

Islamist Participation in Arab Politics The Case of the Yemeni Congregation for Reform

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Abstract

In recent years, a number of Islamist movements from across the Arab world have decided to participate in their countries' parliamentary politics. These developments have raised a number of questions and concerns about the nature of this participation and whether Islamist groups can be trusted to rule responsibly should they come to power by democratic means. As scholars attempt to analyze Islamist participation in Arab parliamentary politics, it is important to stay away from generalizations about the nature and experiences of different parties, for such generalizations tend to mislead and are always insufficient for grasping the complexities of Islamist political participation. A close examination reveals three main types of Islamist political movements: groups that have both political parties and militant wings, groups that have renounced violence and focused solely on political activities within the existing political system, and groups that have entered parliamentary politics somewhat half-heartedly and in the context of tense relations with the ruling regime. The Yemeni Congregation for Reform (Islah) presents an interesting example of this final type, and its experiences help to illustrate trends in the larger Islamist political experience.

Key words: Political Islam, Islamism, Yemeni politics, Arab democracy, Arab opposition movements, religion and politics.

Modes of Islamist Participation in Arab Politics

At a time when Islamist movements across the Arab world have chosen to participate in official political processes, grave concerns have arisen over the nature and repercussions of this participation and over whether the Islamists are equipped to rule should they rise to power through democratic means.

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Because of the diversity of Islamists' awareness of, and approach to, such issues, any analysis of these questions must steer clear of generalities (and the reproduction of generalities) stemming from ideological prejudices or founded upon selective citations of past experiences which, by definition, are insufficient to grasp the complexities and unfolding developments of the present. Similarly, the reductionist view of Islamist movements as groups of ideological zealots whose rhetoric, alone, is a sufficient guide to the logic of their actions is overly simplistic. Nor is it particularly productive to dismiss the criteria used to assess previous movements in the Arab world, such as the liberal, socialist, and pan-Arabist trends on the grounds that Islamist participation in the political process is too recent and infrequent to be subjected to existing paradigms in a convincing manner. The latter argument is a particular favorite among some Islamists, who maintain that it is premature or unrealistic to question their ability to manage public affairs or participate effectively in government, especially when taking the current power balances between the ruling elites and Islamists into account.¹ These apologists are asking the electorate to invest its vote in a movement whose ways of handling the challenges ahead remain obscure, beyond currently available tools for analysis. It is a dangerous form of procrastination.

It is already possible to identify three major modes of Islamist participation in public life. The first comprises the Iraqi, Lebanese, and Palestinian cases. While the Islamist parties and movements in these instances operate with relative organizational freedom in the context of political party plurality, these experiences also take place in a climate of relative chaos, whether because foreign occupation has wrought the collapse of the institutions of government and public security, or because an ongoing intractable crisis of internal discord so hampers the efficacy of government as to constantly threaten the stability of the political system and encourage the prevalence of monopolistic/exclusivist tendencies which conflict with the spirit and substance of peaceful participation. Shi'a-Sunni and pro- and anti-resistance dichotomies aside, the Islamist movements in Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine are characterized by regimented internal structures, possession of the means to exercise violence, and a tendency to resort to, or to threaten to resort to, violence to resolve their political conflicts. Moreover, while acknowledging the differences in motives and the disparities in local contexts, the political ramifications of the Shi'a militias' penetration of the government and security agencies in Iraq are identical with Hizbullah's utilization of its military engagement with Israel in the summer of 2006 to generate sufficient political capital to overturn the

¹ "hiwar ma'a al-ustadh 'abd al-ilah bin kiran 'adu al-barlaman al-maghribi" [A conversation with Mr. 'Abd al-Ilah bin Kiran, member of the Moroccan parliament], *Ikhwan Online*, September 11, 2003, <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.asp?ArtID=2030&SecID=0> (accessed April 21, 2010).

domestic balance of power in Lebanon, and with Hamas's recourse to its paramilitary machine to resolve its conflict with Fatah in Gaza.

We are thus presented with a fundamental question. Will the assimilation of such Islamist movements into plural politics, at a time when they have yet to develop a full commitment to peaceful participation and when such participation is perhaps only a tactic within the framework of a greater strategy, reduce or even eliminate the chances of propelling political plurality forward through a process of democratization? Or, will assimilation gradually inspire the Islamists of collapsed and failed states to demilitarize their movements and revise their means and methods in a manner that prioritizes peaceful participation? Unfortunately, on the evidence of Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine, the latter prospect looks unlikely even if there exists a margin of possibility that the movements change from within (through, perhaps, power struggles between hardliners and moderates), or that their respective societies eventually force them out by gradually turning away from the Islamists' current sources of mass appeal: a populist ideological rhetoric, religious affiliation, and the claim that they are the torchbearers of resistance against an occupying power or common enemy. Theoretically, at least, the only way out of this predicament resides in the coalescing of a collective will to revive the state as a thoroughly civil polity, to reinvigorate its neutrality toward the diverse components of society, and to introduce structures and mechanisms to impede religious or nonreligious exclusivist forces from monopolizing public affairs.²

In sharp contrast to these instances, the second mode of Islamist engagement in public life adopts peaceful participation as its one and only strategic option. Here, there is no alternative to the preservation of the available spheres and mechanisms of political plurality and to gradually solidifying and expanding the pluralistic system through the formulation of a consensus with ruling elites and liberal and leftist opposition groups over the future of the democratization process. The campaign motto, "Participation not Domination," typifies the attitude of these Islamists who are prominent in Morocco, Algeria, Kuwait, and Bahrain, and who have reconstituted themselves in political party structures (such as the Moroccan Party for Justice and Development and the Algerian Society for Peace Movement) or in quasi-political party structures (such as the Islamic Constitutional Movement in Kuwait and the Islamic Concord Society, a Shi'a party in Bahrain) of a clearly nonmilitaristic stamp. Whereas the Society for Peace Movement and the Islamic Constitutional Movement form small parts of the governments of Algeria and Kuwait, the Party for Justice and Development and the Concord Society form part of the loyal opposition in

² For a longer discussion of this model of Islamist participation, see Amr Hamzawy and Nathan J. Brown, "Islamist Parties: A Boon or a Bane for Democracy?" *Journal of Democracy* 19, no. 3 (July 2008): 49-54, and Amr Hamzawy and Marina Ottaway, "When Islamists Go into Politics," *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 33, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 37-46.

Morocco and Bahrain. More significantly, some of these movements—notably the Party for Justice and Development and the Constitutional Movement—have succeeded in formulating a functional separation between Islamist proselytizing activities and politics, thereby transforming themselves into political organizations guided by an Islamist code but run by professional politicians and whose activities steer clear of the rhetoric and pursuits of a proselytizing movement. This cannot be said of the Bahraini Concord Society, in which the blend of proselytizing and politics is perhaps a natural consequence of the overlap between the party’s leadership and the Shi’a hierarchy in Bahrain.

In spite of qualitative differences among these movements, the “participation-comes-first” Islamists share several fundamental characteristics. Above all, they honor the legitimacy of the nation-state to which they belong, and they respect that state’s governing institutions, the principle of equality among all citizens, and the pluralistic, competitive nature of political life. This attitude, which they have generally adopted as much in spirit as in form, has led to the decline in exclusionary rhetoric, whether directed toward the ruling elite or toward the liberal and leftist opposition. It also has led to a gradual shift away from ideological diatribes and categorical judgments, and toward the formulation of practical political platforms and constructive attempts to influence public policy, whether as minor partners in government or as members of the opposition.

The Islamists’ experience in Morocco, Algeria, Kuwait, and Bahrain testifies to the existence of a direct relationship between the stability of the sector of society that is available for political participation as a result of the decline in the government’s exclusion or repression of its members on the pretext of security, and a relatively rapid rise in the sector’s resolve to respect and play by the rules of the game and to reach consensual agreements over the conduct of public affairs in a nonconfrontational manner. Nevertheless, these Islamists still face a number of tests of their intent. On the one hand, they have yet to demonstrate their unconditional commitment to the mechanisms of a pluralistic form of government, even if those mechanisms produce policies that do not conform to their religious beliefs. On the other hand, they must continue to convince their constituencies of the efficacy of peaceful participation, at a time when exclusivist religious forces are positioning themselves for the failure of the peaceful option so as to push their own alternatives, and when authoritarian ruling elites have not yet shed their suspicions of the Islamists nor accustomed themselves to the consensual approach.³

³ For an example of this type of Islamist participation, see Amr Hamzawy, “Party for Justice and Development in Morocco: Participation and Its Discontents,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Carnegie Paper No. 93, July 2008, http://www.carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=20314&lang=en&zoom_highlight=party+for+justice+and+development+in+morocco (accessed April 21, 2010).

The third mode is epitomized by the cases of Egypt, Sudan, Jordan, and Yemen. In spite of the considerable differences among them, Islamist movements in these countries have persisted in the face of a volatile political space and the fragility of their relationship with the ruling elites. If, in Egypt and Jordan, the Muslim Brothers have been given some room to participate in pluralistic mechanisms, in legislative elections, in professional syndicates, and in other areas of civil society, the sword of the security forces is constantly hanging over their heads. On the other hand, the experience of the Islamist movement in Sudan and the Yemeni Congregation for Reform demonstrates the danger of nondemocratic accommodations that Islamists have struck with ruling elites and the impact of such paramilitary-technocratic alliances on political life and on the internal dynamics of the Islamists themselves.

