

## Succeeding by surviving: Examining the durability of political Islam in Morocco

WORKING PAPER

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**SUMMARY:** Moroccan Islamists have proven resilient in the wake of the Arab Spring and have offered a different model of Islamist participation that partly reflects the country's unique monarchical context. The Brotherhood-inspired Justice and Development Party (PJD) has secured a foothold in government through an accommodationist posture towards Morocco's monarchy, while the anti-monarchical popular movement Al Adl Wal Ihsan has sustained its appeal and access through non-violent activism.

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## A Moroccan Model?

At the annual conference of the youth wing of the main Islamist political party in Morocco, the Party of Justice and Development (“PJD”), the 2006 program was filled with sessions led by party leaders and activists on topics ranging from human rights to local governance, mobilization, and the Internet.<sup>1</sup> It also featured a session with representatives from Islamist parties across the Middle East and North Africa. When I asked a party leader why they had invited these guests from outside Morocco, he replied that it was important to “learn from them.”

The admission was tinged with humility, with the implication that it was Morocco’s Islamists who had the learning to do, that other, older and more experienced Islamist parties could instruct them, could show them the way.<sup>2</sup> The following years the party dispatched senior officials to Turkey to meet with the similarly named Party of Justice and Development, the AKP party. In the three years that followed, before the PJD dominated elections in 2011 that propelled it to the prime ministership, its activists embarked upon many such exploratory and educational trips and conferences, including to Cairo to meet with the organization that had originally inspired its own founding, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>3</sup>

As the diverse dynamics of the Arab Spring spread across the Middle East and North Africa, the northwest African country of Morocco barely seemed to register on the wider geopolitical map. Protests were smaller than in neighboring countries; its leader –King Mohammed VI – never faced the existential threats that other authoritarian rulers did. And the king also appeared to stay in front of the protests, ushering in constitutional reforms that allowed him to retain the perceived mantle of reform. Even when Islamists appeared to take advantage of political openings across the region, such a development in Morocco barely registered in the Western consciousness. Attention seemed to focus on Islamist parties in Egypt and Tunisia – even though it was Morocco in 2011 that witnessed the first Islamist head of government in the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>4</sup>

Has Morocco’s moment finally arrived? As mainstream Islamist political parties, those with roots in the Muslim Brotherhood model, appear to be on the wane throughout the Arabic-speaking world, both such movements in Morocco are enduring. Indeed, it is not just the leading PJD that survived the Arab Spring and its aftermath. The country’s largest Islamist movement, Al Adl Wal Ishaan or the Justice and Spirituality Movement (“Al Adl”), a movement that boycotts elections and evades legality, has also navigated the revolutionary period and its aftermath with unique agility.

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<sup>1</sup> Meeting information and background, see Avi Spiegel, *Young Islam: The New Politics of Religion in Morocco and the Arab World* (New York: Princeton University Press, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> For more on Islamist participation in elections, see the work of Shadi Hamid, Nathan Brown, Jillian Schwedler, and Carrie Wickham, among many others.

<sup>3</sup> On “familial resemblances” between Morocco’s PJD and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, see Carrie Wickham, *The Muslim Brotherhood: Evolution of an Islamist Movement* (New York: Princeton University Press, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Adding to this effect is that much of the recent scholarly material written on Morocco’s Islamists appears in Arabic and French. See, e.g., the work by leading scholars Mohamed Darif and Mohamed Tozy. The exception is Malika Zeghal, *Morocco: Religion, Authoritarianism and Electoral Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Marcus Wiener, 2008); and Emad Eldin Shahin, *Political Ascent: Contemporary Islamic Movements in North Africa* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview, 1997).

In the wake of the 2013 Egyptian coup, the coup that spelled the end of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's dominance in Egyptian politics, I once again asked a party official about his relationships with Islamists across the region. When I reminded him of those earlier trips to study other parties, his response was telling, perhaps signaling that power dynamics were slowly shifting. "Now," he said, with a new air of self-confidence, "people should study us."

This chapter heeds this call. Indeed, Morocco increasingly offers an important case study for understanding new and emerging paths of political Islam, or, in other words, how – and in what forms – Islamism and the political process can continue to interact. The Moroccan regime has often attempted, usually over-ambitiously, to hold itself out as a model for many things: for democracy, for reform, for so-called "soft" authoritarianism.<sup>5</sup> But today, perhaps, the country does offer something exceptional: a glimpse into sustaining forms of political Islam, of Islamist parties still holding onto relevance, if not limited power.<sup>6</sup>

This chapter seeks to explain the resilience (and relative success) of mainstream Islamism in Morocco, and in the process help elucidate the forces shaping the next generation of political Islam. This endurance cannot be explained simply by the fact that Islamists in Morocco have come to understand Islam differently than their counterparts elsewhere (of course they did; all such actors exhibit unique, even idiosyncratic, religio-political worldviews). Indeed, it is also not that they are luckier, more learned, more competent or even somehow more ideologically committed to the political process than other Islamists.

