

## POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF ISLAMIST ACTORS IN MOROCCO

Participation of Islamists in the formal political process had taken two different forms prior to the Arab Spring. One was their de facto acceptance and limited accommodation by authoritarian regimes, as was the case in Egypt by allowing independent MPs from within the Muslim Brotherhood. The other was inclusion in the form of legal political parties, as in Morocco and Jordan, albeit with restricted electoral terms. Since 1996, one group among the Moroccan Islamist groups, namely al-Islah wal-Tajdid (Reform and Renewal), has become an integral part of the parliament, first as an opposition party (MPDC/PJD) and later as a ruling party (PJD) since November 2011. In contrast to single-party rule elsewhere in the Middle East, a multi-party system has been the choice of the monarchy as the ultimate decision making body in Morocco. While this system was more democratic on its face, successive governments were composed of palace loyalist parties, which came to power through rigged elections up until the 1990s. The monarchy utilized a highly diverse political strategy, including the following measures: 1) repress the opposition movements and deny their legalization, 2) divide the strong opposition parties by favoring certain factions over others, 3) create new pro-palace parties, and 4) co-opt the opposition parties into the system. As the parties became debilitated due to infighting or failing to find solutions to the country's ongoing problems, the king presented himself as the "ultimate problem-solver" and prevailed as the neutral entity. Thus, multi-party politics upheld the political stature of the king instead of diminishing it.

By creating restricted political openings, as was the case in the early 1990s, the king intended to co-opt some opposition parties, which had been previously excluded from the political system. For a group aspiring to participate in the system, the price of inclusion is moderation. In this vein, al-Tajdid wal-Islah has repeatedly reiterated its acceptance of the monarchy's legitimacy since the mid-1980s, despite having rejected it earlier in the 1970s. Taking advantage of the political opening in the 1990s, the group transformed itself into a political party, and came to power in the 2011 elections. In contrast, the ardent Islamist opposition group al-Adl has persistently rejected the legitimacy of the established order. Its founder, Sheikh Abdessalam Yassine, passed away in December 2012, leaving behind questions about the movement's relationship with the monarchical apparatus. As the

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Arab revolutions have transformed politics throughout the MENA region in terms of political participation, it remains to be seen whether al-Adl will continue to defy the monarchy and refuse to participate in the political system.

### Al-Adl wal-Ihsan's Political Platform

Al-Adl wal-Ihsan is the largest Islamist opposition movement in Morocco. There are differing estimations regarding its number of followers, ranging between one hundred thousand to five million depending on the source. The political program of the group, aiming to rebuild politics, economics, and society on Islamic foundations, is shaped mainly by the writings of its founder, Sheikh Yassine. Born in 1928, the prolific Islamist thinker went on to found the group al-Adl, known in English as the Justice and Charity Organization, in 1981. Trained in the Boutchichiyya Qadiri Sufi tradition, Sheikh Yassine combined Sufism's spiritual education (tarbiya) with the Islamist call to apply Islam in all spheres of life. He decried the proliferation of secularization and Westernization in post-independence Morocco by arguing that the colonization process in cultural and economic spheres had not yet ended.

Dedicated to creating a morally robust Islamic society, Yassine gave the utmost importance to education, which he believed would help teach self-discipline to Muslims. Criticizing Western secular societies due to their "selfish egoism" and "absence of moral values," he envisioned an Islamic society where spiritual and moral values would form both the "motivation and the goal." Apart from religious activism, his theory also entailed socio-political dimension, and the necessity of organization (tanzim), culminating in the establishment of an Islamic state where Islamic law would prevail. In order to realize this goal, his "Prophetic Method" was gradualist and peaceful. Instead of rushing to topple the existing political system, he promoted the mobilization of the social base and the establishment of a political branch.