Perhaps we might call such participants Islamists who take part until they notify us otherwise. They may have adopted a strategy of peaceful participation, but it is no more than a strategy. In view of the perpetual fluctuation of their role in the political life of Egypt and Jordan or the swings in their positions from partners in authoritarian governments to antagonists, in the case of Yemen and to a certain extent Sudan, their leaders and followers continue to hover in the abstract heights of ideology, social narratives, and meta-policy (the role of religion, Islamic Law, the individual, the group, and the Muslim nation), while ignoring the need to develop a culture that values consensus making and constructive mechanisms for influencing public policy. Perhaps the only way to inspire these half-hearted participants in the political process to commit themselves fully is to gradually open the way for them to make a stable contribution to public life.

Within this spectrum of Islamist parties and movements in the Arab world that participate in legal politics, the Yemeni Congregation for Reform (Islah) represents a unique case. First, unlike most Islamist parties and movements, Islah did not enter the political scene as part of the opposition. Rather, it began its participation in 1990 as an ally of the ruling General People's Congress (GPC), before turning against it and becoming the leading opposition party by the end of the decade. Second, compared to other Islamist parties and movements operating in the Arab world, Islah lacks a clear ideological and programmatic narrative as well as an ideologically motivated membership. Much of Islah is composed of traditional and tribal groups that share a loose commitment to the objectives of Islamizing the state and society in Yemen.⁴

This essay examines the role of Islah in Yemeni politics and the

⁴ For a longer discussion of this type of Islamist participation, see Amr Hamzawy and Nathan J. Brown, "The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood: Islamist Participation in a Closing Political Environment," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Carnegie Paper No. 19, March 2010, http://www.carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=40318&lang=en&zoom_highlight=egyptian+muslim+brotherhood (accessed April 21, 2010).

characteristics of its parliamentary participation. It seeks to address four questions: (1) Under what conditions did Islah decide to participate in politics and did its participation change the nature of the Yemeni political game? (2) Why did Islah switch sides from the ruling coalition to join the opposition? (3) What are Islah's parliamentary priorities and has its legislative platform changed since the 1990s? (4) Have Islah's internal structures, decision-making processes, and its rhetoric on key policy issues changed over time as a result of its participation in Yemeni politics?

The Case of the Yemeni Congregation for Reform

Islah's Entry into Yemeni Politics: Post-Unification Developments

An analysis of the Yemeni Congregation for Reform requires an understanding of the tribal character of Yemeni society and the tension this creates within the party between its rather weak ideological orientation and its engagement in tribal politics.

Yemen's tribalism has its roots deep in history and continues to permeate and inform the political, social, and economic life of the country today. Indeed, pervasive tribalism accounts for the dynamics of Yemeni politics and needs to be taken into account in analyzing them. Contrary to the institutions of the modern state that are organized around the two principles of universal citizenship and equality of all before the law, tribalism sustains different rules for state and society. In today's Yemen, the tribe is the main point of reference for its members and collectively represents their interests. The state and its resources are often used to achieve the parochial goals of the tribe. By the same token, due to the strength of particular tribes, political actors—primarily the ruling establishment and opposition parties—lobby tribes for support and loyalty. The pervasive tribalism also means that political life revolves to a significant extent around tribal personalities, usually leaders, rather than being shaped by ideologies and programs. In these circumstances, patronage is an influential political tool.

The strength of tribalism in Yemen and the weakness of modern state institutions and of a common identity among its citizens have affected Islah and its place in Yemeni politics. They influence the party's political behavior and determine its internal dynamics, making them obscure and hard to define. Moreover, Islah has had no long experience with the dynamics of semipluralist politics, which has shaped Islamist parties and movements elsewhere in the Arab world. Islah developed its political culture while an ally of the ruling GPC. As a result, Islamists in Yemen have been imbued with a concept of politics expressed in terms of loyalty, patronage, and connections. This has further diminished the party's ability to engage in internal debates leading to a cohesive ideological narrative about the Yemeni state and society, to a clear programmatic concept of what positions can be justified in Islamic terms, or

to a common stance on key policy issues. Indeed, a striking feature of Islah is that leading party members have repeatedly made contradictory statements on issues. These include Islah's relations with the ruling GPC, the party's commitment to the opposition role Islah has been fulfilling since it joined the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), and the party's position with regard to the ongoing tensions in the North and South of Yemen.

Islah is one of the numerous political parties that were formed shortly after the unification of North and South Yemen in 1990. No fewer than fifty parties formed and contested the parliamentary elections of April 1993, the first after unification. Islah was one of these parties. It was formed by members of the GPC, the party that had ruled North Yemen before unification, and members of the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood. After its formation, Islah remained an ally of the GPC and cooperated with its effort to marginalize the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP), the former ruling party of South Yemen. The late Shaykh 'Abdullah al-Ahmar, the former head of the Hashid Tribal Confederation and a man who enjoyed good relations with the GPC and President 'Ali 'Abdullah Salih (president of North Yemen from 1978 to 1990, and of Unified Yemen since 1990), played a leading role in establishing Islah in 1990. Al-Ahmar remained the president of Islah's Supreme Board—the party's powerful executive body—from 1990 until his death in 2007. He convinced the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood, other Islamist elements, and a number of influential tribal personalities to join together to establish Islah. Thus, Islah as a party emerged as an alliance of three distinct groups: the tribal forces headed by al-Ahmar; the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood, which has provided the party's organizational and political backbone; and a number of conservative businessmen, represented initially by Muhammad 'Abd al-Wahab Jabari, who became a member of Islah's Supreme Board.⁵

The Muslim Brotherhood came from the Sunni community, which represents slightly more than 60 percent of the Yemeni population (the next largest is the Zaydi Shi'i community, which is estimated to represent 30 to 35 percent of the population) and emerged in North Yemen in the early 1960s. Like other Islamist parties and movements in the Arab world, it was influenced by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. The founders of the movement, such as the prominent Shaykh 'Abd al-Majid al-Zindani, were students at Egyptian universities in the early 1960s. Initially, the Muslim Brotherhood—primarily influential in urban centers such as San'a', Ta'iz, and Ibb—markedly shaped the party ideology and platform of Islah. The first article of Islah's basic law defines it as a “popular political organization that seeks reform of all aspects

⁵ Muhammad Muhsin al-Zahiri, “al-mujtama' wal-dawla fil-yaman: dirasa li-'alaqat al-qabila bil-ta'addudiyya al-siyasiyya wal-hizbiyya” [Society and state in Yemen: A study of the relation between the tribe and political and party pluralism] (Cairo: Madbuli, 2004).

of life on the basis of Islamic principles and teachings.” Shaykh al-Zindani became the president of the Islah Central Shura Council—the party’s national legislative body—in 1995, and stayed in office until 2007.

Given Islah’s origin as an alliance of a rather motley array of groups, it is not surprising that the party’s ideology has remained vague and its platform ambiguous. Throughout the 1990s, Islah could be best described as a conservative party that promoted tribal and religious values. It believed in Islamic *shari‘a* as the sole source of legislation and the foundation of a comprehensive vision to reform the Yemeni state and society. Over time, especially after Islah moved away from its alliance with the GPC, the party opened to democratic ideas. Today, Islah accepts democracy as compatible with the Islamic concept of *shura* (consultation) and rejects all forms of dictatorship. It recognizes the right of secular parties and movements, such as the YSP, to participate in Yemeni political life. Islah bases its own participation on respect for the constitution and the pluralist rules of the political game it enshrines.⁶

While Islah’s ideology and platform have been weak from the outset, the tribal character of the party has gradually grown more influential. The post-unification era in Yemen marks the emergence of tribes as powerful stakeholders in political life, especially in parliamentary and local council elections. The tribal character of Yemen had been reinforced during the civil war in the North between 1962 and 1967. Some tribes fought with the republican forces, which were backed by the Nasir regime in Egypt, while others defended the traditionalist Imamate rule. Ultimately, however, all tribes were motivated by the desire to acquire weapons and financial assets. In addition, possession of weapons and growing financial assets reaffirmed the role of tribes and tribal leaders as protectors of their members. Tribes became more effective in providing security and social services in their areas, increasing their ability to negotiate with the state and undermining the central authorities.

As a result, the legitimacy of the state diminished in tribal areas. Governments in North Yemen *de facto* recognized the influence of the tribes and were forced to delegate the task of maintaining order to tribes that took their side. The Hashid Confederation, long headed by Islah founder Shaykh al-Ahmar and considered one of the most influential tribes in North Yemen, has maintained its strength since unification. Inevitably, the role of the Hashid Confederation has strengthened the tribal faction in Islah over other elements.

Tribal constituencies of Islah are concentrated in rural areas, above all in the northern Hashid territory in the governorates of San‘a’ and ‘Amran. The growing role of tribal leaders in Islah has added to the ambiguities and

⁶ Sarah Phillips, “Evaluating Political Reform in Yemen,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Carnegie Paper No. 80, February 2007, http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/cp_80_phillips_yemen_final.pdf (accessed April 21, 2010).

confusions inside the party. Tribal leaders are known for shifting their stands and loyalty across the political spectrum to secure tribal interests. Moreover, some leaders of the same tribe or clan are found in the GPC, while others belong to Islah, a conscious effort to adapt to changing political circumstances and to lessen the impact of either of the two parties on the tribes. The divided loyalty and shifting stands of tribal leaders have helped undermine Islah's ability to develop a clear ideological and programmatic vision.

