facilitate the establishment and maintenance of robust networks of activists, which in turn generate support for the movement. The key mechanism is the network itself, and two types are allegedly at work. The first type, which is akin to “bonding”

<sup>11</sup>Although the social movements literature tends to treat financing as part of organizational resources, we consider this a distinct explanation, as discussed below.

<sup>12</sup>It is widely alleged that Islamists have been receiving large-scale donations from conservative individuals and governments in the wealthy Gulf oil states for decades (Hammond 2013).

<sup>13</sup>*Zakat*, one of the five pillars of Islam, is charitable giving incumbent upon all Muslims who are able to do so, whereas *sadaqa* refers to supplemental, voluntary charity. *Khums* is a religious obligation practiced largely by Shia Muslims to contribute one-fifth of certain types of income.

(Putnam 2000, p. 22), highlights the role of community networks in building local-level support. Face-to-face contact between committed activists who are locally embedded in the communities where they seek to gain support facilitates the transmission of their message and, hence, the expansion of the movement (Wickham 2002, pp. 162–63). Cadres seek to gain followers actively through persuasion and direct appeals or more passively by setting an example of piety and moral behavior. The second type, which roughly corresponds to “bridging” (Putnam 2000, p. 22), emphasizes the ways in which physical institutions such as mosques link separate clusters of supporters and sympathizers across localities to form a larger, national network. The sheer spread of Islamist institutions, which both reflects and facilitates the development of dense social networks, boosts their popularity by bringing the staff members and volunteers of Islamist organizations into contact with more communities. Similarly, financing is of obvious value for gaining mass appeal. The availability of funds can help to sustain a grassroots infrastructure of institutions and individual cadres and supporters, particularly under conditions of political repression. When asked how the banned Islamist party al-Nahdha maintained strong local networks under Ben Ali’s two-decade rule over Tunisia, for example, one representative replied that the party was able to utilize such funds to continuously distribute small-scale social assistance to needy families in the neighborhoods where cadres were based.<sup>14</sup>

Although the pivotal role of the mosque in winning elections is considered unique to Islamists, organizational capacity has additional linkages to electoral performance that are characteristic of elections far beyond predominantly Muslim societies. Organizational resources such as physical institutions constitute a base from which voter mobilization drives and campaign management activities can be coordinated. More important, networks of activists, who may operate from these brick-and-mortar institutions, are vital to the success of electoral campaigns. Cadres can disseminate the message and symbols of the party or movement, build electoral support among marginal supporters and nonsupporters through face-to-face interactions, and increase voter turnout. For example, reports from Egypt and Tunisia suggest that imams sympathetic to Islamist parties used their sermons to encourage voters to cast their ballots for these parties (Spencer 2012, Tadros 2012). Financial resources are also crucial for conducting effective political campaigns. Islamist candidates in the 2011–2012 Egyptian and 2011 Tunisian parliamentary elections, for example, allegedly received vast contributions from the Gulf states, which benefited them during both the campaign and their tenure in power (Kirkpatrick 2011, Tadros 2012). Islamist parties have also been accused of engaging in large-scale vote- and turnout-buying operations, which their opponents contend enabled Islamist candidates to prevail at the ballot box in elections following the Arab uprisings (Fadel 2011).

Despite its popularity, the relative organizational capacity of Islamists is not a satisfactory explanation for the Islamist political advantage for several reasons. First, the very premise on which it is based does not stand up to scrutiny. Recent research has shown that under Hosni Mubarak, for example, the Egyptian government could and did shut down mosques whenever it believed hostile elements were using them as platforms for antistate rhetoric and agitation (Masoud 2013). Similarly, in Tunisia, where Ben Ali succeeded in the near total repression of Islamic institutions, al-Nahdha nonetheless managed to maintain popular support through a clandestine and loose network of sympathizers and activists.<sup>15</sup> Second, the organizational reach of Islamists may have been exaggerated. Although Islamists may have benefited from their influence in mosques, schools, and other social institutions, they faced serious obstacles in organizing workers because they cannot

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<sup>14</sup>Said Ferjani (al-Nahdha official), interview by Melani Cammett, October 21, 2011, Tunis, Tunisia.