Based on this vision, the Political Circle was established, composed of the General Secretariat, the National Council, and various regional bureaus throughout the country where the group's national and international platforms are formulated. The Political Circle covers three different branches dealing with the affairs of women, youth, and trade unions. In its meeting in Septem-

ber 2012, domestic problems such as the ever-growing levels of corruption, pillaging of public wealth by royal cronies, lack of political freedoms, and utilization of violence by the royal establishment (makhzen) forces against the civilians were discussed. This was accompanied by a demand for the lifting of the ban on al-Adl, and a call for people to peacefully continue their struggle to bring political and constitutional change. At the international level, the group reiterated its anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist goals by appealing for the unification of the ummah against the "expansionist projects of the great powers."

### Opposition from Outside the System

Despite the fact that Islam is constitutionally accepted to be the "religion of the state" in Morocco, Islamic law is not applied in jurisprudence, with the exclusion of the Personal Status Law. The Moroccan king is the politico-religious leader, holding the title "Commander of the Faithful" due to the royal family's claim to have descended from Prophet Muhammad. This title grants the king the ultimate religious authority in establishing and heading official religious institutions where the king's religious preeminence is indispensable. This state-enforced form of Islam drew the Sheikh's criticism, which urged the liberation of the mosques from the yoke of official propaganda.

Attacking the very basis of hereditary monarchy as "un-Islamic," devoid of shura-based consultative agencies as a medium to rein in the vast prerogatives of the king, Sheikh Yassine's opposition to the monarchy was quite vocal. He attracted the monarchy's wrath after sending a personal letter to King Hassan II (1929-1999), entitled "Islam or Deluge," in 1974. In the letter, he reproached the king, urging him to abide by Islamic teachings, sack the unjust advisers around him, bring an end to Westernization, and promote the establishment of an Islamic economy. Yassine's audacity was too much to be tolerated by the royal palace. In a humiliating response, the regime had Yassine forcibly committed to a psychiatric hospital for three years, from 1974 to 1977. The monarchy's repressive policies toward Yassine continued with his periodic incarceration and house arrest, which finally ended in 2000 by a decree of the current monarch, King Muhammad VI, to whom Yassine did not hesitate to send a similar open letter in 2000. Despite the lifting of Yassine's house arrest, the regime's intimi-

dation and continuous surveillance of al-Adl members' activities continue to this day.

Since its establishment, the movement has not moderated its anti-monarchical position, despite the monarchy's occasional co-optative attempts. Despite being banned, the movement is tolerated by the monarchical authorities due in part to its widespread appeal within Moroccan society and as a potential safeguard against the Jihadi Salafists. In contrast to the Jihadi Salafists, al-Adl has continuously rejected violence, clandestine activism, and foreign meddling. In contrast to monarchy-friendly Islamist groups, al-Adl has refused to participate in formal politics. The group has boycotted all elections, including the November 2011 general elections, when an Islamist party (PJD) received the winning share of the votes. Al-Adl believes embracing democracy procedurally (the benefits of the ballot box, separation of powers, a system of checks and balances) will not lead to any real transition from the monarchy-dominated political system to a more participatory system. Refusing to utilize insurrectionary tactics to come to power, the group's strategy has been to educate and gradually Islamicize the masses, both politically and spiritually. This awakened public-to-be, as was theorized by the Sheikh, would lead to a non-violent general uprising (qawma) against the established order, culminating with the establishment of an Islamic state. This would be the first step toward the unification of the Muslim world under a global caliphate.

### The Movement at a Crossroads

Even prior to the passing of Sheikh Yassine, one of the oft-repeated questions regarding the future of the movement has been whether it would maintain its anti-monarchical stance or accommodate the monarchy. Nearly one year of the Islamist-led coalition government demonstrated the extreme difficulty of challenging the predominance of the governing elite (makhzen) in politics. In this period, al-Adl maintained its skepticism that the Islamist-led PJD government would shake the entrenched roots of despotism, corruption, and injustice. Deep-seated mistrust of the PJD-led government was crystallized when al-Adl members found no difference in harassment directed against them between non-Islamist governments and the current Islamist-led government. For instance, in July 2012

the group was once again denied the right to organize summer camps, as has been the case since 2000. The PJD's incapacity to defy the regime incumbents vindicated, to some extent, the claims of al-Adl regarding the futility of bringing a comprehensive change to the status quo by functioning from within the system.