Islah's Islamists, popular in urban centers, have never acquired the muscle of the tribal constituencies, but have always played a major role within the party. This is particularly true of the Muslim Brotherhood component of Islah, which is the largest in terms of members and, above all, the most efficient in organizational and political capabilities. Like other Islamist parties and movements in the Arab world, the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood is predominantly urban-based and has its strongholds in universities and professional associations. Within Islah, the Muslim Brotherhood has developed an elaborate and clear approach to political participation on the basis of its endorsement of democratic procedures, which it claims do not contradict Islamic values and teachings.

For the movement, political participation complements religious and social activism, since Islam presents a holistic approach to various aspects of life, including politics. Thus, political activism is understood and framed as part of *da'wa*, the preaching of Islam. In the 1990s, the movement came to accept pluralism, acknowledging the right of other parties to propagate nonreligious ideologies and platforms.⁷ The Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood has evolved from a religious movement to a political party under the banner of Islah. It rejects the idea of establishing an Islamic state, considering the concept of a theocratic state problematic. It separates religion from the state, but combines religion and politics in its activism.⁸

There are other Islamist elements within Islah in addition to the Muslim Brotherhood. Some party figures are close to Salafi groups. Salafism, which was introduced to Yemen over the last three decades and is influenced by Saudi Wahhabism, has a different concept of politics than the Muslim Brotherhood. Salafis are skeptical of political participation and denounce democratic procedures as non-Islamic. Yet, parliamentary and local elections in Yemen have demonstrated that some Salafis and their followers still vote for Islah candidates as the best available option.

⁷ Live dialogue with Zayid 'Ali al-Shami, "al-islamiyun wal-siyasa...tajribat hizb al-islah al-yamani" [Islamists and politics.... The experience of the Yemeni Islah Party], *Islam Online*, July 6, 2000, <http://www.islamonline.net/livedialogue/arabic/Browse.asp?hGuestID=Td3r93> (accessed April 21, 2010).

⁸ 'Adil al-Shajrabi, "al-tajammu' al-yamani lil-islah: bayn al-barnamaj al-siyasi wa shi'ar al-islam huwa al-hal" [The Yemeni Congregation for Reform: Between the political platform and the slogan Islam is the solution], (San'a': Yemeni Observatory for Human Rights, 2008).

Since its inception, Islah has undergone several changes, yet it is still far from being a unified party with a clear ideology and program. This lack of unity has weakened the party's role and activism in Yemeni politics. Between 1990 and 1997, Islah was an ally of the ruling GPC and participated in the coalition government from 1994 to 1997. However, in 1997, Islah switched sides and joined the Yemeni Socialist Party and other parties in opposing the GPC. Islah leaders justified this step on the grounds of the GPC's and President Salih's unwillingness to introduce significant democratic reforms. Since 1997, Islah has gradually become the leading opposition party in Yemen, especially since joining the JMP.

However, Islah's new political role as an opposition party has remained contested internally. While alive, Shaykh al-Ahmar never withdrew his support for President Salih. Salafi leaders in Islah have been particularly critical of the alliance with secular parties, mainly the socialists and the Nasirites in the JMP. Some of them have also denounced Islah's move to the opposition as violating Islamic prescriptions about the relationship between the ruled and their rulers, which, they maintain, necessitate obedience to the ruler.⁹

Islah's break with the GPC led to an opening of the party toward the South. In the parliamentary elections of 1993, Islah had won all its sixty-three parliamentary seats in North Yemen. In the elections of 1997, it won some seats in the South. Although the party has remained predominantly a northern party, Islah's opening toward the South and its later alliance with the Yemeni Socialist Party has led to a second set of significant changes in the party, mainly related to the reduction of the influence previously enjoyed by tribal leaders. A clear indicator is the changing composition of Islah's parliamentary bloc since 1993. Whereas sixty of Islah's sixty-three MPs elected in 1993 had tribal affiliations, their number decreased in the parliament of 1997 to twenty-four of fifty-three MPs, and later to eleven of forty-five in the parliament of 2003. Clearly, tribal dominance within Islah has decreased since its break with the GPC. This has lessened the party's dependence on tribal leaders and created a more receptive internal environment for the party's activism. Tribal leaders, as noted, are highly volatile politically, tending to put the personal and business interests of their tribal constituencies over political stances and policy platforms.

Another aspect of change in Islah is that it has created charitable, religious, and educational institutions to enlarge its power base through the delivery of social services, following a pattern common among Islamist parties and movements in the Arab world. For example, the Islah Social Welfare Society (ISWS) engages in health awareness campaigns, religious education, illiteracy

⁹ Ahmad Muhammad al-Daghashi, "al-salafiyun wal-'amal al-siyasi: jadaliyat al-'alaqa bayn al-markaz wal-atraf wa surat al-mustaqbal" [Salafis and political activism: The center-periphery dialectics and the picture of the future] (San'a': Ma'rib Press, 2009).

eradication, and relief donations, mostly directed to the urban poor during the holy month of Ramadan. ISWS coordinates its activities with the Muslim Brotherhood and explicitly displays its adherence to the movement's ideology. Businessmen and tribal leaders affiliated with Islah also provide charity and welfare services in their areas. Religious leaders within Islah concentrate on mosque preaching, Islamic schooling, and university education to maintain their constituencies. A pivotal role in this regard has been played by Shaykh al-Zindani, who founded a well-known religious university—al-Iman University—and inspired the creation of the so-called Virtue Councils in early 2009, whose mandate is to safeguard religious morality in Yemeni society.

Switching Sides—Islah's Participation in Yemeni Politics

Most Islamist parties and movements that participate in party politics in the Arab world do so from the opposition benches. In a few cases, as in the cases of the Islamic Constitutional Movement in Kuwait and the Algerian Society for Peace, Islamists have joined coalition governments either for short periods of time (Kuwait) or as junior parties with limited access to real power (Algeria). The Yemeni Congregation for Reform represents a different experience altogether. Islah switched sides, moving from an ally of the ruling GPC to an opposition party. However, this move has been far from complete because of Islah's unwillingness to break with the GPC at all levels and because influential leaders within Islah have remained critical of its alliance with the opposition. The result is a party that regularly goes back and forth between the government and the opposition on key political issues and whose policy platform lacks clarity and vision.

At the beginning, the Islamist platform of Islah did not push it away from the alliance with the ruling GPC. Throughout most of the 1990s, Islah remained a close ally of President Salih, motivated by several factors. First, many of those who joined Islah originally belonged to the GPC or were supporters of the northern regime it represented. Second, leading members of the two parties belonged to the same well-established tribal, business, and personal networks that form the Yemeni elite. Third, both the GPC and Islah shared a history of rivalry with the Yemeni Socialist Party and the secular ideology that it propagated.

In 1990, after the unification of North and South Yemen, Islah entered the political fray in Yemen to support the leadership of the former northern regime against the southern Yemeni Socialist Party. The GPC-Islah alliance developed into an electoral and parliamentary coalition in 1993. Ranking second in the 1993 parliamentary elections after the leading GPC, Islah joined the coalition government of the GPC and YSP, which, however, lasted for only one year due to ongoing tensions between the northern and southern leaderships. In 1994, Islah joined the GPC's war against the Yemeni Socialist Party, which

ended with the latter defeated and its leaders exiled.¹⁰ In the aftermath of the civil war, the GPC and Islah formed a coalition government (1994-1997), in which Islah was originally given the position of deputy prime minister and five portfolios: justice, electricity, local administration, health, and fisheries. Later, in 1995, Islah secured an additional ministerial portfolio.¹¹

However, the defeat of the YSP in the civil war created a new dynamic in Yemeni politics, because the strengthened GPC could dispense with its alliance with Islah. In the lead-up to the 1997 parliamentary elections, there were incipient signs of disagreements between the GPC and Islah on their electoral platform as well as on candidates. Although opposition parties started pointing to those disagreements, the GPC and Islah continued to assert their strategic alliance. Nevertheless, disputes between the two parties revolved around several key issues.

There were differences as to the mechanism through which power would be divided in the South where the YSP's defeat had left a power vacuum. The GPC was also worried about the possibility that Islah would seek to expand its influence beyond the political space that the regime was willing to grant to it as a junior partner in the ruling coalition, and pose a challenge to GPC domination. Like the experience with Islamists of other ruling parties in the Arab world, the GPC was fearful of the well-organized and popular Muslim Brotherhood component inside Islah, anticipating it would reach out to constituencies in the South and coordinate them. Finally, the GPC was consumed with its effort to strengthen its own power base and control over the Yemeni state and society. For example, the GPC had adopted a policy of modernizing the educational system to contain the influence of the Muslim Brothers and other Islamist elements affiliated with Islah in schools and universities. In the second half of the 1990s, this policy led to the closing of some religious educational institutions controlled by Islah, deepening its disagreements with the GPC.¹²

In light of such measures, Islah's leadership chose to exert pressure on its ally by initiating a campaign questioning the integrity of the parliamentary elections of 1997; it called the voter registries flawed and alleged that the GPC had misused state resources in the lead-up to the elections. However, it remained unclear whether the intention of Islah's leaders was to pressure the GPC to broker a new electoral deal with it or to break away from the alliance.