Instead, I will argue here in the sections that follow that their relative success can be explained by the confluence of three factors or, what I term, the three "c"s: context, control, and competition. First, by "context," I mean the specific political and constitutional context in which these Islamists function. I am not referring here simply to the existence of a monarchical system -- for not all monarchies are equal. Rather, I point to how the monarchy has exercised its authority: allowing Islamist political participation, but only within certain proscribed lines. Such lines, especially regarding religious activism, often constrain Islamists' power and perhaps broader ideological pursuits, but paradoxically also help ensure their survival and continued appeal.

Second, by "control," I focus here on the extent to which these movements exercise control over and within their internal organizations, specifically between the Islamist party and its allied religious wing or movement ("haraka"). Largely unique among such movements in the region, Islamist groups in Morocco have mostly subsumed their affiliated religious units – not the other way around – with political calculi and authority now driving religious movements. Such an organizational relationship bears considerable strategic fruit, enabling the party to deploy such

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<sup>5</sup> On Morocco as model, see Avi Spiegel, "Just another king's speech?" *Foreign Policy*, March 18, 2011, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/03/18/just-another-kings-speech/>.

<sup>6</sup> Tariq Ramadan, professor of contemporary Islamic Studies at Oxford University and grandson of the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, also noted the shifting sources and influences of new Islamist thought: "It's not coming just from the Middle East anymore," Ramadan noted. "It's coming from North African countries and from the West. There are new visions and there are new ways of understanding. Now they are bringing these thoughts back to the Middle East." Anthony Shadid, "Islamists' Ideas on Democracy and Faith Face Test in Tunisia," *New York Times*, February 17, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/18/world/africa/tunisia-islamists-test-ideas-decades-in-the-making.html>.

movements at their will and allowing the party to maintain and expand its base by offering a unique space to develop discipline among members, religiously oriented activism, and even internal opposition.

Third, and finally, by “competition,” I am referring to the relationship of Al Adl and PJD between and among local and regional Islamist contenders. The nature of this competition – specifically, the way in which each continues to evolve in relation to the other and to cleverly navigate relative market share – has allowed each one to carve out unique appeal. Moreover, contrary to widespread prediction, regional and domestic change, including the Arab Spring, the Egyptian coup, and the rise of ISIS, has not adversely affected these movements’ trajectories. To the contrary, both movements have successfully navigated this tumult by expanding their appeal. They have done so by selling themselves as exceptional and unique – by promulgating the notion that their approach, evidenced largely by their mere survival, is working.

### **Islamists in Government**

Islamists of the PJD spent close to three decades attempting to form a political party, one that could finally participate in elections. After breaking from the country’s first Islamist movement, the illegal Harakat al-Shabiba al-Islamiyya (Movement of Islamic Youth) in the 1970s, its early leaders experimented with a number of tactics: they altered their organizational configurations, merged with other parties, and even changed the names of their group.<sup>7</sup> Yet, the ultimate obstacle to their participation – that is, the major stumbling block to the regime approving their multiple applications for party formation – was not that they represented a nascent political threat. Indeed, during this time, the state allowed socialists, for example, to compete in elections, and even form the first ever “alternance” or opposition government.<sup>8</sup>

When Islamists of the PJD finally formed their political party, they did so under the regulations set forth by the country’s interior ministry and the king himself. They would be permitted to formally participate in elections, it turned out, only if they agreed not to challenge the religious foundations of the state – not to challenge the king’s role as “Commander of the Faithful” or, in other words, to refrain from what the king termed “heresy.” For an Islamist party – one with ideological roots in the Muslim Brotherhood model – to cede religious claim-making to the state would appear antithetical to its goals, or at the very least a difficult compromise to navigate.

Yet, the Islamists of PJD ultimately relented.<sup>9</sup> Senior leaders even went so far as to give up fundamental early claims – the creation of an Islamic state. They would cease to pursue one, one leading activist claimed, because the Moroccan state, under the leadership of the king, “was already one.”<sup>10</sup> PJD followed this path because even in those early years they were motivated by their own survival, by the need to expand and maintain their base and compete

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<sup>7</sup> For more on PJD’s path to party formation, see Michael Willis, “Between Alternance and the *Makhzen*: *At-Tawhid wa al-Islah*’s Entry Into Moroccan Politics,” *Journal of North African Studies* 4 (1999).

<sup>8</sup> For more on Alternance party, see Susan Miller, *A History of Modern Morocco* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> Myriam Francois-Cerrah, in her ongoing doctoral research at Oxford University, makes the compelling argument that certain senior leaders did, in fact, believe that Morocco was an “Islamic state.”

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Emad Shahin, *Political Ascent: Contemporary Islamic Movements in North Africa* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998).

with local Islamist competitors, particularly a growing Al Adl (largely by offering something no one else did – that is, electoral participation); to respond to regional events and realities, namely civil war in nearby Algeria (“We are not Algerian Islamists,” an early leader Abdelilah Benkirane would say as not to scare supporters or the state); and finally by the looming threat of state action (the prospect of too great or challenging a threat was not possible or advisable because it would elicit too great a crackdown from the state). After all, as soon as Shabiba Islamiyya challenged the monarchy, the regime immediately suppressed it; the group soon splintered and was driven underground.