<sup>15</sup>See footnote 14.

always penetrate factories (Alexander 2000, p. 471). To the extent that physical infrastructure and networks facilitate mobilization, among other outcomes, their capacity to do so is circumscribed by the sectors in which they have an established institutional presence and command support. Third, the uniqueness of Islamists' ability to build and sustain organizational strength at the grass roots in authoritarian or semiauthoritarian settings may also be overstated. In Malaysia, for example, the main competitor to the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS)—the United Malays' National Organization (UMNO)—possesses equally strong physical resources and local networks, and thus, the two parties are engaged in direct competition for the ethnic Malay vote (Weiss 2000, Liow 2005).

Fourth, organizational capacity alone—no matter how expansive and distinctive—cannot explain mass appeal or broad electoral support. Organizational capacity is best viewed as a factor that contributes to but cannot fully explain social mobilization. Just as the rise of ethnic entrepreneurs cannot explain why they gain a significant following (Fearon & Laitin 2000), the structural ability of Islamists to spread their message to the masses does not explain why this message resonates so broadly. Particularly in the context of political repression, where the risks of supporting or working for an opposition group are higher, organizational resources are insufficient to garner support and volunteers. Both activists and followers must first be committed to the message of the group (Wickham 2002). This suggests the need for face-to-face interactions, which are far more effective than arm's-length exchanges when it comes to garnering support for social change (Gawande 2013). Finally, as a result of all the above, it is more plausible that Islamist networks serve as a bonding rather than a bridging causal mechanism; that is, they generate support within local communities rather than across disparate localities. Similar to social service provision, then, organizational capacity can best explain why Islamists are more likely to generate support among those who have come in direct contact with their cadres and benefitted from their institutions.

Likewise, access to independent financial resources has limited explanatory power. It would be naive to argue that money alone explains the alleged Islamist political advantage. First, Islamists are not the only groups with deep pockets. Some liberal groups receive generous funding from international organizations and foreign governments, and wealthy local businessmen bankroll some non-Islamist parties, as purportedly occurred in Egypt and Tunisia during recent elections. At the same time, governments and other international actors can and do restrict some sources of external financing that Islamists uniquely enjoy through crackdowns on what they deem to be terrorist financing. Second, money, like other forms of organizational resources, cannot explain why Islamist appeals resonate, nor can it convincingly account for the willingness of either activists or supporters to risk their physical and material well-being under authoritarian rule. To support Islamists under conditions of political repression, people must be moved in ways that money cannot buy. As others have recognized, this suggests the need to examine the role of ideology (Brumberg 2002a, Wickham 2002).

## **Ideological Hegemony**

Another commonly invoked source of the Islamist political advantage is what we refer to as ideological hegemony. Scholars locate the origins of this hegemony in either the essence of Islam and its impact on Arab culture or a particular set of structural-historical conditions. The former usually takes an essentialist form in which ideological hegemony is linked directly to Islam as a total system for social organization, as distinct from other faiths, particularly Christianity, which enables it to dominate the popular consciousness (e.g., Lewis 1988; Ayubi 1991, p. 227). The less essentialist, more historically contextualized approach, which is far more common in the scholarly literature, generally hinges on the failure of other ideologies, particularly nationalism, thereby enabling Islamism to fill a void (e.g., Esposito 1997, pp. 2–3; Kepel 2002, pp. 62–65). Thus,

whereas organizational capacity and financial resources primarily provide and sustain the physical infrastructure and personnel that enable Islamists to gain support, ideological hegemony provides Islamists with a spiritual foundation for generating mass appeal and mobilizing electoral support.

