

Victor Mallet on the growing successes of Islamic fundamentalism

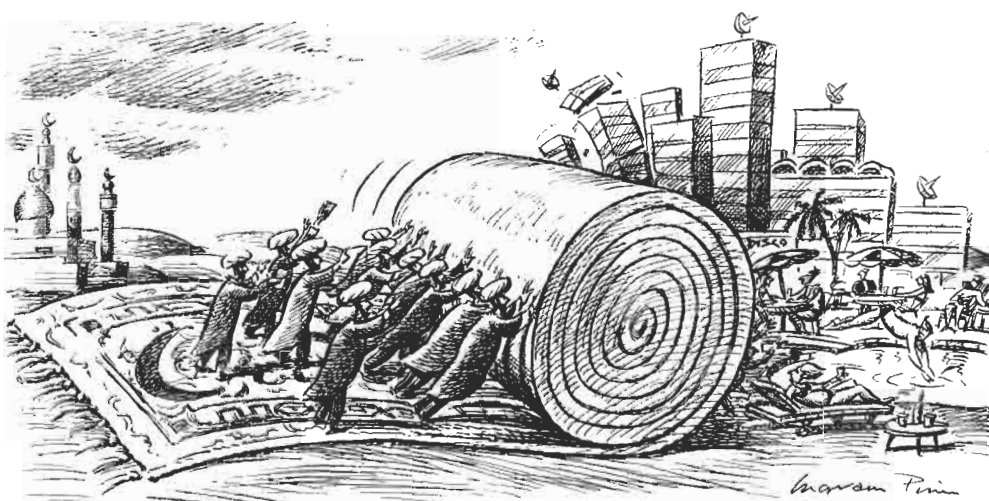
Arab world's wave of religion

Western decadence is still available in Tunisia: revellers drink wine in public, taxi-drivers listen to Marvin Gaye's Sexual Healing on their cassette players, and the women are still topless on the beaches of Hammamet.

If the future bears out the worst fears of Tunisia's Government and bourgeoisie, such liberalism will not last long. Just as they were getting used to the idea of the decade-old Islamic regime in Iran – and delighting in its various failures – the ruling classes of North Africa and the Arab world in general have been forced to watch the alarming spectacle of a new wave of Islamic fundamentalist successes.

The broadly secular amalgam of socialism and nationalism which flourished in the post-colonial period from Algeria to Egypt and from Syria to Yemen have been undermined by economic failure, while the authoritarian regimes which put such ideologies into practice have been pushed onto the defensive – and into elections – by popular discontent at home and the spread of democracy abroad.

In last month's local elections in Algeria the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) won 54 per cent of the vote, and Mr Ali Belhadj, the radical FIS preacher, had an unwelcome message for the urban elite of the Mediterranean coast. "Our goal is not the municipalities and the provinces," he said, "but the restoration of the Caliphate and the rule of the Book of God throughout the Islamic nation."



from each others' successes. "This movement," says Mr Ali Laridh of the Tunisian Nahdha (Renaissance) movement, "is part of the rebirth of religion in the whole Arab world."

The very word Islamic, in Arabic as well as English, now has militant overtones. "You can be born a Moslem. What makes you Islamic is something different," says Dr Chibli Mallat, lecturer in Islamic law at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. "It denotes a political choice to have religion expand its sphere to larger and larger fields. . . There is an Islamic will to power."

Egypt, Jordan, Algeria and Tunisia have all been forced towards democracy after years of repression by pressure from below. And among opposition movements, the Islamic organisations, with their mosque-based political networks, tend to emerge the strongest.

The European nations across the water are disturbed but not yet panicked by the rise of fundamentalism in Algeria and by the implications for Morocco, Tunisia and the rest of the Arab world. Mr Belhadj may be radical and anti-French, but Mr Abbasi Madani, the FIS leader, has taken a more conciliatory approach. France has reason to

in Algeria. Ordinary Tunisians, they say, are not fanatical enough to want to get involved with an illegal movement but might be tempted by Nahdha's universal Islamic message if it were legitimised. "If the Pope stood for election in Italy, he might win too," says one senior Tunisian official.

The other way to control the fundamentalists is to co-opt them into existing political structures and yield ground on particular issues of concern to Islamic purists. Mr Saddam Hussein, President of Baathist Iraq, has taken to hosting gatherings of Moslems and appealing to the religious instincts of

relationship with Islam, while the rulers of Saudi Arabia have long financed fundamentalism abroad as a kind of insurance policy against foreign criticism of their own religious credentials.

Sunni fundamentalists often lack the messianic fervour of their Shia counterparts in Iran, and are less concerned about the export of revolution, but they share the aim of applying Islamic law (*sharia*) on the basis that Islam is an entire way of life, religious, political, social and economic. At a superficial level that means a ban on alcohol and interest payments, and an insistence on modest garb for women.

to be sure exactly what the various Islamic movements stand for. Mr Laridh, for example, emphasises the importance of democracy, outlines a vague economic strategy of promoting self-sufficiency, balks at the word *sharia*, and says that Nahdha in Tunisia is much less radical than the FIS next door in Algeria. His critics believe that he and his Nahdha colleagues are pretending to be moderate in order to take power.