Whether these changes arose partly as a result of belief or tactics (or both), the party that emerged from these concessions has capitalized, and even internalized, these dynamics. They have driven the way PJD campaigned for office, how they mobilized their base, how they designed and devised their organizations and party structures, and ultimately, despite recent suggestions to the contrary, how they govern. Consider PJD’s path to the prime ministership itself, to electoral success once deemed unimaginable (by its members, the general population, or even the state). For the first elections in which they were ever allowed to participate (1997), activists agreed to latch onto another existing party.<sup>11</sup> In the elections of 2002, they only contested a limited number of seats. In the local elections following the 2003 Casablanca bombings (often referred to as Morocco’s 9/11), they agreed, once again at the behest of the monarchy, to limit the districts they would contest, not wanting to exacerbate tensions in the country.

When the party grappled with how to respond to electoral setbacks in the 2007 elections, it elected as its new secretary general not someone who would take a more antagonistic stance against the state, but rather someone more accommodating. Its new leader, Abdelilah Benkirane, was someone who had a longstanding history of working with the monarchy, within the confines of state regulation. And when the Arab Spring hit Morocco in 2011, PJD opted, not surprisingly, to remain for the most part on the sidelines. Some party members voiced sympathetic notes about the protests, but, in the main, they worried that challenging the king would risk destabilizing the country, and, more selfishly, disrupt their own long ingrained path to power (we will see in this chapter, after all, that the group initially most active in the protests was their main Islamist competitor: Al Adl).

Further, when PJD contested elections in 2011, they agreed to give up their biggest mobilizing space – the mosque – abiding by earlier government rules that forbade parties from campaigning in places of worship. Indeed, they ran a campaign largely bereft of mentions of religion, instead focusing largely not on opposing the state but on opposing other parties, on the promise of renewing the political process itself. They stressed bread and butter issues, including job creation, unemployment, corruption, and minimum wage increases. In a typical campaign-related video, for example, the head of PJD Youth Khalid Bukkharri implores voters to support PJD because it can rid the political process of corruption. His focus is very evidently on

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<sup>11</sup> In this case, the Democratic and Constitutional Popular Movement party (MPDC).

economic issues; not religion.<sup>12</sup>

Once PJD assumed office it did so all the while under the king's auspices. Under rules set forth in the country's new constitution of 2011, the party that won the majority of votes would finally be guaranteed a right to the prime ministership. (Up until then, this outcome was not assured. When the king had the power to choose whomever he wanted, such as after the 2002 elections, he looked past the election results and appointed a technocrat.) But while the new constitution paved the way for a PJD-led government, it also significantly regulated and constrained it. The king still maintained the power to veto appointments and to appoint, in the first place, the most critical ministries: the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Defense, among others.

Some scholars have argued that Benkirane's rule poses unprecedented challenges to the stability of the Moroccan regime, but such a view is misleading; in fact, the opposite is largely true.<sup>13</sup> It is certainly the case that once in power, Benkirane's personable, even folksy, approach has managed to transcend some of these structural constraints, attaining a popularity unprecedented in contemporary Morocco for a politician outside of the king – a context where the king's approval rating runs high and where politicians routinely rate as abysmal. Benkirane addresses crowds in local dialects and appears to be personally unaffected by the spoils of power. For instance, relatives told me how he still buys his furniture at used furniture open-air markets outside of Rabat. At one campaign event in 2015, Benkirane could not hold back his tears as he marveled at the thousands of people assembled to see him. The crowds gathered seemed to revel in Benkirane's unique display of emotion, drowning out his words with applause. His popularity is such that he reportedly now finally has a bodyguard (a development that might say less about his new popularity than the old power of the prime minister, one that could walk around freely without protection).

It is certainly the case that Benkirane has shown a willingness, also unique for a local politician, to speak out against the regime and even, at times, the king himself. Benkirane often rails, for example, about longstanding state interests, about entrenched economic and political forces that curtail his party's ability to rule, using metaphors such as "crocodiles" and "ghosts" to connote their omnipresence and hidden power.<sup>14</sup> Such statements clearly implicate the king himself, who controls the largest portions of the economy.

Yet, these statements are exceptions, not the rule, and should be understood not as new challenges to the regime, but rather as well-timed, strategic efforts to appeal to oppositional forces within the country, namely anti-regime sentiment within sectors of his own party base and

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<sup>12</sup> One plea, for example, proceeds roughly as follows: "The main discussion today is targeted at Moroccan youth. The Moroccan youth that we have our hope invested in. We believe that they will respond to the needs of the country, on the path towards ending corruption and tyranny...We must stand against corruption and stand with those that fight for our rights. Every Moroccan, whether living in the mountains or valley or desert, must give your vote to he/she who deserves your vote, who truly deserves it. Hence, the PJD invites you, and all citizens, to vote for it, so that our voice may be a voice and opportunity strong against all tyranny and corruption." *PJD2011 CHABAB*. Pjd Communication. YouTube video, 3:24. November 21, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fUoZGv-trAs>.