Ideological hegemony is most often used to explain why Islamists can generate broad mass appeal. Tessler (2011, p. 46) provides an apt summary of this argument when, quoting an Egyptian sociologist, he describes Islamists as offering a “credible slogan” but not a concrete solution to address widespread social and economic grievances. Although not clearly specified, the mechanism appears to be framing—that is, if we understand ideological hegemony here to mean the ability of one group to define reality for the majority,<sup>16</sup> then it provides Islamists with a usable frame with which to present their approach to current problems as the most reasonable. Hence the elegant simplicity of the common refrain that has rung throughout the Muslim world since the 1970s: “Islam is the answer” (Ehteshami 2005, p. 32). The credibility of this slogan is buttressed by the ability of Islamists as religiously based actors to portray their sociopolitical agenda as correct or justified on moral grounds (Kepel 2002, p. 67). More concretely, Islamism was expertly framed as the best or most authentic way for Muslims to reassert themselves in response not only to colonialism and neocolonialism (Ayubi 1991, pp. 217–24; Ismail 2006, pp. 34–50) but also to “corrupt, exhausted, and ineffectual regimes” (Esposito 1997, p. 3).

Ideological hegemony may also feed into other alleged sources of the Islamist political advantage, notably the provision of social welfare. Here, Islamists enjoy hegemony because they are the only oppositional group or nonstate actor able to credibly claim that social welfare provision is an integral part of their doctrine. This enables them to frame their broad agenda as promoting social justice and their service provision as a central duty and necessary part of their core activities. Thus, ideological hegemony takes on a slightly different meaning but operates via the same framing mechanism. The net benefit to Islamists is twofold. First, it raises the costs for governments to shut down mosques and their affiliated Islamic charities. This has the added virtue of making social service provision a relatively safe arena in which Islamists can invest their financial resources. Second, it lowers the costs of recruitment because Islamists have access to a core of committed volunteers and trained professionals who view their work as an expression of piety and devotion (Harmsen 2008, p. 68): The fact that charitable giving (*zakat*) is a pillar of Islam produces a flow of volunteers and staff members. As the literature on faith-based organizations suggests, this may translate into a more committed and lower-cost workforce than secular welfare agencies enjoy (Davis & Robinson 2012, Wuthnow 2004).

The literature is similarly vague when it comes to linking ideological hegemony to electoral mobilization. And yet, the notion of cultural dominance is apparent in the view that Islamists advance a unique claim to represent religion and, more specifically, the Islamic faith in office. They can thus portray themselves as the only political actors on the scene who are qualified to implement their proposed, deliberately vague, solution (i.e., Islam) to their respective country’s problems. Electoral support for Islamists, therefore, is often driven by a desire to see a greater role for religion in state affairs as the sole “authentic alternative” to the status quo of “corrupt, exhausted, and ineffectual regimes” (Esposito 1997, p. 3)—rather than an endorsement of any specific policies. Hence the large portion of votes that are cast for Islamists as “rejection” votes against unpopular incumbents rather than as “sanction” votes that express support for the Islamist program (Tessler 2011, p. 46; see also Garcia-Rivero & Kotzé 2007).

The strength of this explanation is that, in contrast to others, it offers greater insight into why Islamists generate mass appeal. Their deliberate “emphasis on fairness and social justice” in

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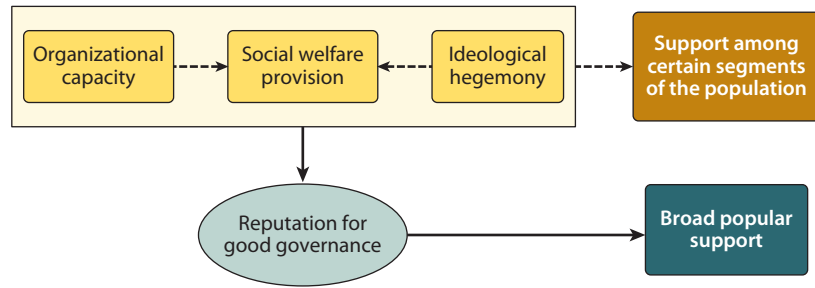
<sup>16</sup>This is, of course, an adaptation of Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony (Hoare & Smith 1971).

