Dealing with Islam in North African Politics:
Ideology and Power in Morocco
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Islamic Ideology and Political Power in Morocco: the 'Alawi' Monarchy

One of the key factors to understanding contemporary politics in North Africa is the ideological use of Islam in the political sphere.[1] Understood as a main foundation of North African cultural background and political identity, Islam has been present in the political discourse since the very emergence of the National states in the post-colonial era. Pre-dating self-government in the form of sovereign states in the mid-1950s, Islam and Islamic law were also used by colonial forces to deal with the local elites and to legitimate their political rule and their economic and military administration. In any case, Islamic history has provided a powerful element of unity to North African societies in the form of Sunni and Mālikī trend, thus contributing to the social, political, and juridical order. Despite the diverse trends and symbolic representations of Islam in the cultural and spiritual fields in North Africa, there is little doubt about the centrality of the Islamic discourse in contemporary politics as it can be stated that Islam is one of the main power resources in the political competition among elites. The case of the 'Alawī Kingdom of Morocco is especially relevant.

Since the very beginning of its political history in the Middle Ages, Morocco was founded on the legitimacy of the Islamic rule. Even though its first political experience as an Islamic sovereign political entity came in the form of a Shi'īte emirate ruled by the Idrissid dynasty in the 8th century AD, in the modern period the ideological weight of reformist Sunni Islam was able to gather the government and the population around a common religious and political identity. The important role played by the *wahhābi* trend[2] in the eighteenth century must be stressed in this ideological process, as can be seen in the figure of the sultan Muhammad b. 'Abd Allāh (1757–1790). Once adapted to Moroccan tradition, Wahhābism was the ideological foundation of the Islamic reformism implemented by the state. However, Moroccan Islamic tradition was also heavily influenced by Sufism, the mystical trend of Islam, so the 'Alawī dynasty and the Makhzen always tried to keep the balance between both Islamic ideological forces.[3] Later on, Islamic reformism found its place in the political sphere in the form of the Salafi ideology imported from Egypt. According to reformist Salafism, Islam should be reformed to accommodate its principles to the social, cultural,

economic, and political needs of modern Muslim societies. Very rapidly, reformist Salafism gave a modern religious legitimation to anti-colonial sentiment, and led the Moroccan National Movement to transform this religious ideology into an active political anti-colonial ideology and practice in the first half of the twentieth century.

Eventually, anti-colonial political practice led to a renewed Islamic legitimization of the 'Alawī dynasty, which played a very active role in the last period of the French and Spanish protectorate (1912–1956). After the official independence of the country in 1956, the monarchy was legitimated as the main pillar of the modern sovereign state both in political terms and religious terms. In this sense, the Constitution consecrated the King with the caliphal title of "*amīr al-mu'minīn*," literally the "Commander of the Faithful."[4] That made the monarch the highest Islamic authority in the country, adding a strong legitimation to his wide political powers and strengthening them symbolically in the religious sphere. This was also the result of a political fight between the monarchy and the *Istiqlāl* Party (Independence Party, IP), the main actor of Moroccan anti-colonial process. Once national unity was ensured, King Mohammed V (1956–1961) managed to re-appropriate the symbolic hegemony accumulated by the nationalist movement in the process of decolonization, partly due to the crucial support given by the rural areas, where the monarchy controlled local networks, and played a symbolic role from the religious point of view.[5] The first Moroccan Constitution proclaimed in 1962 under the government of Hassan II (1961–1999) grants this special royal status, both in political and religious terms, consecrating his figure as the highest guarantor of the Islamic principles in the country.[6] Since then, with article 41 of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Morocco reformed in 2011, stressing the religious authority of the King as *amīr al-mu'minīn*, and first *imām* in the country, his legitimacy relies mainly on the religious field. This is something that is not a mere symbol. It implies the religious legitimacy of his power as an "emirate," one of the most important titles historically held by the Sunni Caliphs, referring originally to their highest military powers.[7] This *moral* legitimacy is accompanied by the use of *esthetic* Islamic elements and rituals as the *bay'a* (act of allegiance) in order to show publicly the religious status of the king, symbolically linked to a political structure that was characterized in the 1970s and 1980s by favoring authoritarianism. As the first *imām*, the King's powers do not come from any human institution, but directly from God who appoints a caliphal order under the authority of the king. Indeed, Moroccan sovereigns possess a symbolic capital that irrefutably legitimizes their position as political and religious leaders, and decisively situates power relations within the framework of the state itself.