<sup>13</sup> Intissar Fakir and Maati Monjib, "Rabat's Undoing: Why the Moroccan Monarchy Should be Worried," *Foreign Affairs*, October 23, 2014, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/morocco/2014-10-23/rabats-undoing>.

<sup>14</sup> For a humorous take on Benkirane's favorite metaphors, see *Benkirane Vs Crocodiles & Ghosts [Photomanipulation Progress]*, Hamdan Design, MP4, 1:06, July 16, 2013, <https://www.facebook.com/video.php?v=10201006535184485&theater>.

within the Islamist opposition of Al Adl (see section below). Indeed, Benkirane and his deputies have consistently shown a granular fixation on party strategy and survival, for controlling party machines and operations. Youth activists reported that Benkirane himself, as sitting prime minister, had a say in which candidates ran for head of the youth wing.<sup>15</sup>

The vast majority of the time, Benkirane goes out of his way to remind the public of the dominance of the king. In March 2015, he was explicit when he told a group that “Morocco has no future if we enter into conflict with our king.”<sup>16</sup> The imagery of his speech was also significant: Benkirane spoke next to a framed photo of the king placed on a pedestal beside him. The king’s picture was larger than Benkirane himself.<sup>17</sup>

Nowhere is the party’s ability to survive more on display than in its evolving internal organization. PJD finds its most recent roots in the Harakat al-Tawhid wa-l-Islah (Movement of Unity and Reform or the “haraka”). But when the party was formed it faced a choice of whether to disband the “affiliated religion movement,” to dissolve it within the party, or to keep it alive as a separate entity. The party chose the third option – largely as a way to continue to be able to mobilize as many young people as possible. The haraka continues to exist, but remains largely devoted to supporting party mobilization, able to recruit supporters with Islamic messages when necessary and acceptable. Its presence and activities – largely consisting of weekly Quranic study sessions for movement members – allows the party to attract young people interested more in religion than in politics while also enabling the party to assert control and discipline over it. The haraka’s organizational make-up, originally modeled loosely after the Muslim Brotherhood’s *usra* or family model, including where individuals were historically internally “promoted” based on how many new members they managed to recruit, has evolved into a sophisticated system more focused on the development of new party leaders. Activists frequently report that to be successful in the party, one must be active in the haraka.<sup>18</sup>

The presence of the “separate” haraka also gives the party plausible deniability over more controversial issues, allowing its newspaper (*Attajdid*) to write on topics that might appeal to diverse groups, including those more religiously inclined. The extent to which the haraka has become part and parcel of the party machine was evident in the election of its new head in 2014. Both leading candidates had party roots: one was the party’s former secretary general (and the country’s former foreign minister) and the other was a former close government aid to the sitting prime minister and party secretary general, Benkirane.

PJD officials still evoke religion, but almost never when in opposition with the state (as was the case with a debate over “Freedom of Conscience” in 2013 when it changed its views to align itself with the monarchy). It also abided by a 2013 state edict that prohibited religious leaders, including imams, from running for office. Instead, for party officials, “Islam” itself often becomes

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<sup>15</sup> For more on PJD party discipline, see Spiegel, *Young Islam*, 2015; See also article on Benkirane and day-to-day party operations.

<sup>16</sup> For quote on Benkirane needing the king, see Youssef Roudaby, “Benkirane: «Il n’y a pas d’avenir pour le Maroc si nous entrons en conflit avec le roi»,” *Telquel*, March 16, 2015, [http://telquel.ma/2015/03/16/benkirane-il-ny-pas-davenir-maroc-rentrons-en-conflit-roi\\_1438474](http://telquel.ma/2015/03/16/benkirane-il-ny-pas-davenir-maroc-rentrons-en-conflit-roi_1438474)

<sup>17</sup> PJD Communication. *YouTube* video, 20:22. March 14, 2015, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4\\_qJ9ZRhpKQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4_qJ9ZRhpKQ).

<sup>18</sup> For more on PJD recruitment and structure, see Avi Max Spiegel, *Young Islam*, 2015.



a stand-in for public “morality” or “traditional values” – and often is discussed as a way to reach a religiously conservative base. Since assuming office, such examples of strategic framing include (in)famous party comments on women’s place in the home, on Islamic banking, on Jennifer Lopez, or even on portrayals of the Prophet Mohammed in Western movies.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, party leaders have taken to calling other political parties (and Istiqlal in particular), the “mafia,” warning Moroccans of giving back control of the political process to secular, and, therefore, unethical politicians.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, regional and local competition also compelled PJD to double down on its strategies. Its approaches were on display most dramatically in the wake of the Egyptian military’s coup and crackdown against the Muslim Brotherhood and its president Mohammed Morsi in 2013. The effects of Morsi’s fall were felt not simply in Egypt (where, of course, the Brotherhood, its affiliated political party, and even any allegedly “sympathetic” journalists, officials, protesters, or mere onlookers have at various points, been arrested, jailed, beaten, and, in some cases, killed). The coup and its aftermath (including the fate of Tunisia’s Ennahda party) were widely viewed as a challenge to the Islamist experiment in governance, and the resurgence of pre-Arab Spring power structures.

