Asef Bayat (ed.)


The startling rise and fall of Islamists in the aftermath of the so-called “Arab Spring” has posed many questions about the future of Islamism as a viable political force. Can Islamists regain their appeal? Are Islamists ready to revisit or change their ideology, discourses, and strategies? What would be the extent, level, and cost of that change? When he published his article on post-Islamism in 1996, Asef Bayat posed an insightful and provocative argument about alterations to the Islamist project. He accentuated ongoing changes within and among Islamists to illustrate how they tended to adapt to new and complex environments, both domestically and globally. Despite its novelty and lucidity, however, the notion of post-Islamism stimulated debate and disagreements within the academic milieu. While some scholars received Bayat’s argument with skepticism and criticism, others critically engaged with it in a more analytical and productive manner.

In his new volume Post-Islamism: The Changing Faces of Political Islam, Bayat revisits and refines his thoughts on post-Islamism. He engages those who disagree with his argument or who have reservations and critiques. Apparently, some scholars have misinterpreted post-Islamism as a reference to the “end” of Islamism as an alternative political discourse. In fact, it is quite the opposite. Bayat stresses that post-Islamism neither represents a “particular” era nor the “end of a historical phase.” Rather it is an ongoing process of change, adaptation, and manifestation – “a condition and a project.” In this way, post-Islamism underscores not only the changing character of Islamist political actors but also their tendency to present a conscious and deliberate break with their late twentieth century political projects. As Bayat points out, post-Islamism “should be seen as the birth, out of a critical departure from Islamist experience, of a qualitatively different discourse and politics” (29). Indeed, the theory of post-Islamism does not suggest that new modalities, attitudes, discourses,
and strategies would surpass old ones because both Islamism and post-Islamism exist simultaneously. Rather, post-Islamism reveals the propensity and willingness of Islamists to alter their worldviews, discourses, and tactics in order to generate broader support among new audiences.

The volume’s contributors offer fresh and lucid criticisms of post-Islamism from different scholars representing a wide array of scholarship and interests. Some of them explain post-Islamism from a structural point of view, while others focus on ideational and ideological perspectives. Cihan Tuğal (chapter four) explains the transformation of Turkish Islamists over the past four decades as a product of socio-economic changes that overshadowed Turkish society and politics. For Tuğal, the Turkish Justice and Development Party (AKP) does not represent a post-Islamist shift but rather a revival and incarnation of Turkish conservatism. This conservatism, according to Tuğal, is a reaction to western and secular alienation on the one hand, and an illustration of success on the part of Turkish religious communities among lower and lower middle classes, on the other. Ihsan Daği (chapter three), however, argues that the AKP embodies the foreground model for post-Islamism, which for him means a “new thinking” based on pluralism, inclusiveness, and freedom. While Daği concurs with Tuğal on the influence of the socio-economic changes in 1980s and 1990s that underpin the transformation of Turkey’s Islamists, they diverge on the outcome. Tuğal believes Turkish conservative communities with nationalist sentiment in a post-Sufi order have emerged as a reaction to Turkey’s old Islamists, whereas Daği views post-Islamism as a reaction to aggressive secularism as applied by the state and the military.

Later sections of Bayat’s book present scholars who still struggle to capture the essence of “post-Islamism.” They tend to twist it in order to explain their individual cases. For instance, Sami Zemni (chapter five) provides a fuzzy picture for post-Islamism in Morocco. It is unclear whether the Party of Justice and Development (PJD) is the incarnation of post-Islamism or a classical Islamist party operating in the twenty-first century. Zemni’s attempt to explain post-Islamism juxtaposes the Al-Adl wa al-Ihsan movement with the PJD in a simplistic manner in order to prove the latter’s post-Islamism. Despite the significant differences between both groups, however, his analysis oversimplifies much to claim that the PJD’s has made a post-Islamist turn. True, the commitment and submission of PJD to the democratic game is evident. This, however, is not enough to judge its post-Islamism. Similarly, Noorhaidi Hasan (chapter six) tends to reduce post-Islamism to Islamists’ position in regard to the implementation of Shari’a. In so doing, Hasan oversimplifies post-Islamism as a shift from militant Islamism to peaceful Islamism. Despite the changes and transformations of Indonesian Justice Party (PK), which changed its name later to