particular both resonates with those within society who “regarded themselves as unjustly deprived” and offers a vision of governance focused on public welfare that contrasts sharply with the status quo (Wickham 2002, pp. 160–61). Ideology also serves as the crucial link between mass appeal and mass mobilization that was lacking in these other accounts; in sum, by invoking a common identity it serves as a unifying force that enables bridging across various segments of society (e.g., Brumberg 2002a). Likewise, ideology provides a plausible explanation for both why the cadres that make up Islamist networks and provide services are so committed and why Islamists opt to invest their financial resources in social service provision. Ideological hegemony is much less effective, however, at explaining the ability of Islamists to win elections beyond a rejection vote. Admittedly, Islamists have a core group of supporters who cast their votes for Islamists based on ideological affinity—that is, because they share both the convictions and policy agenda of Islamist parties. And yet, it appears to be a minority of the population. Based on a variety of indicators, for example, the past two waves of the Arab Barometer Survey suggest that a majority of the population at least in the Arab world “[prefer] a [political] system without a strong role for Islam or religious actors” (Tessler et al. 2012, p. 96). Moreover, an emphasis on ideology cannot explain the electoral prospects of Islamists where their hegemony is compromised. It does not help us understand, for example, how voters choose among competing Islamist candidates and parties, as occurred in the 2011–2012 parliamentary elections in Egypt and has been a feature of Indonesia’s elections since 1998, or between two dominant parties that both claim to be the authentic representative of political Islam, which has long fueled the rivalry between UMNO and PAS in Malaysia (Liow 2004).

## REPUTATION AS THE PROXIMATE CAUSE

Our contention is not that social service provision, organizational capacity, and ideological hegemony do not contribute at all to the alleged Islamist political advantage. Rather, we posit each of these factors has an indirect effect on what is actually the primary source of the Islamist political advantage—a reputation for good governance. It is precisely because Islamists provide essential social services, have strong ties to the community, and possess a strong spiritual foundation that they are able to foster a reputation as both individuals and organizations for being uniquely competent, trustworthy, and pure vis-à-vis the alternatives. To be sure, for some segments of the population, social welfare activities and ideological appeals will have direct causal effects. For example, social welfare activities can enable Islamists to win support through service provision, particularly among the poor and needy, whereas ideological appeals may garner the support of those who are swayed by the prospects of an Islamic state. Yet, these components of the population are likely to be in the minority. As depicted in **Figure 1**, the reputational effect enables Islamists to amass popular support and make electoral gains beyond those segments of the population with which they have come into direct contact or enjoy ideological affinity. Importantly, it is not merely that Islamists as both individuals and organizations are generally held in high esteem but that they are regarded as uniquely possessing these specific and desirable character traits in the places where and times when they are successful.

Specifically, we hypothesize that social welfare provision, organizational capacity, and ideological hegemony operate via a signaling device that generates a particular reputation for Islamists—as competent, trustworthy, and pure—and thus enables them to garner broad popular support. The decision to invest in social welfare provision can foster a reputation for competency and promote an aura of trustworthiness and financial integrity because Islamists, unlike many governments, actually deliver on their promises. Furthermore, social welfare initiatives generate communal benefits rather than personal enrichment for Islamist leaders and cadres, which again contrasts sharply with government officials who are often viewed as corrupt. In countries where citizens



**Figure 1**

Reputation as the proximate cause for broad popular support.

hold deep grievances against incumbent rulers for favoring the interests of privileged elites to the neglect of the general population, a reputation for trustworthiness and financial integrity is particularly compelling and, therefore, can generate widespread support even among those who do not actively favor Islamist reform agendas. Thus, this reputational argument is distinct from a vote-buying logic: Good governance credentials compel people to vote for Islamists not because of the direct receipt of benefits but rather because the provision of social benefits makes Islamists more desirable leaders. Furthermore, social welfare initiatives can create a positive feedback loop or virtuous cycle whereby the provision of social services helps to foster a positive reputation, which in turn boosts perceptions of the quality of services offered by Islamist organizations.