¹⁰ Jillian Schwedler, *Faith in Moderation: Islamist Parties in Jordan and Yemen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 103.

¹¹ As an additional ministerial portfolio, Islah got first the Ministry for Food Security and later the Ministry for Education. See 'Abdullah al-Faqih, "al-tatawur al-siyasi fil-jumhuriya al-yamaniyya 1990-2009" [Political evolution in the Yemeni Republic: 1990-2009], March 25, 2009, <http://dralfaqih.blogspot.com/2009/03/1990-2009.html> (accessed April 21, 2010).

¹² Schwedler, *Faith in Moderation: Islamist Parties in Jordan and Yemen*, 65.

The final move toward the break between the GPC and Islah was largely the result of the GPC's conviction that it could end the alliance with Islah without great electoral losses. In the lead-up to the parliamentary elections in 1997, the GPC secretary general announced that his party wanted to achieve a "comfortable majority." Convinced that the GPC was intent on securing this comfortable majority without its allies, Islah protested this policy, warning of a GPC conspiracy against democracy in Yemen and positioning itself close to opposition parties, such as the Yemeni Socialist Party and the Nasirites. The socialists and Nasirites were determined to boycott the elections, viewing them as having the sole objective of granting President Salih and the GPC false democratic legitimacy. Islah, however, was unwilling to go this far, and in the end, severed its cooperation with the opposition and took part in the elections.

Islah's secretary general at the time, Muhammad 'Abdullah al-Yadumi, claims that the GPC had threatened to declare a state of emergency and abort the democratic process if Islah boycotted the 1997 parliamentary elections. He says that Islah had considered joining the boycott of several opposition parties, but the threat of a government declaration of a state of emergency led it to conclude that participation in the elections was in the interest of the Yemeni people and democracy. In al-Yadumi's words, "participation in the elections was going to protect what there is of the democratic margin for participation, so we participated."¹³

In the 1997 election campaign, Islah coordinated with the opposition on some issues, such as petitioning for electoral safeguards and for a transparent update of the voter registries. However, having decided to participate in the elections, it turned against cooperation and dropped its demands for safeguards. Islah ended up participating as the GPC's chief competitor and won 53 of the 301 parliamentary seats, second to the GPC's 187. After the elections, Islah joined neither the GPC in a coalition government nor the opposition camp. It preferred to play the game of accommodating the regime rather than completely severing ties. Islah's leaders, especially Shaykh al-Ahmar, still viewed the GPC and President Salih as strategic allies.

The 1997 parliamentary elections thus unleashed a period of great ambiguity in the relations between Islah and both the ruling GPC and the opposition parties. In the presidential elections of 1999, Islah named President Salih as its candidate. Before the 2003 parliamentary elections, however, Islah joined the Opposition Supreme Coordination Council—which originally included the YSP and four smaller parties—to form a new opposition coalition, the

¹³ Muhammad 'Abd al-'Ati, "amin al-tajammu' al-yamani: nakhud al-intikhabat wa natahamal al-hajma" [The secretary of the Yemeni Congregation: We contest the elections and we endure the onslaught], interview with Muhammad 'Abdullah al-Yadumi, *al-Jazeera*, April 23, 2003, <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/archive/archive?ArchiveId=52251> (accessed April 21, 2010).

Joint Meeting Parties. JMP parties developed a collective electoral platform, making the GPC their common enemy and demanding the introduction of democratic safeguards and significant political reforms. They also coordinated on candidates. The results of the 2003 elections meant the return to parliament of the YSP, which won seven seats, and the Nasirites, which won three. Islah saw its pool of seats decline from fifty-three to forty-five.

Yet, even joining the JMP did not stop Islah's leaders, especially Shaykh al-Ahmar, from supporting President Salih and making several political deals with him and the GPC. In the 2006 presidential elections, al-Ahmar endorsed Salih for the presidency against the JMP's candidate, Faysal bin Shamlan, who was supported by Islah as a party. Al-Ahmar's support for the president and the continued coordination between the two men explain why the GPC parliamentary bloc elected al-Ahmar speaker of parliament repeatedly from 1993 until his death in 2007.

Since 2003, Islah's practice of switching sides between the GPC and the opposition has continued. In 2005, al-Ahmar called Salih incapable of reforming the government and declared that it had become impossible to reach electoral or political agreements with the GPC. In the lead-up to the 2006 local elections, which were held on the same day as the presidential elections (September 20, 2006), Islah's leadership announced its full support of the JMP. However, the GPC and Islah negotiated a political agreement on how to reform the government through introducing democratic and decentralization measures, and al-Ahmar supported Salih in the presidential elections.

Islah displayed the same ambivalence over the question of postponing the parliamentary elections scheduled for April 27, 2009, for two years. When the GPC declared that the security threats facing Yemen in the North and South made it necessary to delay the elections and requested parliament to do so, Islah's parliamentary bloc protested vehemently. Its MPs accused the GPC of conspiring against democracy and free and regular elections, called on President Salih to block any postponement, and threatened to boycott the political process. Yet, a few days before the election date of April 27, 2009, Islah joined the GPC and other parties represented in parliament in voting for postponement, but demanded immediate reform of the electoral system.¹⁴

Several factors explain why Islah has never opted to break completely with the GPC. First, Islah does not see itself as an alternative to the GPC. Its Islamist platform and its move toward the opposition over the last years have not led the party to reconsider the objective of reforming state and society in Yemen

¹⁴ See Supreme Council for Elections and Referenda, <http://www.scer.org.ye/arabic/indexa.htm> (accessed April 21, 2010).

¹⁵ Sarah Phillips, *Yemen's Democracy Experiment in Regional Perspective: Patronage and Pluralized Authoritarianism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 165.

through consultation and coordination with the ruling GPC.¹⁵ Second, channels of communication between the two parties have always remained open, even in the periods of heated electoral competition at the national and local levels. Third, key figures in Islah's leadership, such as Shaykh al-Ahmar and Shaykh al-Zindani, have maintained enduring relationships with President Salih and periodically have assured him that Islah neither aims to replace the GPC nor to challenge the power of the president.¹⁶ Indeed, the death of Shaykh al-Ahmar in 2007 has had a negative impact on relations between the two parties and is a key reason for Islah's growing opposition to the government.¹⁷

On the other hand, the very nature of the GPC and Islah as umbrella organizations for tribal, conservative, and religiously inspired groups has meant that they have been competing for the same constituencies, producing ongoing tensions between them. More votes for the GPC mean fewer for Islah in many cases, and vice versa. The GPC has viewed the growing electoral success of Islah in the South as a direct challenge. In the 1997 parliamentary elections, for example, the GPC sought to defeat Islah candidates in the governorates of Ibb and Ta'iz because Islah had scored significant electoral victories there in 1993.¹⁸

Attempts at regulating competition failed repeatedly. Both sides were unwilling to compromise. In the 1997 elections, the GPC and Islah agreed that the GPC would run uncontested in 100 of the 301 electoral districts and Islah in 50, while they would compete in the remaining 151 districts. In practice, however, both the GPC and Islah ran candidates as independents in the districts where they were not supposed to participate.¹⁹

The GPC has systematically resorted to additional means to defeat Islah at the polls. Since 1997, GPC candidates have capitalized on their party's access to the state's financial resources and media outlets to influence elections. The GPC has also used the armed and security forces to instigate clashes with opposition supporters. In the 2006 local elections, the GPC notched up its competition with Islah by trying grass-roots politics and providing social services in urban and rural areas for the first time. GPC candidates attempted to attract voters through field visits and the provision of services. Tribal leaders were specifically targeted to convince them to limit their contacts with Islah

¹⁶ Ahmed Abdelkareem Saif, "Strengthening Parliaments in Conflict/Post-Conflict Situations: Case Study on Yemen," United Nations Development Programme, 2005, <http://www.parlcrp.undp.org/pwdocs/Yemen.pdf> (accessed April 21, 2010).

¹⁷ Phone interview by author with Rajih Badi, editor-in-chief of Islah's newspaper, *al-Sahwa*, February 12, 2009.

¹⁸ Phillips, *Yemen's Democracy Experiment in Regional Perspective: Patronage and Pluralized Authoritarianism*, 147.

¹⁹ Jillian Schwedler, "The Islah Party in Yemen: Political Opportunities and Coalition Building in Transnational Polity," in *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Approach*, ed. Quintan Wiktorowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 221.

or to run for office with the backing of the GPC.²⁰ GPC maneuvering and patronage resulted in significant losses for Islah and the JMP parties. Islah's share in the local councils dropped from 23 percent of the seats after the 2001 elections to less than 10 percent. The YSP's share decreased from 4 to 3 percent.²¹

On another level, the GPC's leadership, specifically President Salih, has played in recent years on the contradictions within Islah between those groups in favor of the party's alliance with the JMP parties and those which are skeptical of it. In July 2009, Shaykh al-Zindani, who has frequently criticized Islah's alliance with the YSP, was rewarded by the president. Salih endorsed al-Zindani's efforts to form Virtue Councils.

The GPC has also used the differences between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafi components of Islah to create a state of instability inside the party. Salafis have been encouraged to move out of Islah and form new political parties. Salafi shaykhs and conservative preachers have been promoted by the government to replace preachers affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood in various mosques. The government's aim has been twofold: (1) to limit Islah's control over mosques, which has helped the party in constituency building and electoral mobilization; and (2) to deepen the rift within Islah between the Muslim Brothers and the Salafis. However, as noted, the actual participation of Salafis as a group in Yemeni politics has remained minimal due to their scattered location and traditional teachings that forbid participation in politics.