The king of Morocco (Mohammed VI since 1999) is not merely the head of the Moroccan state, a modern and secular Muslim state-nation, but is also the highest religious authority and the personification of the Islamic community leadership in the country and even outside of it, as the Moroccan 'imārat al-mu'minīn' is recognized by other Islamic authorities in Western Africa and among the Moroccan diaspora.

It is important to stress that the imposition of the caliphal model means the victory of traditional Islam over Salafí Islam in postcolonial Morocco. That is to say, the victory of the traditionalistic nobility over modernist Islamic intellectuals. As Dialmy states, the symbolic flow of Moroccan monarchy lies on its religious foundation. [8] Islamic tradition has symbolic elements that work as power springs: *'ilm* (knowledge), *baraka* (thaumaturgy), and *sharaf* (prophetic ancestry). All of them are attributions of Moroccan monarchs. Possessing any of these three elements is having some power in Muslim societies; accumulating the three of them confers the greatest power. Even though these powers are not political *stricto sensu*, they are the referential basis of any kind of political power within an Islamic society, as is the case of Morocco. Moroccan monarchs have played very well with these Islamic symbols in the political field, exclusively used by them from the top of the political structure. Nevertheless, after many years of using Islamic symbols as political tools to advance the monarch's political goals, a new political movement emerged in the 1970s to reorient and use these symbols of Islamic legitimacy in opposition to that of the monarchy. Political Islam gathered the support of a very wide set of social sectors, which were included in a new Islamic narrative that talked about justice and equality in a clear discourse of Islamic opposition addressed against traditional political elites.

While official Islam in Morocco is headed by the king, it is also represented by the *'ulam*ā,' the Islamic scholars who have always supported and legitimated the political order. As representatives of traditional religious knowledge, Islamic scholars take care of the fulfilment of the principles of the *sharī'a* within the state's institutions and in the public sphere from a Sunni, *mālikī* and *ash'arī* point of view to guarantee the "*islamicity*" of Morocco. In political practice, the body of *'ulam*ā' works as a political institution in charge of legitimating the powers of the state in Islamic terms. The relationship between the monarchy and the *'ulam*ā' is thus very close, as is their relationship with the traditional religious institutions, the *al-Qarawiyyīn* Islamic University in Fes and the *Dār al-Hadīth al-Hasaniyya* in Rabat. This institution, founded in 1964, is devoted to training future religious civil servants, but its main objective is controlling religious

discourse and spreading the official ideology of the state through the religious discourse within the country and beyond. A very similar role was played by the League of *'ulam*ā' (*Rābitat al-'ulam*ā'), founded by the king as a council of Muslim scholars in charge of advising the state on religious terms and issuing fatwas in benefit of the monarchy. In ideological terms, there is a clear identification between Islam and the established order which limits any possibility of political confrontation with the political regime, as long as Islam itself is identified with the state in every level: political, juridical, and administrative. [9] In the political level, Islam is represented by the *imārat al-mu'minīn* and by the structure and the action of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, which is one of the most important and stable institutions within the government. In the juridical level, the Islamic reference is present in the legal development of the family laws contained in the Family Code (*Mudawwanat al-usra*), whose rules are directly extracted from Islamic jurisprudence and regulates marriage, offspring, and inheritance. The social weight of this level is evident, for there is no possibility of dealing with these facts outside of the Islamic legal framework. Finally, in the administrative level, Islam is codified as an ethical reference always present in Islamic discourse linked to the administration and the monarchy. From this point of view, any political opposition against the monarchy would be symbolically defined as an opposition against religion and tradition, as was the case with the political opposition movements founded on ideologies such as Marxism or Islamism.