Islamic fundamentalists like to say that the ideologies of socialism and capitalism have provided demonstrably inadequate systems of government, but the same argument is inevitably being used against the fundamentalists themselves as they take the levers of power. The collapse of a number of Islamic finance houses in Egypt last year sullied the record of Islam as well as the reputations of the bankers concerned. In Jordan, public opinion forced the Government to rescind an "Islamic" ban on male hairdressers working in women's beauty parlours.

"Iran is an example, a pattern. We have to do the same," declares a 23-year-old activist of the underground Islamic Jihad in the Israeli-occupied Gaza Strip. It is only after having made this statement that he asks his interviewers what Iran is actually like 10 years after the revolution.

The answer, of course, is that it is far from perfect. Iran's economy is in turmoil and its clerical leaders are at loggerheads over their various interpretations of what constitutes an Islamic society or an ideal foreign policy. Much the

With the FIS demanding general elections, it did not take long for militant Algerian Moslems to start disrupting parties and trying to tear down the satellite dishes which allow Algerians to taste the sordid pleasures of Italian television striptease; the antennae are no longer "paraboliques" but "paradiaboliques".

Nor are Arab monarchies immune. In Jordan, the Moslem Brothers and Islamic independents became the largest single group in parliament after the country's first elections for 22 years last November; since then nightclubs have been attacked and television purged of kissing scenes.

In the Israeli-occupied territories, the Islamic movement Hamas has been gaining ground at the expense of the more secular-minded Palestine Liberation Organisation. In Britain, Turkey and the Soviet Union, Moslems are becoming more assertive. In Egypt, fundamentalists have sacked Christian churches. In Sudan, a fundamentalist-military junta is under pressure from its supporters to declare an Islamic republic. Colonel Muammer Gadaffi, the Libyan leader who regards himself as a champion of progressive Islam, has sharply criticised religious extremists.

The various Islamic groups thriving today, whether Sunni or Shia, draw public comfort

The causes of the generalised Islamic revival of the past two decades have been well rehearsed: the Israeli victory over the Arabs in 1967; popular anger against corruption and hypocrisy in government; the inability of many Arab economies to realise their potential despite the oil wealth of the Gulf; all this leading to a widespread feeling of material and ideological failure in societies where many western values have been enthusiastically espoused by an educated minority but not necessarily absorbed by the poor.

Until recently Arab intellectuals confidently declared that Islamic fundamentalism had passed its peak after the Iranian revolution in 1979. What they could not predict was the sudden democratisation of eastern Europe, the decline of the Soviet Union as a superpower and pro-Arab counterweight to the US-Israel alliance, the anti-government riots in Algeria and Jordan, and the increase in religious feeling throughout the Arab world.

These factors have all contributed to the partial democratisation of the Middle East and the subsequent upsurge of Islamic influence. South Yemen, the only communist Arab state, was swallowed in May by the democratising - and more Islamic - North Yemen following the collapse of the Soviet empire.

The tired ruling elites in

fear the transfer of North African political disputes into its own large immigrant community, and all Europe would be concerned about the economic implications for Algeria and its neighbours if educated elites decided to leave any future Islamic states in disgust.

The Arab opponents of fundamentalism are full of anguish. They hear Europe and the west urging them to be democratic, but they fear that free elections are opening the door to anti-democratic Islamic forces which will cling to power indefinitely with a hazy system of consultation (*shura*) on Islamic lines. Democracy, the fiery Mr Belhadj declared in Algeria, is blasphemous.

Arab leaders have only a limited political arsenal at their disposal to restrain their fundamentalist opponents. Neither President Chadli Bendjedid of Algeria nor President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia has quite the populist charisma of Mr Madani or Mr Rached Ghannouchi, the leaders of the respective Islamic movements which oppose them.

Repression is one method of control. It is used in Morocco and partially applied in Tunisia, where Mr Ben Ali's Government refuses to recognise the Nahdha as a party. Mr Ben Ali's supporters believe that President Chadli committed a serious tactical error by recognising a purely religious party

his audiences, while Egypt has accepted the presence of the Moslem Brotherhood bloc in parliament without explicitly recognising it as a party.

As descendants of the Prophet, both King Hassan of Morocco and King Hussein of Jordan already have a special

But the Koran and the reported acts of the Prophet Mohammed are open to such a broad range of interpretations that no two Moslem clerics are likely to agree on all the details of an Islamic government's policies, and it is hard

same challenges await the Sunni fundamentalists. Mr Madani is making a bold prescription when he says of Algeria: "The present system is sick, the doctor is the FIS, and the medicine has existed for 14 centuries - Islam."