Although far from being complete and unquestioned among its rank and file, Islah's gradual shift toward the opposition has helped the party to mature as a political force. Islah has abandoned the more simplistic slogans and arguments of the 1990-1997 period, such as "Islam is the solution" and the denunciation of secularism. It has become more pragmatic and accommodating in its attitude toward nonreligious opposition parties, mainly the YSP. The security challenges facing the Yemeni state in the North (the Huthi rebellion in Sa'da) and in the South (the separatist movement and al-Qa'ida) have made Islah see its role in the tribal areas of the North and its alliance with

²⁰ Sheila Carapico, "How Yemen's Ruling Party Secured an Electoral Landslide," *Middle East Report Online*, May 2003, <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero051603.html> (accessed April 21, 2010), and April Longley, "The High Water of Islamist Politics—The Case of Yemen," *Middle East Journal* (Spring 2007): 240-261.

²¹ The percentages are based on the numbers and figures of the Supreme Commission of Elections and Referendum, <http://www.scer.org.ye> (accessed April 21, 2010). See also Muhammad al-Sayyid Ghanim, "al-tajarib al-intikhabiyya fil-yaman wa marahil al-tahawul al-dimuqrati" [Electoral experiences in Yemen and the stages of democratic transformation], *al-Jazeera*, October 3, 2004, <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/C836F037-306D-48EA-8124-F1EA5C23B730.htm> (accessed April 21, 2010), and National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI), "Report on the 2006 Presidential and Local Council Elections in the Republic of Yemen," http://www.ndi.org/files/2152_ye_report_elections_042407.pdf (accessed April 21, 2010).

the southern-based YSP as essential pillars in keeping Yemen together and preventing the collapse of the state. Islah's policy platform has also come to focus increasingly on pushing for political and socioeconomic reforms, fair representation of Yemeni parties in state institutions, and active participation of the opposition in decision making and in fighting corruption.

In addition, Islah's ideology and vision have evolved while participating as an opposition party. It has presented itself, like other Islamist parties and movements in the Arab world, as a party pressing for political change from within an authoritarian political system, using peaceful methods. Islah has underscored its commitment to democratic mechanisms by regular participation in national and local elections and acceptance of their results, despite regime manipulation. Like other Arab Islamists, this participatory vision has been religiously legitimated by equating democracy with the Islamic concept of shura.

Islah's positive evolution in the opposition, however, does not mean that the party's ambiguities or its constant switching between the government and the opposition sides will cease any time soon. Islah's accommodating attitude toward nonreligious parties and its acceptance of pluralism have not led the party to abandon the view of shari'a as the sole basis for organizing the state and society in Yemen. The dissatisfaction of several strong leaders in Islah with its current course and the ongoing communication between them and the GPC have prevented the party from adopting a clear opposition platform. The JMP parties, for their part, have never stopped questioning Islah's commitment to the alliance. Divisions between the Muslim Brothers and the Salafis within Islah have prevented the party from taking concrete stances on issues pertaining to the role of religion in politics, especially since shari'a provisions were enshrined in the constitution early in the 1990s. From the time al-Zindani began pressing for the formation of the Virtue Councils in July 2008 until their formation in early 2009, Islah leaders remained divided between support and skepticism, and the party could not reach a unified position.

Islah's ambiguities and internal divisions have harmed the party electorally and politically on various occasions. Most significantly, they have impeded the party's legislative role and its performance in successive Yemeni parliaments. In contrast to other Islamist parties and movements, such as the Moroccan Party for Justice and Development and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, which over time have developed well-organized parliamentary blocs with clear legislative priorities and active parliamentary participation, Islah has never reached a level close to that.

Islah in Parliament—Legislative Priorities and Performance

Islah's role in parliament has to be evaluated against the background of two realities of Yemeni political life since unification in 1990. First, since it started to contest parliamentary elections in 1993, Islah has been losing seats, while

the GPC has been increasing its representation. Second, in the last two decades, Islah has changed its position in Yemeni politics from a partner in the ruling coalition with the GPC (until 1997) to alliance with opposition parties grouped in the JMP.

Since entering Yemeni politics, Islah's representation in parliament has fallen gradually from 62 seats of 301 in 1993 to 53 in 1997, and then to its current tally of 45 after the 2003 elections. The other major opposition party in Yemen, the YSP, which boycotted the 1997 parliamentary elections and participated only in the elections of 1993 and 2003, has fallen precipitously from 56 seats in 1993 to 7 in the current parliament. Meanwhile, the GPC increased the number of seats it won from 123 in 1993, to 187 in 1997, to 229 in 2003. This partly reflects the growing institutional and political dominance of the GPC, which emerged at the end of the 1990s as the country's uncontested ruling party. Islah has become the major opposition party facing the GPC. However, its ability to compete with the GPC has been diminishing, and it leads an opposition that suffered substantial parliamentary and political losses between 1993 and 2003.

In the parliamentary elections of 1993, Islah ran based on an electoral platform that spelled out the party's coalition with the GPC and its commitment to religion ("Islam is the solution"), and exposed its uncertainty with regard to democratic mechanisms. It finished second after the GPC, besting the YSP.

The 1997 elections reflected the outcome and effects of the 1994 civil war between the North and the South. The war ended with the defeat of the South and enactment of a new electoral law in 1996 (law 27/1996) that banned former southern leaders from participation in political life, dealing a blow to the YSP, which boycotted the elections. The GPC won a clear parliamentary majority of 62.1 percent—187 seats, compared to 40.5 percent in 1993. Islah's approximate share of the popular vote fell to 17.6 percent from 20.9 percent in 1993, resulting in 53 seats. In 1997, Islah's candidates ran on a quasi-opposition platform, criticizing the GPC's dominance over Yemeni politics and the lack of democratic safeguards in the electoral process.

In the 2003 elections, Islah's losses continued. Only 45 of its parliamentary candidates were elected and the party's share of the vote fell to 14.9 percent. Despite the parliamentary representation of the YSP and other opposition parties, the GPC's dominance reached unprecedented heights. President Salih's party secured 76 percent of parliamentary seats, or 229.

Islah more skillfully presented its opposition platform in the lead-up to the 2003 elections. In line with other opposition Islamist parties and movements in the Arab world, Islah's platform called for gradual, peaceful democratic reforms and for a fair distribution of political power between the GPC and other parties. The fact that shari'a provisions had been enshrined in the constitution in 1994 prevented Islah, unlike other opposition Islamists, from putting forward the application of shari'a as the keystone of its opposition platform. Shari'a was replaced by calls for democratic reform, political change, better governance,

and measures against corruption.

The growing dominance of the GPC over Yemeni politics and the shrinking role of Islah also have been demonstrated at the local level. After the local elections in 2001, the GPC's representation in local councils was 61 percent against Islah's 23 percent. The YSP controlled 4 percent of the seats in local councils—mainly in the southern governorates—and independents 12 percent. Like the parliamentary elections in 2003, the local elections in 2006 enhanced the majority status of the GPC. The ruling party ended up securing over 80 percent of the seats on local councils. Islah's share of the popular vote declined to less than 10 percent, the YSP's to 3 percent, and that of independents to approximately 5 percent.

As a party with a declining presence in a parliament dominated by the president's party, Islah, especially after its move toward the opposition since 1997, has behaved like a small party trying to have some impact on key legislation and policy issues. Unlike other opposition Islamists in the Arab world, Islah's positions and activities in parliament have not reflected a comprehensive platform. They have been characterized by ambiguity and switching sides between the GPC and opposition parties, the two characteristics that shape Islah's overall role in Yemeni political life.

From 1993 to 1997, Islah's parliamentary bloc assisted the GPC bloc. Until 1994, the parliamentary agenda was influenced by the post-unification struggles over the distribution of power between North and South Yemen. This resulted in a bitter conflict between the North-based GPC and Islah, on the one hand, and the South-based YSP, on the other. The Islamist platform of Islah was used effectively to discredit the socialist agenda of the YSP. Indeed, the ideological controversies between the YSP socialists and Islah's religious leaders, such as Shaykh al-Zindani, who systematically described the YSP as an atheist organization, added to the tensions between North and South.

After the YSP's defeat in the civil war in 1994, the GPC and Islah formed a government with Islah, the junior partner in the ruling coalition. Its parliamentary bloc focused in the post-civil war phase on ensuring the conformity of Yemeni legislation with shari'a provisions. President Salih had rewarded Islah for its support during the civil war by accepting its demand to enshrine shari'a in the constitution. In December 1994, the GPC and Islah parliamentary blocs amended article 3 of the constitution to make shari'a the source of all legislation. The amendment was the clearest sign of Islah's adherence to an Islamist platform between 1993 and 1997. However, the party failed to capitalize on it so that it could introduce additional legislative changes. Several religious leaders in Islah disapproved of the education law, which was passed by the GPC and the YSP before 1994, and obliged the government to close down some of the educational institutes that taught shari'a and *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence). Islah's parliamentary bloc failed to change the education law.