Political Islam and the New Islamic Political Legitimacy

Along with the 'Alawī Monarchy and the body of official interpreters of Islam, the other important actor dealing with the political use of religion in the public sphere is political Islam. [10] Obviously, there are many different aspects dealing with political Islam as a political actor in Morocco. Most of the organizations belonging to the 'Islamic movement' (*al-haraka al-islāmiyya*) in the country share a historical background, dating back to its first emergence in the early 1970s when the first Islamic political organisations developed as an ideological response to the declining leftist secular opposition to the 'Alawī Monarchy regime. They also share an epistemological combination of ideological components based on both the influence of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (*ikhwānī*) and that of the charitable religious associations traditionally linked with Sufism (*da'wī*), as Mohamed Darif states. [11] There are many associations and small organizations around the Islamist ideological parameter, sometimes showing important

divergences among them. In fact, the two most important and influential Islamist organizations attending to their ideological influence and their political practice, the Community of Justice and Spirituality (Jamāʿat al-ʿAdl wa-l-Ihsān, CJS) and the Unicity and Reform Movement (Harakat al- Tawhīd wa-l-Islāh, MUR) –politically linked with the Justice and Development Party (Hizb al-ʿAdāla wa-l-Tanmiyya, PJD) since 1998–have gone through very different political experiences.[12] On the one hand, the CJS is an outsider movement located outside the boundaries of the regime in terms of non-violent political resistance. It is officially illegal but still tolerated by the state, so its clear stand against the monarchy eventually leads to the repression of their members and the persecution of their activities. On the other hand, the PJD is a main institutional political actor located in the parliamentary opposition who reached the government for the first time in November 2011, in a coalition with other political parties.[13] In October 2016, the PJD managed to once again become the most voted option in the legislative elections, leading the coalition government since then.

    Thus, the CJS calls for the restoration of an authentic Islamic leadership in the country, starting with the 'conversion' of the king. Since the very beginning of the CJS as a movement in the early 1980s, its founder and leader, Abdessalam Yassine (1928–2012) sent a message to the king, based on his own Islamic moral legitimacy, to apply justice and equality as essential Islamic values. They have refused to participate in political competition many times, as they do not consider the political structure to be valid with an illegitimate monarch presiding over it. However, they are very active participants in the social sphere, mainly through education. They also have shared social and political space with other opposition organizations from very different ideological backgrounds, as can be seen in their active participation in the M20F (February 20 Movement) in 2011 along with leftist organizations demanding political reforms against corruption. The CJS joined the anti-corruption demonstrations in a clear proactive way, organizing and taking part in the protests throughout the country. Nevertheless, in December 2011, the CJS announced its withdrawal, claiming reasons related to effectiveness, while also trying to avoid future conflicts with other leading organizations within the movement, especially with the left-wing and secularist organizations.

    The PJD obviously accepts the political and religious legitimacy of the ʿAlawī Monarchs, but they seek an end to corruption in public life. They do not blame the monarchy for the situation of inequality, poverty, and corruption in the country. Instead, they blame their political competitors and some close friends of the Royal Palace.[14] In their official discourse and

practice, the PJD displays respect for the figure of the king as the highest Islamic authority in the country as he guarantees the maintenance of religious traditions and the state's Islamic national identity. In this sense, their perspective is rather conservative, compared to the CJS, who could be seen as the representation of a revolutionary spiritual modernity. In general terms, political Islam emerged as the expression of an ideological and political alternative in Morocco that underlines Islamic morality as a core element. Islamist ideologues, such as Saad Eddine El Outhmani (b. 1956), former Secretary General of the PJD (2004–2008) and Moroccan Prime Minister since 2017, or the above mentioned charismatic founder and leader of the CJS, Abdessalam Yassine, claim that the foundation of their Islamic political action derives from Islamic moral reference. Yet, they chose opposite ways of dealing with political power in the country. In this sense, the moral element in their political discourse represents an attempt to craft a whole new contemporary "Islamic narrative" and, therefore, to present the historical dynamic of political Islam as a movement that is essentially moral and "prophetic," as it foresees a specific kind of Islamic utopia. They translate this vision of political Islam into their political discourse in terms of real democracy and social justice. The PJD did not participate officially in the M20F in 2011, nor did it support the demonstrations; however, it supported some of the demonstrators' general demands and allowed individual members to join the demonstrations. Thus, it kept a low profile as an institutional political actor while using the protests ideologically as a source of power with a reactive and ambiguous discourse opposed to the demonstrations that showed empathy for the demonstrators and their demands against corruption at the same time.