Mirroring Sheik Yassine's letters to King Hassan II and Muhammed VI, a prominent member the Political Circle and son-in-law of Sheikh Yassine, Abdullah Shibani, sent an open letter to Prime Minister Benkirane in November 2012. Both being comrades in revolutionary Islamist movements in the 1970s, Shibani criticized Benkirane and the transformation of his Islamist movement from being rejectionist to accommodating the monarchical order. He argued that "[The makhzen] never allow you to surpass the red-lines, which guarantees their hegemony over political authority and their plundering of public funds." Shibani later urged Benkirane to repent, resign from his post, and ask the king to distribute the shares of royal companies to the needy. In contrast to criticizing the monarchy, this time, the critique was directed against the system-friendly Islamists. This has the potential to serve the royal strategy of exploiting the inter-group schisms among Islamist groups.

While labeling the PJD as "being a tool in the hands of the real patrons in politics," it is questionable whether al-Adl offers a tangible alternative to challenge the makhzen's power by "operating from the outside." The illegal status of the group dissuades various groups from joining al-Adl in a "National Dialogue," which has long been demanded by the group. Neither accepting to participate in parliament by compromising its ideological tenets, nor to be the flag bearer of the Moroccan Arab Spring might push the movement toward the margins of the political struggle. While not restricting itself solely to a non-political religious outreach, the group continues its political activism by not acceding to the bargaining nature of politics. As an attempt to surpass this deadlock, in his latest interview from January 2013, the spokesman of the group, Fathallah Arsalane, took a relatively moderate stance by declaring the group's readiness to transform into a political party. The primary barrier preventing this from being realized, he argues, is the royal authorities' unpreparedness to authorize the group. The state would only legalize the gro-

up, Arsalane states, if the group renounced its principles and accepted the establishment's red lines, namely the legitimacy of the monarchical order. This declaration can be read as a shift from his stance in 2009, when he asserted the group's firm rejection of participation in the elections and formal politics until such time as when "there would be true competition and real institutions, which are now non-existent."

While the group's criticism of the regime's undemocratic structure persists, Arsalane has seemingly softened his stance regarding this truly being an impediment for their participation in the formal politics. Despite their reservations about the present constitution, Arsalane openly states his organization's respect for functioning within its framework. Instead, he accuses the state of not abiding by the democratic references in the constitution. This point is also supported by a senior member of the Political Circle, Omar Iharshane, who criticized the regime for not adhering to their own slogans espousing pluralism, human rights, and freedoms, as it refuses to legalize al-Adl. At this moment, the monarchy does not seem to be willing to thaw relations with

the group, as it did not send any royal representative to the funeral of the Sheikh. While it is doubtful if the participation in the funeral would have fixed the rocky relations with the royal palace, it would nonetheless have opened a new course between the two opposing camps.

It remains to be seen whether al-Adl will emerge as a legally accepted player in Moroccan politics in the near future. The decision to participate necessitates engaging in a series of self-analysis and compromises. This is not dissimilar to the Spanish Communist Party (PCE), which recognized the legitimacy of the monarchy in exchange for its legalization in 1977. However, the difference is the symbolic characteristic of the Spanish king and the genuine democratic transition in Spain in the 1970s in contrast to the omnipotent Moroccan king and the monarchy-crafted restricted democratization process. While the Communists' participation in formal politics during the Spanish transition contributed to the democratization of the country, al-Adl might well end up mirroring the PJD, backing the cosmetic reforms of the 2011 constitution, and bringing the long-standing *raison d'être* of the movement into question.

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