Since the elections of 1997, Islah's legislative priorities and performance

have been shaped by its changed position in Yemeni politics as a result of joining the opposition. Islah has used its participation in parliament to underscore its commitment to democratic mechanisms and its recognition of the legitimacy of the existing state's legal framework, but also it has called for the introduction of political and economic reforms. Contrary to its legislative initiatives before 1997, Islah's parliamentary bloc has devoted less attention to legislation related to religious and moral issues. Islah has acted only when the GPC has proposed laws that contradict some shari'a provisions, trying to block them.

Since the parliament of 1997-2003, Islah's legislative priorities have changed and it has come to seeking the following: constitutional amendments aimed at a fairer distribution of power between the government and the opposition, reforms in electoral laws and laws pertaining to political rights, improvement in parliament's oversight of the government's socioeconomic policies, and a reduction in corruption. To a lesser extent, it has also sought religious legislation. These priorities became clearer after Islah and the JMP parties agreed in January 2003 to a joint electoral platform for the 2003 elections and a joint parliamentary platform.

Concerning constitutional amendments, Islah's bloc voted in 2000 for two government-sponsored amendments that extended parliament's term from four to six years and the president's term from five to seven years. In endorsing the two amendments, Islah assumed that lengthening parliament's term would provide more stability in the legislative process and partially free the parties from the influence of powerful electoral constituencies, such as tribes. Islah expected the longer parliamentary term to make it easier to introduce political and economic reforms.

Rhetorically, Islah defended the amendment to the president's term as a way to make the country more stable. In fact, its support reflected the support of key Islah leaders, including al-Ahmar and al-Zindani, for President Salih. However, in 2007, when Salih proposed through the GPC additional constitutional amendments to shift Yemen from a presidential to a parliamentary system, reduce the presidential term to five years, and set an upper limit of two consecutive terms, Islah's bloc refused to fall in line. Islah parliamentarians criticized the president's initiative as undemocratic and designed to sustain his and the GPC's dominance of Yemeni politics. Throughout 2008 and most of 2009, the two parties along with smaller parties discussed these proposals.²²

As for electoral laws and laws pertaining to political rights, Islah MPs have systematically attempted to block the initiatives of their GPC colleagues which they find undemocratic in spirit. However, the GPC has been able to ignore

²² Yemeni Congregation for Reform, "ada' wa mawaqif al-kutla al-niyabiyya lil-tajammu' al-yamani lil-islah 2003-2009" [The performance and stances of the parliamentary bloc of the Yemeni Congregation for Reform] (San'a': Yemeni Congregation for Reform, 2009).

Islah's opposition in most cases because of its comfortable parliamentary majority.

Several examples follow. In 2000, Islah MPs opposed the bills on local councils, which entailed the appointment of governors by the Ministry of Interior. Islah demanded that governors should be directly elected like members of the local councils. The GPC majority passed the law.²³ The parliament again took up the law of local councils in 2008. The GPC bloc suggested an amendment providing for the election of governors by the members of local councils instead of the appointment of governors by the president. Islah MPs opposed this seemingly democratic amendment, because it clearly favored the GPC, which has controlled more than 80 percent of the local council seats since the 2006 local elections. They renewed their demand for direct election of governors, but in vain. Parliament passed the GPC amendment.²⁴

In 2006, the GPC and the JMP parties, including Islah, signed an "Agreement of Principles" aimed at organizing the presidential and local council elections of September 2006. The agreement, which was preceded by parliamentary passage of a new law for elections and referenda (law 26/2006), changed the composition of the Supreme Commission for Elections and Referendum (SCER). It added two JMP members, making four in all, as compared to five members who were appointed by the GPC. The agreement also stipulated that the subelectoral committees, which were responsible for the validation of voter lists and the supervision of the election process, would be comprised of 54 percent GPC-appointed members and 46 percent JMP-appointed members. The agreement also emphasized the neutrality of the military and security services, public money, and public media during the elections.²⁵

After initial euphoric statements, Islah MPs became disenchanted with the inner workings of the committee in the early days of validating the voter lists. Islah claimed that the SCER had failed to carry out its mission. It accused

²³ Jalal Ibrahim Faqira, "al-ada' al-siyasi lil-barlaman al-yamani 1997-2003" [The political performance of the Yemeni Parliament 1997-2003], *al-Jazeera*, April 3, 2004, <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/E1B6DECE-90C8-473B-8EE9-BE9EBAC916A5.htm> (accessed April 21, 2010).

²⁴ 'Abduh 'Ayash, "mashru' intikhab al-muhafizin yujadid khilaf al-sulta wal-mu'arada bil-yaman" [Proposed amendments to the governors' elections renews the disputes between the regime and opposition in Yemen], *al-Jazeera*, April 13, 2008, <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/20957537-DAFD-4122-977A-A440E8DE4968.htm> (accessed April 21, 2010). See also the text of Law 4/2000 for local councils amended by law 18/2008 and ratified by the Yemeni Parliament on April 17, 2008, Supreme Commission of Elections and Referendum, <http://www.scer.org.ye/arabic/authoritylaw.htm> (accessed April 21, 2010).

²⁵ 'Abd al-Salam Tahir, "al-hizb al-hakim fil-yaman yuwaqi' ma'a al-mu'arada itifaq mubadi' li-daman intikhabat naziha" [The ruling party in Yemen signs an agreement of principles with the opposition to guarantee fair elections], *Asharq al-Awsat*, June 19, 2006, <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=369003&issueno=10065> (accessed April 21, 2010).

the GPC members in the commission of obstructing the validation process, expelling election observers from civil society organizations, and using the security services to intimidate JMP commission members.²⁶ The presidential elections ended with an overwhelming victory for the GPC candidate, President Salih, over the JMP candidate, Faysal bin Shamlan. Salih won 77.2 percent of the vote. The local elections also were a sweeping victory for the GPC

In 2008, Islah MPs proposed a new law to ensure the judiciary's independence and to reinforce the separation of executive and judicial authority. Islah's bill aimed at changing the practice of the appointment of judges by the minister of justice, which gives the executive considerable influence over the judiciary. The bill would have created a general assembly, composed of senior judges, to nominate judges eligible for high judicial offices. The assembly's nominations would have needed the approval of the parliament and the president.²⁷ Islah's legislation was referred to a parliamentary committee for study, and, as of October 2009, no decision had been reached.²⁸

In 2008, the Islah bloc also proposed a law to grant and protect free access to information. It was endorsed by other opposition MPs and widely supported by civil society organizations and various professional associations. Even so, the GPC majority brought down Islah's legislation. In early 2009, the cabinet adopted a different bill prepared by the National Information Center, a government agency, and moved it to the parliament for deliberations. The government's proposal would impose severe restrictions on access to information, including harsh penalties for journalists—up to six months in prison—for publishing any information deemed by the authorities to be politically sensitive or a threat to Yemen's national security or its foreign relations. As of October 2009, the parliament had yet to pass the government's bill.²⁹

Islah MPs have devoted significant attention to social and economic issues. In its electoral platforms of 1997 and 2003 as well as in several declarations of

²⁶ "al-lajna al-'aliyya lil-intikhabat tu'akid fashalaha wa 'adam ahliyatihā al-dusturiyya wal-qanuniyya wal-idariyya wal-fanniyya" [The Supreme Committee for Elections confirms its failure and its lack of constitutional, legal, administrative and technical capacity], *al-Islah.net*, September 3, 2006, <http://www.al-islam.net/details.aspx?Pageid=3663&pagename=gen> (accessed April 21, 2010).

²⁷ 'Abd al-Basit al-Qa'idi, "al-na'ib 'abd al-razaq al-hijri: man ya'taqid an al-qada' mustaqil wahim, wal-idariyun janah al-sulta al-akhir" [The deputy 'Abd al-Razaq al-Hijri: Whoever believes the judiciary is independent is delusional, and the administrators are the other wing of the regime], *al-Ahali*, February 19, 2009, <http://www.alahale.net/includes/print.asp?id=2106> (accessed April 21, 2010).

²⁸ Phone interview by author with Rajih Badi, editor-in-chief of Islah's newspaper, *al-Sahwa*, September 18, 2009.

²⁹ "ijma' barlamani 'ala mashru' 'ashal bi-sha'n qanun al-husul 'ala al-ma'lumat" [Parliamentary consensus on 'Ashal's draft on the issue of access to information], *al-Islah Net*, February 16, 2009, <http://www.al-islam.net/print.aspx?pagename=gen&pageid=6946> (accessed April 21, 2010).

programs, Islah has repeatedly criticized the government's failure to improve the living conditions of Yemenis by introducing just and effective social and economic policies. Like their Islamist colleagues elsewhere in the Arab world, Islah MPs have gradually mastered the technique of supporting their criticism of the government's failure with numbers demonstrating social and economic hardship. For example, more than 45 percent of the Yemeni population lives on U.S. \$2 a day, 18 percent live on \$1 a day, and the unemployment rate runs as high as 35 percent. However, Islah has confined its parliamentary activism on social and economic policies to criticism of the government and largely failed to increase effective parliamentary oversight powers or develop alternative policies.³⁰ Failure to develop alternative, concrete policy measures in the socioeconomic realm brings Islah closer to the majority of Islamist parties and movements that participate in Arab politics. The Moroccan Party for Justice and Development, the Egyptian and Jordanian Muslim Brotherhoods, and Algerian Islamists have been heavily criticized for their inability to develop concrete policy platforms that address issues such as poverty, unemployment, and social services.