The relative organizational strength of Islamists similarly promotes a reputation for competency that contrasts with that of both the incumbent regime and other oppositional groups. The physical infrastructure of Islamist institutions (i.e., mosques, welfare agencies, schools, vocational training centers, Qur'anic study groups, etc.) together with networks of committed cadres conveys a sense of capability and efficacy to actual and potential adherents, regardless of their religious beliefs. This critical mass of brick-and-mortar institutions thus contributes to the ability of Islamist organizations to project an image of good governance. Networks of committed cadres reinforce this image by creating the impression that Islamist institutions are managed by a dedicated and thus more experienced and capable workforce. A reputation for competency makes the message of Islamists more appealing as a credible alternative to the status quo, fosters the presumption that they are more capable of offering high-quality social welfare services than alternate providers, and ultimately encourages people who are frustrated with the incumbent regime's incompetence to vote for Islamist parties and candidates. Among other things, this reputational advantage helps to explain why Islamists are successful despite their limited organizational reach beyond certain segments of society and the government's occasional crackdowns on mosques and other Islamic institutions. It also helps to explain why those Islamist parties that did not appear to be well organized at the outset of recent electoral campaigns in Egypt and Tunisia (al-Nour and al-Nahdha, respectively) managed to win such a large share of the votes. The claim that reputation gives Islamists an edge over their competitors is also supported by mass surveys indicating that those who support Islamists are not especially religious but rather the least satisfied with government performance (e.g., Tessler 2011).

Access to independent sources of financing can reinforce the Islamist reputation for competency and foster an image of trustworthiness and financial integrity. But the relationship between independent financial resources and a reputation for good governance hinges on both the sources of their income and how it is invested. If their source of income appears to be vast networks of supporters, then independent financing effectively signals that Islamists have already garnered

mass trust, potentially disseminating their positive image more widely. Similarly, Islamists' investments in religiously compliant financial instruments such as Islamic banks and businesses indicate that their behavior conforms to their principles. Conversely, if the funds of an Islamist organization are seen as derived from illicit or immoral activities, such as drug production and trafficking, then access to independent sources of financing may backfire, causing reputational damage. The effects of financial resources can also interact with organizational structure to boost or undermine the reputations of Islamists. When funneled through Islamist organizations with movement-like structures, which have more grassroots linkages, independent financial resources can enhance their reputations. If these movements morph into more formal organizations such as NGOs, which tend to have fewer local linkages, then independent financing may work to the disadvantage of Islamists, who become vulnerable to the accusation that they use external funding to perpetuate their own organizational interests rather than to serve the community.<sup>17</sup>

The role of ideological hegemony in promoting a reputation for purity is more straightforward. In their professed desire to create a society based on Islamic norms, Islamists automatically gain a reputation for honesty, fairness, and incorruptibility (Marcou 2012, pp. 62–64). By promoting a social justice agenda, Islamists convey their pure and benevolent intentions. At the same time, their claim to authenticity signals that Islamists alone have such intentions.

The positive reputation of Islamists is reinforced when individuals who are associated with Islamist organizations wittingly or unwittingly set an example by leading a humble and virtuous life. The cultural practices and embeddedness of Islamists in their communities endow them with a cultural familiarity as one of us, not unlike the way that George Bush or Bill Clinton projected a broadly appealing everyman image in the American context (Canfield 2003). This local resonance contrasts sharply with the personae of liberal political figures, who often appear culturally disconnected and even foreign in the eyes of the masses in many predominantly Muslim societies. Cultural familiarity both enables the construction of the social networks that undergird Islamist organizations and facilitates the embeddedness of Islamists at the grassroots level.

Although closely connected, ideology and reputation are not synonymous. Ideology is about the content of religious doctrine (here, social justice), whereas reputation refers to a perceived commitment to fulfilling this doctrine. Thus, ideology is not sufficient to win hearts and minds absent reputation. Having a reputation for purity reinforces the credibility of the Islamists' message and promotes its appeal beyond those who come in direct contact with Islamists or their institutions. In contrast to competency, which suggests the capacity to implement desirable changes, an untarnished reputation suggests that the bearer is willing to incur the costs of pursuing such changes. This same sense of a higher level of commitment also fosters the presumption that Islamists offer better social welfare services than alternate providers, even among those who have not used their services. Finally, whereas ideology offers voters an informational shortcut about the type of policies an Islamist party is likely to pursue in office (Pepinsky et al. 2012), a reputation for purity offers voters an informational shortcut about the type of moral character that candidates and parties are likely to embody if elected. For a deeply religious society, this may provide an even more compelling reason to cast one's vote. Where incumbent regimes are plagued by endemic corruption, voters may simply be more inclined to vote for candidates and parties they consider to be incorruptible. This helps to explain why it is not only true believers who cast their vote for Islamist parties and candidates. At the same time, it suggests that, when voters must choose among competing Islamist parties, they will consider the reputation of individual candidates.

