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Political movements in the Muslim world: religious or socio-economic drivers?

Dr Muhammad Hasib

Lecturer Islamic Studies, University of Gujrat

Email: Dr.mhasib@uog.edu.pk

Abstract

Political movements in the Muslim world are shaped by a complex interplay of religious, social, and economic factors. This article examines whether religious ideology or socio-economic grievances serve as the primary drivers of political mobilization across Muslim-majority countries. By analyzing historical movements, contemporary protests, and the rise of political Islam, the study explores how faith-based narratives intersect with issues such as poverty, inequality, governance deficits, and external interventions. The article argues that while religion often provides symbolic and motivational frameworks, socio-economic conditions play a decisive role in shaping political participation, activism, and policy demands. Understanding the dual influence of religious and socio-economic factors is crucial for policymakers, scholars, and civil society seeking to interpret political dynamics in the Muslim world.

Keywords

Political Movements, Muslim World, Islamism, Socio-Economic Drivers, Religious Ideology, Political Mobilization, Governance, Social Justice, Economic Inequality, Political Activism

Introduction

Political movements in the Muslim world have long drawn scholarly attention due to their diversity, intensity, and global implications. These movements range from grassroots social protests to organized Islamist political parties, reflecting the intersection of religion, culture, and socio-economic conditions. Understanding

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the drivers behind these movements is essential for interpreting their goals, strategies, and impact on society.

Religious ideology often serves as a unifying and mobilizing force. Islam provides a set of ethical, legal, and social principles that political actors invoke to legitimize claims, inspire followers, and frame narratives of justice, governance, and societal reform. Movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Jamaat-e-Islami in South Asia illustrate how faith can shape political organization, policy agendas, and public engagement.

Simultaneously, socio-economic factors—including poverty, unemployment, inequality, corruption, and political exclusion—frequently underpin mobilization. When basic needs and rights are unmet, communities may turn to political activism as a means of addressing grievances. Economic deprivation and social marginalization often amplify receptivity to religious narratives, creating a synergy between ideology and material concerns.

This article examines the dual role of religion and socio-economic conditions in shaping political movements across the Muslim world. It highlights historical and contemporary examples, explores the interplay between faith and material grievances, and assesses how these factors influence political participation, governance, and policy outcomes. By doing so, it aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the drivers of political mobilization in Muslim societies.

Historical Context of Political Movements in the Muslim World

Political movements in the Muslim world have deep historical roots, shaped by colonial experiences, the collapse of empires, and the struggle for independence. These movements often intertwined religious principles with socio-political objectives, creating frameworks for activism and governance.

During the colonial era, Islamic identity became a unifying force against foreign

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domination. Movements like the Khilafat Movement in India (1919–1924) combined religious symbolism with political resistance, seeking both to protect Islamic institutions and challenge colonial authority. Similarly, anti-colonial struggles in North Africa and the Middle East often invoked Islamic heritage to mobilize populations and legitimize political claims.

Post-independence, many Muslim-majority countries faced governance deficits, socio-economic inequality, and weak state institutions. These conditions fostered political movements addressing both religious and material concerns. The rise of political Islam in the 1970s and 1980s, exemplified by the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Jamaat-e-Islami in Pakistan, reflected responses to perceived moral decay, corruption, and socio-economic marginalization, blending religious ideology with calls for social justice and political reform.

Contemporary movements continue this dual pattern. Arab Spring uprisings (2010–2012) revealed a spectrum of motivations: youth-led demands for economic opportunities and political participation coexisted with calls for religiously inspired governance reforms. In countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, both socio-economic grievances and faith-based narratives shaped mobilization strategies, organizational structures, and public support.

Understanding this historical context demonstrates that political movements in the Muslim world rarely arise solely from religious or socio-economic factors. Rather, they emerge from an interplay of ideological, historical, and material conditions that collectively shape mobilization, goals, and outcomes.