The PJD in Morocco was not immune from these perceptions. In the wake of the coup, newspapers in the country wondered whether the PJD would soon also fall. (One newspaper headline featured a picture of Benkirane with the headline: “Is He Next?”) The second largest party in parliament, the Istiqlal or independence party, seized on this political opening and announced its departure from the government coalition it had with PJD. It was explicit that its actions were intended to bring the PJD-led government to a close. Istiqlal sided outwardly with the Egyptian military’s rhetoric and condemned the Egyptian brotherhood for “anti-democratic” behavior – blaming the brotherhood, in other words, for its own demise.<sup>21</sup>

PJD reacted to the Egyptian coup and to its first real challenge since assuming office not by railing against the unchecked powers of authoritarian rule, but rather by seeking its aid. It responded not by defending the Muslim Brotherhood against the excesses of the Egyptian state – not by reasserting its own Islamist identity – but rather by faulting the Brotherhood for mismanagement, for poor performance. PJD maintained that it was different from the Brotherhood, a better version of it, Islamism 2.0. It pointed out that it had done a better job of working with other parties, of taking its time in government, and of working side by side with existing state structures, rather than upsetting them. “They are not our Brothers,” one leading party official told me after the coup.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> “Morocco women protest Islamist PM’s stay at home speech,” *Yahoo*, June 24, 2014,

<http://news.yahoo.com/morocco-women-protest-islamist-pms-stay-home-speech-183358711.html>; and “Moroccan PM Furious With Jennifer Lopez for Revealing Act,” *Yahoo*, June 8, 2014, <https://news.yahoo.com/video/moroccan-pm-furious-jennifer-lopez-061416576.html>.

<sup>20</sup> See campaign videos and statements in run up to September 2015 local elections.

<sup>21</sup> For more on Istiqlal and PJD feuding, see Benjamin Roger, “Maroc : crise gouvernementale, quelle solution pour le PJD?” *Jeune Afrique*, July 12, 2013, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/169708/politique/maroc-crise-gouvernementale-quelle-solution-pour-le-pjd/>; “L’éternel combat Istiqlal-PJD...,” *La Vie éco*, March 17, 2015, <http://www.lavieeco.com/news/actualites/l-eterne-combat-istiqlal-pjd...-33244.html>.

<sup>22</sup> For more on this, see Avi Spiegel, “The Fate of Morocco’s Islamists,” *Foreign Policy*, July 9, 2013, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/07/09/the-fate-of-moroccos-islamists/>.

Recall that even at the time of the Egyptian coup, the PJD foreign minister's response was tepid, stopping short of condemnation and instead calling for "national unity" in Egypt; a top haraka official, on the other hand, was far more bellicose.<sup>23</sup> The message to party members was clear: statements (from the haraka) are what we *really* think; statements (from the party) are what we *have* to say. But, in the end, official policy was, as it continues to be, directed by the party.

Moreover, when PJD needed to find a new coalition partner to remain in power, it turned for help to its greatest benefactor: the monarchy. After the king stepped in to help find a new coalition partner, Benkirane was clear in his gratitude, noting that his government would have fallen had it not been for the king, and renewing the grand bargain: PJD's survival would be ensured if it supported the king.<sup>24</sup>

### Islamists in Opposition

If PJD's relationship with the state can be characterized by cooperation and even cooptation, Al Adl's appears, at least at first glance, to be one of confrontation and combativeness. Its roots lie squarely in the writings of its founder and late spiritual guide, Abdesslam Yassine. Yassine took steps to form what would become Al Adl in the 1970s, after leaving the largest Sufi movement in the country, the Tariqa Boutchichiya. Intent on building his own political movement and inspired by the writings of Sayyid Qutb, among others, Yassine began writing tome after tome (seventeen in total), each laced with grand plans for re-Islamicizing society, for re-connecting Muslims everywhere, and for eventually replacing the Moroccan regime from the bottom up.<sup>25</sup>

The movement that came to be created in his footsteps, Al Adl, in many ways found its early inspiration not merely in a text of theological dissent, but in one of political insurgence. In a public letter sent to King Hassan II in 1974, Yassine blamed the country's failings on its monarch, who had allegedly sold out its fortunes to his rich cronies, to "Zionist" friends, and to special interests; Hassan II, in sum, had put his own needs above that of the state. What was perhaps even more revolutionary was that Yassine addressed the king as his own peer, portraying himself as a scholar and leader equal to the Commander of the Faithful.<sup>26</sup> For this act, Yassine was sentenced to an insane asylum and to many subsequent years of house arrest.