    Islamic morality is – ethically and aesthetically – a core reference in the use of ideology[15] as an almost exclusive resource in competing for power.[16] Thus, the Islamist alternative in Morocco is based on a political and social ideology founded on a new Islamic legitimacy present in a new religious discourse of political change and social reform. Symbolically linked to the concepts of "democracy" (or its Islamic endogenous alternative, the *shūrà*) and "justice" (*ʿadl*) as the foundations of their opposition, Moroccan political Islam issues a discourse that is embedded within national and religious tradition but, at the same time, is clearly located within the framework of political modernity. Filled with concepts derived from the juridical tradition of classical Islam, Moroccan Islamist discourse is primarily addressed to the monarchy and the competing political actors (*Makhzen*), and secondarily to the rest of society. In both cases, the Islamist discourse displays a very powerful message in terms of "democratizing" the Islamic reference as the

main source of political legitimacy.[17] This discourse, beyond its immediate connection to very concrete historical contexts, uses Islamic concepts that are easily recognizable by the Moroccan population. These concepts are politicized in their origin and re-politicized in the discourse with the addition of a contextual political meaning, and based pragmatically on the conditions of the power competition in Morocco and the position of each of the Islamist actors in this setting. The main specific factor here is linked with the specificity of the religious and political context of contemporary Morocco. In this sense, the non-negligible role of the 'Alawī Monarchy. In moral terms, it is not possible to refuse the legal authority of the 'Alawī Monarchy from an "Islamic" standpoint, as their political power is inseparable from their religious legitimacy.[18] This status makes the Islamic political action of political Islam in Morocco far more ideological than in other Muslim contexts. The use of juridical and political Islamic concepts as the 'imamate' (*imāma*) and the 'caliphate' (*khilāfa*) by the main Moroccan Islamist actors, the PJD and CJS, in their discourse is thus directly linked to the monarchical 'imārat al-mu'minīn' in terms of acceptance-reform or refusing-resistance. In that sense, it is linked to a concrete model of 'Islamic government' in ideological terms. Islamic actors try to develop their own Islamic conceptualization to deal with political power regarding this specificity. This is the case of the use of the concept of 'imāma' by the PJD, given that they accept the religious and political legitimacy of the king and the current political system. [19] To them, the 'imāma' would be not only a concept related to the exercise of religious power by the monarch, but also the implementation, in Islamic terms, of a kind of 'straightaway governance' in moral terms, for it would be a general framework of good governance, a kind of prophetic moral guideline which is perfectly compatible with democracy as a technical system of political representation. This is the way they claim to share Islamic legitimacy in the exercise of their political power from the opposition to the government within the Moroccan political context they try to reform (*islāh*) in ethical terms from the inside in the name of Islamic morality. That is rather different from the perspective of the CJS, whose starting point is putting an end to the "tyrannical" and "despotic" government implemented by the 'Alawī Monarchs in the name of Islam. The dialectical opposite to this concept is that of 'khilāfa,' representing the general framework for the implementation of the government of the *shūrà* instead of "corrupted" liberal democracy, so that the CJS locates the moral reference in the first place. In this sense, its reactive standpoint rejects arbitration as a constitutional role of the monarchy, considering it illegitimate in moral terms, as long as it pursues its own economic and political interest instead of implementing

justice in political, juridical, and administrative levels according to Islamic prescriptions. It is therefore the concept of 'justice' (*'adl/'adāla*) they claim to emphasize, as opposed to those of the 'despotism' (*istibdād*) and 'corruption' (*fasād*) of the ruling elites in the dialectics of opposition facing the primary political elites (PJD) or the monarchy itself (CJS).[20]

Their standpoints regarding political and symbolic opposition vary in a wide diversity of ideological options in terms of acceptance/reformism or refuse/resistance, but they always have a shared claim of Islamic legitimacy in common.[21] However, the discourse of Islamist organizations differs in terms of political strategy, as the ideological element is the essential power resource for them, and it is by using this resource that each of them attempts to turn themselves into a main political actor and into a moral point of reference within the framework of the political power competition in Morocco.[22] The main vector of their discourse and the ideology that backs it up (and which essentially frames Islamist political practice) is the use of Islamic moral references linking the role of Islamic governance to the governed (*al-hākim wa-l-mahkūm*), within the framework of the 'Islamic state' (*al-dawla al-islāmiyya*) as the ultimate horizon of political change, in which political Islam is situated either in resistance, opposition, or reformism.

