

Thinking about muslim politics

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Abstrak

Vast public attention has been devoted to the politics of Muslim societies, much of it prompted – and distorted – by the rise of radical Islamism, and there has been a corresponding and voluminous academic literature on the subject. A central debate centres on whether ‘Islam’ is a formative factor or not and, if it is, how is it determining. A prevalent view is that Muslim politics stems, as does all politics, from structural factors such as institutional development, political economy, and social stratification, among others. Islam is often seen in instrumental terms as facilitating or indeed hindering the drive for and wielding of power and influence in public life. While these contextual factors are undeniably relevant, basic values and norms are also consequential and often motivational. Political culture, which has fallen out of favour in contemporary social science, thus has a role to play. Muslim traditions and symbols can have societal impact, even as their meanings, and control over them, may be debated. The Covid-19 pandemic provides examples of how the political process can be affected by Islam-shaped perspectives as seen in different interpretations of what is religiously permissible and reactions to state control. ‘Muslim politics’ is a kind of politics that builds on culturally specific normative orders that are self-consciously expressed by various agents who presume to speak for Islam, but whose authority and modes of influence may be, and often are, contested. The concept of ‘Muslim politics’ is a window through which observers of Muslim societies can supplement understanding of collective action by an appreciation for the meanings that people attach to it.