In the interim, Yassine's incipient movement thrived in its leader's physical absence: leading protests against the state, mobilizing on university campuses, refusing to participate in elections, and publishing magazines and newsletters that showed more willingness than any other actor in the country to outwardly and brazenly criticize the state, and even the king

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<sup>23</sup> "Le Maroc souligne la nécessité de préserver l'unité nationale de l'Egypte," *Map Express*, July 3, 2013, <http://www.mapexpress.ma/actualite/activite-gouvernementale/le-maroc-souligne-la-necessite-de-preserver-lunite-nationale-de-legypte/>.

<sup>24</sup> For quote on king supporting government, see Mohamed Etayea, "Abdelilah Benkirane, menacé, se voit attribuer des gardes du corps," *Telquel*, March 16, 2015, [http://telquel.ma/2015/03/16/benkirane-menace-se-voit-attribuer-gardes-du-corps\\_1438496](http://telquel.ma/2015/03/16/benkirane-menace-se-voit-attribuer-gardes-du-corps_1438496).

<sup>25</sup> For more on Yassine and the early Al Adl, see the work of Mohamed Darif, Malika Zeghal and Avi Spiegel. Yassine's personal website is also a great source: <http://yassine.net/ar/index/index.shtml>

<sup>26</sup> For insightful analysis of Yassine letter, see Henry Munson, *Religion and Power in Morocco* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

personally. Such actions were often met by the state with arrests (of top leaders and student activists) and bans and confiscations (of newspapers and magazines).

Thus, while PJD embraced elections, Al Adl eschewed them. While PJD sought legality at all costs, Al Adl appeared to thrive, even bask, in its own illegality. Yet, even though it has routinely been labeled “radical” or “immoderate” or “banned” or “illegal” – labels that suggest irrational or, at the least, contrarian behavior – Al Adl too played by, and continues to play by, the rules of the political game: dictates laid down by the state and realities presented by domestic and regional political circumstances, by both internal and external Islamist competitors. Throughout its existence and to this day – and especially since the Arab Spring, PJD’s election, and the Egyptian coup – Al Adl’s behavior has been strategic, reactionary, and increasingly characterized by its goals of survival and expansion.

When Mohammed VI took over the throne in 1999, Yassine wrote another letter, albeit a tamer one. Yet, as part of the new king’s efforts to appear to liberalize, Yassine was “freed” from house arrest and was allowed to move, eventually relocating to the neighborhood of Suissi, the most expensive and elite neighborhood in the country, one inhabited by diplomats and foreign dignitaries. (As one member noted, “Yassine is important; he should be surrounded by important people.”)

Yassine’s anti-government stance was omnipresent in his early writings and stances – borne no doubt from his own ideological readings and understanding – but it was also never lost on his organization that such a stance also made mobilizational sense: it allowed Al Adl to differentiate itself from PJD, to recruit young members interested in standing up to the regime. It formed its own political circle – a quasi political party in waiting – in 1998, a year after PJD formed, with the implicit aim of being better organized to compete with PJD for supporters. It was during every subsequent election year – 2003, 2007, and 2011 – that it proceeded to undertake its most dramatic mobilization campaigns.

It was no surprise, therefore, that when anti-regime protests emerged during the Arab Spring, Al Adl soon assumed a leading role – for a time. Al Adl opted to join forces with a wide cross-section of Moroccans, including Leftists, when they became part of the largest group of protesters known as the “February 20 Movement,” named after an unusually large day of protests in 2011.<sup>27</sup> Yet, as the Arab Spring protests continued to unfold across the region, Al Adl suddenly decided to take a break. What, then, drove the group, in December 2011, to leave the February 20 Movement, choosing to withdraw once again into the political shadows?<sup>28</sup>

The decision, at first glance, seemed to make little strategic sense. This was a moment when opposition movements around the region were celebrating their biggest successes in history. Popular rhetoric Al Adl had embraced for decades was finally being adapted by the masses; slogans only they shouted for years about dissolving the monarchy, for example, were suddenly being chanted by protesters across the political spectrum, from left to right. This seemed, in

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<sup>27</sup> For more analysis of the February 20 Movement, see Ahmed Benchemsi, “Morocco’s Makhzen and the Haphazard Activists,” in *Taking To The Streets: Activism, Arab Uprisings, and Democratization*, eds. Lina Khatib and Ellen Lust (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).

<sup>28</sup> See Al Adl communiqué at <http://www.aljamaa.net/ar/index/index.shtml>

many ways, like the obvious time for Al Adl to capitalize on these links and to grow to new heights.