Conclusion

As a general conclusion, it is possible to state that there is a postmodern cultural element that provokes a rupture between two Islamic political conceptualizations: hierarchical (Islamic monarchy) and popular (political Islam). This cultural element is related to political narrative, so that is to say, to history and discourse. This narrative is set between structuralism and political pragmatism, for Islam is still the most powerful ideological element linking ideology and political power in Morocco. In this sense, every political and social actor, in order to share this Islamic legitimacy, is forced to locate their ideological and political proposal *regarding* the 'Islamic reference' parameter. Historically, the 'Alawī Monarchy has had control over the magnitude of this parameter, but the inclusion of a new discourse legitimating political practice in Islamic terms eventually led to the progressive "democratization" of the Islamic political legitimacy. In short, Islam is in every case an ideological tool to legitimize political standpoints before society, so that it can be adapted according to the political and historical circumstances regarding power relationships.

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Notes

1   ʿAbd al-Ilāh Bulqazīz, *Al-Islām wa-l-siyāsa. Dawr al-haraka al-islāmiyya fī sūgh al-majāl al-siyāsī,* (Casablanca: al-Markaz al-thaqāfī l-ʿarabī, 2001): 7-10.

2   C. Holes, s.v., "Wahhābiyya," *EI²*, v. XI: 39-47.

3   Hind ʿArūb, *Al-Makhzan fī l-thaqāfa al-siyāsiyya al-maghribiyya,* (Rabat: Al-Najah al-Jadīda, 2004).

4   H. A. Gibb, s.v., "Amīr al-muʾminīn," *EI²*, v. I: 445.

5   Rémy Leveau, *Le Fellah marocain défenseur du trône,* (Paris: Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, 1985).

6   Mohamed Darif, *Al-Dīn wa-l-siyāsa fī l-Maghrib,* (Casablanca: Manshūrāt al-Majalla al-Maghribiyya li-ʿIlm al-Iŷjtimāʿ al-Siyāsī, 2000).

7   Youssef Belal, *Le cheikh et le calife. Soiologie religieuse de l'islam politique au Maroc,* (Lyon: Ecole Normale Superieure, 2011).

8   Abdessamad Dialmy, "L´islamisme marocain entre révolution et intégration," *Archives des Sciences Sociales des Religions* 110 (2007): 7.

9   Mohamed Darif, *Monarchie marocaine et acteurs religieux,* (Casablanca: Afrique Orient, 2010): 23-25.

10   Malika Zeghal, *Les islamistes marocains,* (Casablanca: Le Fennec, 2008): 11-14.

11   Darif, *Monarchie,* 2010.

12   Juan A. Macías-Amoretti, "Political Islam in Morocco: from Islamic ethics to political power," in *Political Islam in a time of revolt*, edited by Ferran Izquierdo, John Etherington and Laura Feliu, 227-248, Series: Islam and Nationalism, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

13   Eva Wenger, *Islamist Opposition in Authoritarian Regimes: The Party of Justice and Development in Morocco,* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2011).

14   Khadija Mohsen-Finan and Malika Zeghal, "Opposition islamiste et pouvoir monarchique au Maroc: Le cas du Parti de la Justice et du Développement," *Revue française de science politique* 56 (2006): 79-119.

15   Juan A. Macías-Amoretti, "Imamate and Caliphate: Islamic Governance Theory in Moroccan Islamist Discourse," in *Caliphates and Islamic Global Politics*, edited by Timothy Poirson and Robert L. Oprisko, 24-33, (Bristol: E-International Relations Publications, 2014).

16   Ferran Izquierdo Brichs, ed., *El islam político en un contexto de revueltas,* (Barcelona: CIDOB, 2013): 319-349.

17   Lise Storm, *Democratization in Morocco: The political elite and struggles for power in the post-independence state,* (London: Routledge, 2008).

18   Darif, *Monarchie,* 2010.

19   Saad Eddine El Outhmani, *Al-Dīn wa-l-siyāsa. Tamayyīz lā fasl,* (Casablanca: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī l-ʿArabī, 2009).

20   Juan A. Macías-Amoretti, "Seeking an 'other' desperately: the dialectical opposition of Political Islam in Morocco," *Journal of North African Studies* 20(3) (2015): 336-348.

21   Ibid.

22   Francesco Cavatorta, "Neither participation nor revolution the strategy of the Moroccan Jamiat al-Adl wal-Ihsan," *Mediterranean Politics* 12(3) (2007): 381-397.