Since 1997, the Islah bloc has rejected the government's annual budget and abstained from voting on fiscal issues. Islah's opposition to GPC-backed bills on social and economic issues has remained largely ineffective because of the GPC's parliamentary dominance. For example, the Islah bloc opposed the new income tax law in 2005, the law of wages and salaries in 2007, and various privatization measures in 2009 that allowed foreign investors to own real estate in Yemen. In all three cases, the GPC majority passed the legislation. Islah MPs have succeeded in introducing amendments to only a few GPC bills. In 2009, the Islah bloc meaningfully amended the micro-credit law. The bill circulated by the government gave the central bank the right to confiscate the borrowers' property in case of failure to pay back government loans. Islah viewed this as contradicting shari'a provisions and demanded its removal. Before passage, the legislation was amended to grant the central bank only the right to refer borrowers in default to the judicial authorities.³¹

Of 119 parliamentary questions that Islah MPs addressed to the government between 2003 and 2009, 41 raised issues pertaining to Islamic teachings and

³⁰ Yemeni Congregation for Reform, "ada' wa mawaqif al-kutla al-niyabiyya lil-tajammu' al-yamani lil-islah 2003-2009" [The performance and stances of the parliamentary bloc of the Yemeni Congregation for Reform].

³¹ Ibid. See also *Asharq al-Awsat*, Husayn al-Jaribani, "al-yaman: al-islah yansahib min jalsat al-taswit 'ala ta'dilat qanun daribat al-mabi'at" [Yemen: Al-Islah withdraws from the voting session on amendments of the sales tax law], *Asharq al-Awsat*, July 6, 2005, <http://www.asharqalawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=9717&article=310202&feature> (accessed April 21, 2010), and "al-barlaman yu'id mashru' qanun al-tamwil al-asghar ila al-lajna al-maliyya" [The parliament returns the draft law on micro-finance to the Finance Committee], *al-Sahwa*, March 16, 2009, http://www.alsahwa-yemen.net/view_news.asp?sub_no=1_2009_03_16_69239 (accessed April 21, 2010).

morality. These issues varied from selling alcoholic beverages in some provinces and showing “indecent movies” in hotels, to the closing of religious schools. However, with regard to religious legislation, Islah MPs have succeeded in recent years in amending only two bills based on their Islamist platform. In 2005, the Islah bloc cooperated with the GPC majority to make shari‘a part of the curriculum of the state police academy, an amendment to law 10/2001.³² In 2009, most Islah MPs were among the parliamentary majority that rejected government-proposed amendments of civic status laws (law 14/2002 and law 20/1992) to raise the eligible age of marriage for females from fifteen to eighteen years. In the end, after taking into consideration the opinion of the parliamentary Islamic Codification Committee, a parliamentary majority approved raising the age of marriageable females to seventeen years.³³

The parliamentary debate on raising the age of marriage for females has revealed how differently various Islah MPs interpret their party’s Islamist platform and relate it to religious legislation. Some Islah MPs voted for the government’s proposal, while others, especially Islah representatives in the Codification Committee, denounced it as contradicting shari‘a and threatening the moral integrity of females.³⁴

An earlier incident revealing the internal divisions among Islah MPs in interpreting the Islamist platform occurred in May 2008, when President Salih called on religious scholars to form “Virtue Councils” to further moral practices and ensure compliance with Islamic teachings in society. Shaykh al-Zindani and Shaykh Hammud al-Zarihi, both prominent figures in Islah, were among twenty-five scholars who established these councils. The Virtue Councils held several meetings, in which the scholars called for a ban on alcohol consumption, a prohibition on women working for private companies, supervision of beaches and public places, and other measures intended to enforce virtues and fight vice. Several Islah members, mainly clerics and preachers, later joined the Virtue Councils.

³² Yemeni Congregation for Reform, “ada’ wa mawaqif al-kutla al-niyabiyya lil-tajammu’ al-yamani lil-islah 2003-2009” [The performance and stances of the parliamentary bloc of the Yemeni Congregation for Reform].

³³ Phone interview by author with Rajih Badi, editor-in-chief of Islah’s newspaper, *al-Sahwa*, February 12, 2009. See also, “majlis al-nuwab yastakmil munaqashatahu taqrir lajnat taqin ahkam al-shari‘a al-islamiyya” [The Deputies’ Assembly completes its discussion of the report of the Committee for the Codification of the Judgments of Islamic Law], Web site of the Yemeni Parliament, February 11, 2009, <http://www.yemenparliament.com/det.php?sid=725> (accessed April 21, 2010), and Nabil ‘Abd al-Rab, “al-mawad al-diniyya al-shar‘iyya tuthir khilafan bayn al-barlaman wal-hukuma” [The religious legal material stirs up a disagreement between the parliament and the government], *al-Motamar.net*, February 26, 2005, <http://www.almotamar.net/news/19594.htm> (accessed April 21, 2010).

³⁴ Abdul-Aziz Oudah, “The Parliament Increases Age of Marriage to Seventeen,” *Yemen Observer*, February 14, 2009, <http://www.yobserver.com/local-news/printer-10015774.html> (accessed April 21, 2010).

As a result, Islah was heavily criticized by its partners in the JMP and various civil society organizations, which feared that the formation of Virtue Councils would further diminish individual freedoms in the name of religion. Islah was forced to state publicly that as a political party it would not interfere in issues of morality, and so it does not approve or disapprove of the Virtue Councils. The statement also described the decision of Islah members to join the councils as personal and not reflecting a party line.

Although the official stance of Islah toward the Virtue Councils has demonstrated a measure of practical separation between its political activity and its religious elements (the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis) influential inside it, it has also brought to the surface the internal divisions within Islah in interpreting its Islamist platform. Islah could not disown the formation of the councils or denounce an initiator, al-Zindani, a prominent party figure. It needed to accommodate him and his influential followers, lest it lose their backing. But the party also had to respect its members who distanced themselves from al-Zindani's initiative, seeing it as an apolitical enterprise with which the party should not be associated.³⁵

Overall, Islah's impact on the legislative process has been rather limited since the party moved to the opposition side in 1997. Between 1994 and 1997, when it participated with the GPC in a coalition government, Islah scored its clearest legislative victory: the 1994 amendment to article 3 of the constitution that made shari'a provisions the source of all legislation. Islah's efforts since 1997 to push for democratically inspired constitutional and legal amendments and to strengthen parliamentary oversight of the government's policies have largely failed because of the uncontested dominance of the GPC in parliament. Islah MPs are outnumbered both in plenary discussions and in the standing committees, which review legislative proposals and presidential decrees after their first discussion in parliament.³⁶

³⁵ Nabil al-Sufi, "‘an hay’at al-fadila: ma‘a qudsiyat al-ikhtilat wa did razilat al-riqaba wal-ghuraf al-mughlaqa" [On the Virtue Council: In defense of integrating the sexes and against the sin of censorship and closed rooms], *Ma'rib Press*, August 9, 2008, <http://marebpress.net/articles.php?id=4031> (accessed April 21, 2010). See also, 'Abd al-Salam Muhammad, "bayn takhawuf siyasiyin wa da'm 'ulama kibar bil-hizb lil-fikra: al-amr bil-ma'ruf al-yamaniyya taqsim hizb al-islah" [Between fears of politicians and the support of prominent religious scholars for the idea: The Yemeni Virtue Councils divide the Islah Party], *Islam Online*, June 14, 2008, http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=ArticleA_C&pagename=Zone-Arabic-News/NWALa yout&cid=1212925307466 (accessed April 21, 2010).

³⁶ In the current parliament, the representation of Islah MPs in standing committees is as follows: two of eleven in workforce and social affairs; three of seventeen in constitutional affairs; two of thirteen in foreign affairs; three of twelve in justice and endowments; two of eleven in local governance; two of seven in Islamic codification; two of twelve in defense and security; three of fifteen in public liberties and human rights; one of twelve in trade and industry; three of fourteen in education; three of ten in information, culture, and tourism; two of fifteen in public health; three of fifteen in higher education; two of nineteen in oil and development; one of thirteen in water and environment; one of seventeen in services; three of eighteen in finance; and one of seventeen in agriculture, irrigation, and fisheries.

Although Islah's long-standing ambivalence toward President Salih and the GPC and its internal divisions have hindered the party's parliamentary activism, more than anything it has been the concentration of power in the hands of the president and the ruling party that has greatly curbed Islah's legislative success. At this level, the experience of Yemeni Islamists corresponds to the wider regional pattern of Islamist parties and movements, which have proven ineffective opposition groups in parliaments controlled by authoritarian regimes.

Trajectories of Evolution—Impacts of Political Participation on Islah

In spite of its limited impact in parliament, Islah has continued to contest elections at the national and local level and to play politics by the rules. Apart from the 1994 civil war, in which the party joined hands with the GPC to defeat the YSP, Islah has upheld its commitment to peaceful participation in political life since its formation in 1990. Islah's emerging acceptance of democratic procedures and pluralism during the 1990s has evolved further, so that today they are an uncontested pillar of the party's ideology and role. Indeed, Islah's experience in the JMP has demonstrated its willingness to cooperate with ideologically and programmatically different parties and to develop a joint electoral and parliamentary platform to push for reforms in Yemen.