But instead it seemingly chose the opposite path. Why? Once again, its behavior can only fully be understood when examined in relation to its main Islamist competitor. Al Adl, in 2011, just as it was since its founding, was moved by a fear of losing or alienating its base. Some members told me of other reasons for their departure from February 20: some logistical, some personal, some even emotional. Some bemoaned the lack of communication from Leftists or their poor organizational skills. Some felt mistreated by their fellow protesters, even victims of prejudice by them. Some felt that Leftists were anti-religious, and seemed to take umbrage at references to religion. According to one member of the February 20 Movement, Al Adl added little but prowess at protesting. “They could bring people to the streets, but that was it,” she said.

Yet, these challenges, not unlike many problems shared by new protest movements, were not insurmountable. Instead, the major motivating factor to Al Adl leaving the February 20 movement related to its main Islamist foe and the long-term fears over losing its own base. It is no coincidence that Al Adl returned to the shadows only weeks after PJD’s dramatic election victory. The ascent of PJD to the prime ministership, to the highest seats of government, placed Al Adl in a difficult position. Benkirane was personally popular with many young Islamists. And the fear among Al Adl was that it could be seen as a “spoil sport,” as getting in the way of the most momentous moment for Islamists in the region.

Recall that Benkirane was appointed prime minister during a wave of Islamist electoral victories in the region in the wake of the Arab Spring. In this context, Al Adl felt that it could not risk alienating its base by continuing to oppose the new, popularly elected government. Sometimes, it was explained to me, one has to swallow a bitter pill, to make short-term concessions for the good of the long term. There was also an expectation in Al Adl that PJD would ultimately stumble, especially because the monarchy would constrain its rule.<sup>29</sup>

As one member noted in the wake of the Egyptian coup, Al Adl “did what the Muslim Brotherhood should have done” – that is, took things slowly, waited and watched events unfold. They should have recognized that the time was fluid; that the Arab Spring was perhaps but a passing phase. Activists also gleaned from the Egyptian coup that Islamist groups must be wary of the power of Arab states – that regimes never disappear, pointing of course to PJD’s inability to enact real change in the face of the Moroccan regime’s power. Indeed, leaving February 20 when it did allowed it to avoid some of the harshest state responses against February 20 members, including arrests, beatings, and house searches.<sup>30</sup>

Even though it ceased to formally cooperate with February 20, it still finds common ground, slowly, methodically, with Leftists in ways that don’t overtly threaten its own existence. Nowhere is this more at display than in Al Adl’s organizational evolution. The group is often described by scholars and journalists alike as one that is “banned yet tolerated” – which suggests that the group has been spared the fate of counterparts in Egypt that have faced absolute crackdowns.

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<sup>29</sup> For a different take, see *Taking To The Streets: Activism, Arab Uprisings, and Democratization*, (chapter 7)

<sup>30</sup> “World Report 2014: Morocco/Western Sahara,” *Human Rights Watch* (2013)

But such a formulation is incomplete. Instead, my research suggests that, just like PJD, the group is often permitted to engage in activities that challenge the regime on political grounds, but never those that might question the regime's religious foundations.<sup>31</sup> It regularly holds protests on anodyne issues such as economics, Palestinian rights, American foreign policy, corruption, or unemployment. Yet, once its activities extend too far into the public religious sphere – that is, outside its own private discussions of its own texts – then crackdowns against it increase. By and large, Al Adl appears to abide by these limitations.

To facilitate these arrangements, the organization is now compartmentalized into two distinct wings or “circles” – a Religious Circle (spawned at its formation in the early eighties) and a Political Circle (created in 1998 at a movement meeting in Marrakesh, a year after PJD began participating in politics). Just as is the case with PJD's relationship with its “haraka,” Al Adl's dual organizational front allows it to maximize its appeal to as many new recruits as possible, to make room for many personalities and sensibilities within its movement (those, for example, for whom Yassine's writings on Sufism and personal transcendence hold appeal; and also those for whom the group's anti-government stances have special sway). Activists claim that the movement is undergoing organizational change to better streamline its functions, but it is noteworthy that, as one activist explained, it is basing its reorganization on business models (not other Islamist groups).

The Egyptian coup of 2013 did not change Al Adl's major strategy; rather, it cemented it. The coup seemed to exemplify the risks posed in opposing an authoritarian regime too boldly; by exposing these dangers, it also reinforced their strategy of slow, incremental, bottom up political change. They also used the coup to highlight their own criticisms of the Moroccan state and of the Arab state writ-large, publically faulting the power of repressive authoritarian state police forces and militaries. They even called upon international bodies to condemn the Egyptian military, as if to suggest that appropriate condemnation would never come from the Moroccan regime, a regime that the group considers potentially as unjust as the one in Egypt.<sup>32</sup> The group's Political Circle now appears to function with some degree of autonomy from its religious circle, increasingly resembling a political party, albeit a mainstream one, in waiting. It holds internal elections for its guiding council and issues official statements on public events, such as congratulating the Turkish Prime Minister on his party's victory in local elections in March 2014.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, to listen to a debate between representatives of PJD, Al Adl, and a main socialist group in the country, is to hear only two distinct schools of thought: an anti-regime stance embodied by Al Adl and the socialists and a pro-government stance embodied by PJD.<sup>34</sup>

### **The Future of the “Moroccan Model” of Islamism**

Political scientists have long written about the durability of authoritarianism in the Middle East and North Africa – and about the strategies, techniques, and practices employed to buttress

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<sup>31</sup> See Avi Max Spiegel, *Young Islam*, 2015 for more thorough analysis.