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<sup>17</sup>We are grateful to Benoit Challand for underscoring this point.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, we advance two main arguments. First, we contend that, due to a dearth of both empirical evidence and systematic analysis across countries, the existence of an Islamist political advantage has been widely presumed rather than demonstrated. Consequently, scholars have focused on explaining the rise of political Islam rather than the variation in popular support for Islamists, particularly when it comes to winning elections. Second, we offer an alternative explanation for this variation. We argue that—to the extent that Islamists have a political advantage—the primary source of this advantage is reputation rather than the provision of social services, organizational capacity, or ideological hegemony. Our purpose is not to dismiss the main sources of the Islamist political advantage identified in scholarly literature and media accounts, but to suggest a different causal path whereby each of these factors individually and sometimes jointly promotes a reputation for Islamists as competent, trustworthy, and pure. It is this reputation for good governance that enables Islamists to distinguish themselves in the streets and at the ballot box. Where Islamists can build and sustain such a reputation vis-à-vis their competitors—including the party of the incumbent regime—we expect them to gain mass appeal under political repression and perform well in founding elections. Where they face competitors that can legitimately claim to be competent, trustworthy, or pure, or where issues such as regime incompetence, rampant corruption, and immorality are not valence issues, Islamists will be less likely to generate broad popular support.

Our argument has important implications for the future electoral prospects of Islamists in Egypt, Tunisia, and beyond. If reputation is the main source of the Islamist edge over their competitors—whether in the state or nonstate sphere—then their presumed political advantage may be less robust than has been portrayed. Reputations that have been built over decades can unravel in a few months or even weeks. In particular, good governance credentials are based on actions, events, and initiatives that took place under authoritarian rule and do not necessarily transfer to the postauthoritarian context. During regime transition, when Islamists no longer have to operate in a quasi-legal environment, their reputations can be easily undermined if they do not live up to their messages or appear to contradict their principles and ideologies. Even a relatively minor infraction can result in an immediate loss of public confidence, as the rise and fall of the Islamist Justice and Prosperity Party (PKS) in Indonesia demonstrates.<sup>18</sup> In this regard, the very factors that contribute to Islamists' reputation for good governance can serve to undermine it. If Islamists do not become more transparent in a more democratic context, the clandestine nature of Islamist organizations needed to survive under authoritarian rule can give rise to suspicions about their motives and actions, thereby diminishing their reputation as trustworthy. This is exacerbated when Islamist parties are affiliated with a movement, as illustrated by the case of the FJP in Egypt, which is linked to the MB. Similarly, access to independent sources of financing may be a double-edged sword, as both the origin and distribution of these finances come under greater public scrutiny. Real or perceived vote-buying, for example, can tarnish the images of Islamist parties, undercutting their relatively clean reputations and diminishing their claims to authenticity, which in turn can lead to reduced vote shares in subsequent elections. The ability of Islamists to provide a slogan but not a solution can also backfire over time, when once in power they are forced to adopt clear policy positions, commit inevitable mistakes, and make unacceptable compromises as part of the normal business of politics.

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<sup>18</sup>Over a decade (1999–2009) the PKS became the fourth-largest party in Indonesia and the country's most successful religious party by cultivating a reputation as the cleanest party in the country (Hamayotsu 2011). When it was implicated in several minor corruption scandals, however, its popular support plummeted to a much greater degree than that of other parties whose leaders have faced more serious corruption charges, most notably the ruling Democratic Party.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

Earlier drafts of this article were presented at the Middle East Studies Association 2013 annual meeting and at the American University of Central Asia in Bishkek. The authors are not aware of any affiliations, memberships, funding, or financial holdings that might be perceived as affecting the objectivity of this review.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank Anna Grzymala-Busse and Ellen Lust for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper. Michael Marcusa provided excellent research assistance. All errors are our own.

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