Religious Drivers of Political Movements

Religion has consistently served as a powerful motivator and framework for political movements in the Muslim world. Islamic principles, symbols, and narratives provide legitimacy, cohesion, and moral guidance for mobilization,

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often influencing both the objectives and strategies of political actors.

Ideological mobilization is central to religion-driven movements. Organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Jamaat-e-Islami in South Asia draw upon Islamic teachings to frame political agendas, emphasizing justice, moral governance, and societal reform. Religious rhetoric often inspires collective identity, encouraging individuals to participate in political activism as a moral and spiritual duty.

Legitimacy and authority are reinforced through religious references. Leaders and movements invoke Quranic verses, Hadith, and historical precedents to justify policy demands, governance reforms, or resistance to perceived oppression. This religious framing enhances credibility among followers and strengthens organizational discipline.

Community cohesion is another significant factor. Religious gatherings, mosques, and educational institutions function as platforms for political mobilization, enabling movements to disseminate ideas, recruit members, and coordinate activities. Faith-based networks facilitate trust and solidarity, which are critical for sustained activism.

Transnational influence also amplifies religious drivers. Global Islamic scholarship, diaspora networks, and digital media allow ideas to circulate across borders, shaping local political movements. Movements often draw inspiration from successes in other Muslim contexts, creating a sense of shared purpose and collective identity.

While religion is a compelling motivator, it often interacts with socio-economic grievances. Religious ideology can provide a framework for understanding inequality, injustice, or corruption, making faith a lens through which material concerns are interpreted and addressed. This interplay underscores the complexity

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of political mobilization, revealing that religion is both a source of motivation and a medium for articulating broader societal grievances.

Socio-Economic Drivers of Political Movements

Socio-economic conditions are central to understanding political mobilization in the Muslim world. Poverty, unemployment, inequality, and lack of political representation often drive communities to engage in activism, protests, and organized movements.

Economic deprivation motivates participation in political movements. High unemployment, inadequate public services, and limited access to education and healthcare create grievances that fuel demands for social justice and reform. Communities experiencing economic marginalization are more likely to support movements promising change, regardless of religious framing.

Social inequality and exclusion amplify mobilization. Minority groups, rural populations, and marginalized urban communities often face systemic discrimination, limited political voice, and inadequate resources. These disparities can make religious narratives appealing, as they provide moral justification and a sense of solidarity while addressing material concerns.

Governance deficits also contribute to socio-economic mobilization. Corruption, weak institutions, and authoritarian practices undermine trust in government, prompting citizens to seek alternative forms of political engagement. Socio-economic grievances, therefore, intersect with demands for accountability, transparency, and effective governance.

Youth engagement is particularly shaped by socio-economic factors. Young populations, facing unemployment and limited opportunities, often become the most active participants in protests and grassroots movements. They harness social media and digital platforms to organize, communicate, and advocate for

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reform, demonstrating how material conditions influence political participation. While socio-economic factors are decisive, they are frequently intertwined with religious motivations. Movements often use religious rhetoric to frame socio-economic grievances, creating a synergy that enhances mobilization and legitimacy. Recognizing this duality is crucial for understanding the multifaceted drivers of political movements in Muslim-majority contexts.

Case Studies of Religious vs. Socio-Economic Influences

Examining specific political movements in the Muslim world illustrates the interplay between religious and socio-economic drivers. These case studies demonstrate that political mobilization rarely stems from a single factor, but rather from a complex interaction of ideology and material conditions.

Egypt and the Muslim Brotherhood: The Muslim Brotherhood has historically combined religious ideology with socio-economic appeals. While its rhetoric emphasizes Islamic governance, moral reform, and faith-based social justice, the organization's extensive social services—schools, clinics, and charitable initiatives—address the economic needs of marginalized communities. During periods of political instability, these services enhance legitimacy and mobilize support among economically disadvantaged populations.