Yet, Islah's has had to overcome various obstacles to participate in politics. Operating in an authoritarian regime, in which the president and his party dominate political life and strip checks and balances among government branches of their meaning, has forced Islah, since its move toward the opposition in 1997, to sustain its ties with the regime to have some influence over key political choices. Islah also had to overcome its own mixed constituency and its internal divisions to take part in politics. The tribal, Muslim Brotherhood, and Salafi elements of Islah have prevented the party from developing a clear ideology and platform. As the analysis of the party's legislative priorities and performance has shown, the Islah parliamentary bloc has been forced to strike a balance between tribal and political interests, between different interpretations of the party's Islamist platform among influential leaders, and between those who see Islah as part of the opposition JMP and those who denounce cooperation with the JMP and still view the GPC as an ally. The result has been continued ambiguities in Islah regarding its ideology and platform and a wide skepticism on the outside as to where the party really stands.

These characteristics have made the experience of Islah different from that of other Islamist parties and movements in the Arab world, though not completely. Of course, most Arab Islamists who also participate in politics from the ranks of the opposition have managed to sort out many of their initial ideological ambiguities and to articulate clear parliamentary platforms. Islah has not been able to do so, to-date. Still, Islah, like other Islamist parties, has had to account to its constituents for achieving only limited reforms and

justify its continued commitment to reform. Like Islamists elsewhere, Islah has justified itself through a mixed narrative: first, economic and political reforms are framed as long-term and gradual processes of change, requiring patience on the part of their advocates. Second, peaceful participation is presented as the best available option to challenge the authoritarian regime, while assuring peace within Yemeni society. This last argument resonates well in a country like Yemen, which has gone through long periods of instability in the past and seems to be entering a new one now. In fact, the growing security and instability threats in the North and South of Yemen have been used effectively by Islah to justify its participation in legal politics and its ongoing contacts with the regime as essential to the prevention of state failure or disintegration in Yemen.

Islamist parties and movements have become institutionally more complex and amenable to internal democratic procedures while participating in party politics. For example, the Moroccan Party for Justice and Development has kept a functional separation between the religious movement and the party, while the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood has maintained such a functional separation between the movement and the parliamentary bloc. Islah's internal evolution, too, has been toward growing institutional complexity.

The organizational and decision-making structure that Islah has developed contains six legislative and executive levels: the General Congress, the Central Shura Council, the Supreme Board, the General Secretariat, the Judiciary Board, and local congresses and councils in each of the twenty governorates of Yemen. According to its bylaws, at all these levels, Islah bases decision making and leadership formation on the concept of shura, which compels party members to deliberate and put in practice a participatory approach.³⁷

The General Congress of Islah, the party's main executive body, amended different articles of Islah's bylaws in a meeting in March 2009 to allow for greater internal democracy, decentralization, and participation. A significant example is the amendment of article 12 of the bylaws. Before the amendment, article 12 gave the General Congress the right to elect from its own members the delegates of the local congresses of Islah. The amended article 12 stipulates that members of the local councils will elect the delegates of local congresses directly. Also, in the same meeting, the General Congress amended article 14 to transfer the responsibility for electing the members of the Central Shura Council, the party's internal parliament, from the General Congress itself to local congresses.

These two amendments demonstrate Islah's willingness to improve the inner workings of its executive and legislative bodies by introducing a high degree of both internal democracy and decentralization of decision-making powers from the national to the local levels. They shed another positive light

³⁷ Islah By-Laws, 2005.

on Islah's strategic commitment to democratic procedures. It is worth noting that the amendments to articles 12 and 14 were pushed not only by the local councils of Islah, which benefit from them, but also by several key figures in the leadership following extensive debates within the party.³⁸

Unlike the democratizing drive of Islah manifested in the interplay between the party's national and local levels, two key features of internal democracy in political parties—mobility and change in leadership—have been largely missing. Shaykh al-Ahmar remained president of Islah's powerful Supreme Board from the party's formation until his death in 2007. In fact, the fourth and last confirmation by the General Congress of al-Ahmar in his position, which took place shortly before his death, violated Islah's bylaws stipulating that the term of the Supreme Board president can be renewed only three consecutive times. Shaykh al-Zindani remained president of Islah's Central Shura Council for three consecutive terms from 1995 until 2007. In 2007, al-Zindani was replaced as council head by Muhammad bin Ajlan, who had been vice president between 1995 and 2007. Al-Zindani was then elected to a seat on the party's Supreme Board.³⁹

The lack of mobility and change in the top leadership positions, which does not make Islah any different from other parties in Yemen, has also shaped the wider composition of the Central Shura Council. Since Islah's formation, influential tribal and religious members have systematically controlled more than a two-thirds majority in the council (100 of 130 seats).⁴⁰ Only in leadership positions at the local level, which are determined through internal elections for candidates to run for leadership in local congresses and councils, has Islah shown itself able to display a high degree of mobility and change. The last round of elections for the local congresses and councils, held in January 2007, confirmed this trend.⁴¹

Another trajectory of evolution among most Islamist parties and movements

³⁸ Phone interview by author with Rajih Badi, editor-in-chief of Islah's newspaper, *al-Sahwa*, March 22, 2009.

³⁹ Mustafa Nasr, "mu'tamar al-islah...al-ansi: al-mu'tamar waqfa taqyimiyya li-ada' al-islah...al-sufi: al-idara al-hizbiyya al-islahiyya lam tastati' al-inhiyaz lil-barnamaj al-siyasi...al-duktur al-shu'aybi wa huza' yutaliban al-islah bi-mu'arada wataniyya fa'ila" [Islah's conference ... al-Ansi: The conference pauses in assessment of the performance of Islah... al-Sufi: Islah's party administration was not able to prioritize the political program.... Doctor al-Shu'aybi and Huza' demand from Islah an effective national opposition], *Saba News*, February 2, 2005, <http://www.sabanews.net/ar/print87894.htm> (accessed April 21, 2010).

⁴⁰ 'Abd al-Karim Salam, "al-islah al-yamani: al-haras al-qadim yu'aziz mawaqi'ahu" [The Yemeni Islah: The old guard strengthens its positions], *Swiss Info*, March 1, 2007, <http://www.swissinfo.ch/ara/detail/index.html?cid=5750262> (accessed April 21, 2010).

⁴¹ 'Abd al-Qawi al-'Azani, Mansur Bil'aidi, and 'Abd al-Wasi' Rajih, "fi intikhabat hurra wa tanafusiyya hamalat mufaja'at fil-nata'ij" [In free and competitive elections that were characterized by surprises in the results], *al-Sahwa.net*, January 23, 2007, <http://www.alshibami.net/saqifa/showthread.php?t=24040> (accessed April 21, 2010).

in the Arab world is their gradual opening toward women. Here, too, Islah's experience has resembled the wider Islamist spectrum. Islah's discourse on women has changed over time, from an initial skepticism of female political activism to an acceptance of it driven by political and pragmatic considerations. In 1998, women were elected for the first time to Islah's Central Shura Council; they won seven seats. Currently, seventeen women hold seats in the council. In the March 2009 meeting of Islah's General Congress, article 36 of the party's bylaws was amended to allow for greater female representation, and a section for women was added to the General Secretariat.

Islah's gradual opening toward women has been propelled mainly by its electoral competition with the GPC. Like Arab Islamists elsewhere, Islah has always had significant female constituencies—currently, they are 18 percent of party membership. However, women were largely ill-represented within Islah and kept out of leadership positions and election candidacy in the 1990s. In recent years, especially after Islah's poor showings in the presidential and local elections in 2006—Islah did not nominate a single female candidate for the seven thousand contested seats in the local councils—party leaders have come to realize the importance of mobilization among women and therefore the need to better represent them in the party's legislative and executive bodies.

Still, as with various policy and political issues, internal division has plagued Islah's opening toward women. Some tribal and religious leaders have opposed it, based on a conservative interpretation of shari'a provisions, while others have recently pressed for the introduction of female quotas at all levels of the party.⁴² Owing to the party's internal division, Islah's parliamentary bloc has consistently declined over the last four years to subscribe to various GPC proposals aimed at introducing a 10 to 15 percent female quota in the parliament, 20 to 25 percent in the local councils, and 10 percent in the State Consultative Council.

The Yemeni Congregation for Reform shares some key characteristics with other Islamist parties and movements operating in the Arab world. Like them, Islah has a faith-based ideology and platform, albeit loose, and has been participating in party politics with the aim of achieving constitutional, political, and socioeconomic reforms. Islah has also gradually become committed to democratic procedures internally as well as in Yemeni politics. These shared characteristics justify identifying Islah as an Islamist party. However, Islah differs from most other Arab Islamist parties in several ways. The party combines tribal influences with those of the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi groups. Compared to Islamist parties elsewhere, Islah has shown

⁴² Husayn al-Jaribani, "san'a': masira nisa'iyya lil-daght 'ala al-ahzab li-tazkiyat al-mara'a fil-intikhabat al-mahaliyya" [San'a': Female march to pressure the parties to empower women in the local elections], *Asharq al-Awsat*, August 20, 2006, <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=378867&issueno=10127> (accessed April 21, 2010).

a higher degree of internal division on key issues, such as its relationship with the ruling establishment, women's participation in politics, and how to interpret the party's Islamist platform and transform it into political actions. Moreover, unlike other Islamist groups, Islah's participation in politics did not begin in the opposition. The party was a junior partner in a ruling coalition until joining the opposition in 1997. The practice of switching sides between the government and the opposition has been a hallmark of Islah and continues to make it an exception among its Islamist counterparts.