Tunisia and the Arab Spring: The 2010–2012 uprisings in Tunisia highlight socio-economic grievances as primary motivators. High unemployment, political corruption, and limited civil liberties drove widespread protests. While religious organizations participated, the movement's initial momentum was largely shaped by material concerns. Nevertheless, religious discourse provided moral framing for calls for justice, illustrating the intersection of socio-economic and ideological factors.

Pakistan and Jamaat-e-Islami: In Pakistan, the Jamaat-e-Islami has pursued a

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combination of religious and socio-economic objectives. It mobilizes support by advocating for Sharia-compliant governance and ethical leadership while also addressing educational needs, poverty alleviation, and social services. The movement's dual approach demonstrates how religious ideology can reinforce socio-economic engagement and broaden political appeal.

Syria and the Syrian Civil War: Various Islamist factions in the Syrian conflict illustrate the interaction between religious and socio-economic drivers. Many recruits were motivated by socio-economic deprivation, political marginalization, and regional inequalities, while religious ideology provided a framework for justifying participation and sustaining commitment during prolonged conflict.

These case studies underscore that neither religion nor socio-economic conditions act in isolation. Political movements in the Muslim world are shaped by a dynamic relationship between faith-based narratives and material grievances, which together influence mobilization strategies, public support, and policy objectives.

Implications for Governance and Policy

Understanding the drivers of political movements in the Muslim world has significant implications for governance, policy-making, and social stability. Policymakers must consider both religious and socio-economic dimensions to address grievances effectively and promote sustainable political engagement.

Integrating socio-economic development is critical. Governments that address poverty, unemployment, inequality, and access to education can reduce the appeal of movements fueled primarily by material grievances. Economic empowerment programs, inclusive policies, and social safety nets help mitigate conditions that often drive political mobilization.

Recognizing religious identity is equally important. Policies that respect

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religious practices, facilitate community participation, and uphold ethical governance enhance legitimacy and reduce tensions. Engagement with faith-based organizations can promote constructive dialogue, civic education, and social cohesion.

Countering extremism and radicalization requires a dual approach. Addressing economic marginalization and political exclusion alongside promoting moderate religious interpretations can reduce susceptibility to extremist ideologies. Effective policies combine security measures with community empowerment, education, and interfaith engagement.

Promoting participatory governance ensures that citizens, including marginalized groups, have a voice in decision-making. Transparent institutions, fair electoral processes, and inclusive policymaking strengthen trust and reduce incentives for movements driven by disaffection or exclusion.

International cooperation also plays a role. Global organizations and foreign governments should support policies that foster socio-economic development while respecting religious and cultural norms. External interventions must prioritize ethical engagement, capacity building, and long-term stability rather than imposing unilateral agendas.

By considering the complex interplay of religious and socio-economic drivers, policymakers can craft nuanced strategies that strengthen governance, reduce conflict, and empower citizens, contributing to stable, inclusive, and resilient Muslim societies.

Conclusion

Political movements in the Muslim world are shaped by a dynamic interplay of religious ideology and socio-economic conditions. While religion provides moral guidance, organizational cohesion, and symbolic legitimacy, socio-economic

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grievances—such as poverty, inequality, and political exclusion—often serve as the immediate catalysts for mobilization. Historical experiences and contemporary case studies demonstrate that neither factor operates in isolation; rather, they reinforce and interact with each other to influence political participation, activism, and policy demands.

Understanding these dual drivers is essential for governments, civil society, and scholars seeking to address instability, promote good governance, and foster inclusive political participation. Policies that combine socio-economic development with respect for religious identity and ethical governance can mitigate grievances, reduce the appeal of extremist ideologies, and enhance social cohesion.

Ultimately, political movements in the Muslim world reflect broader societal dynamics. Effective engagement requires recognizing the intertwined roles of faith and material conditions, ensuring that interventions are informed, balanced, and culturally sensitive. By doing so, Muslim societies can navigate political challenges constructively while preserving their ethical, religious, and social values.

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