<sup>32</sup> See Al Adl 2013 statement at <http://www.aljamaa.net>

<sup>33</sup> D. Abdelwahed El Moutawakkil, email to Erdogan, President of the Justice and Development Party, March 31, 2014, <http://www.aljamaa.net/fr/document/5404.shtml>.

<sup>34</sup> For report of one such debate, see; On cross-ideological cooperation, see <http://www.aljamaa.net/ar/document/79700.shtml>

their own rule.<sup>35</sup> The Moroccan case now also compels us to consider the durability of emerging forms of political Islam: one, in this case, that is less a dramatic remaking of Islamist political thought, but rather a more modest, practical approach to Islamist political survival. It is a model characterized by molding to specific state religious policy; to deploying Islam selectively and strategically; to resetting the power relationship between political party and allied religious wings; and to proactively navigating domestic and international competition.

Morocco's Islamists also suggest that predictions of mainstream political Islam's demise are inexact. Electoral Islamism is not necessarily dead; but rather certain forms may be struggling more than others. Islamists that work within the confines of the state, and even in subservience to its longstanding institutions, such as ones in Morocco, Tunisia, and Jordan, appear to be faring better than those with faster, more revolutionary tendencies. Yet, what sets Morocco's Islamists apart is not simply that they work within the confines of existing political structures, but rather the nature of the structures themselves. In other words, the particular structural contours of Moroccan state policy – specifically in relation to religious activism – have significantly shaped Islamist behavior and ultimately beliefs.

There is little doubt that militant extremist Islamist groups – ISIS in particular – have been emboldened by the Egyptian coup and by the larger perceived failures of the Islamist electoral experiment writ-large. But Morocco's Islamists suggest that mainstream Islamists could also benefit from such setbacks. In many ways, the Egyptian coup and the rise of ISIS have, counter-intuitively, given Morocco's Islamists a new lease on life. This regional tumult has, first and foremost, altered expectations. As movements elsewhere continue to face challenges, succeeding might now simply mean surviving. It has also vindicated their accommodationist approach. Morocco's Islamists, particularly the PJD, were sometimes dismissed as co-opted “puppets”; but now their approach appears more prescient than powerless. The Egyptian coup clearly showed that if a movement challenges the authoritarian state too much, then it might suffer potentially existential consequences. Morocco's Islamists might have internalized this lesson from the neighboring civil war in Algeria two decades earlier. PJD used to claim that it helped prevent Morocco from turning “into Algeria”; it now maintains that its actions protected Morocco from turning into Egypt or Tunisia, or worse Yemen or Libya.

The party remains intent on showing that it represents its own unique model, untainted by the mistakes of others (say, for example, the Algerian FIS of the 1990s, the Egyptian Brotherhood of the Arab Spring, and now even the experiences of Tunisia's Ennahda or the thought of Rachid Ghannouchi). Such national pride can sometimes sound like a lack of self-reflection or perhaps even Islamist cosmopolitanism. “We are a Moroccan party,” is a refrain heard often. Party leaders often appear less interested in adopting new forms of political thought than in learning useful pragmatic lessons. Informing this, of course, is also the not-so-subtle fear that importing such thought (or even appearing to import such thought) could seem threatening to the religious thinking of the regime.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> This body of work is voluminous. A good place to start is the diverse writings of Jason Brownlee, Eva Bellin, Ellen Lust-Okar, Lisa Anderson and Gregory Gause.

<sup>36</sup> Perhaps for the opposite reason, Al Adl's Yassine readily looked elsewhere for insights, even as far as Iran.

In the wake of ISIS's rise, Al Adl has also benefitted: its so-called radicalism simply does not appear as "radical" as it once did. Both Al Adl's nonviolent activism and its commitment to working within the confines of the nation-state (even as it consistently finds fault with it) allow it to appear more mainstream than it ever did. The group has seized this opportunity for wider appeal and access. Leaders meet with foreign embassy officials, they travel more, and speak out more than they used to.

The ultimate question now is whether the approaches adopted by Morocco's Islamists are viable in the long term – whether, in short, their models of Islamist activism are sustainable. In the case of both PJD and Al Adl, there is little to suggest the development of any long-term strategic goals beyond mere survival. If their predicament were represented by the metaphor of a traditional running race, it is still not clear what "winning" would look like. Yet, the effects of losing – of not being able to run in the race any longer – are far clearer. Indeed, grim examples abound from across the region. The effects of losing are acutely palpable: the inability to hold government jobs and/or relative personal power and the inability to maintain commitments and promises to its base for employment and security.

PJD speaks little of far-reaching plans other than to continue to fight corruption within the existing system and to continue to become the best political party it can be, specifically in relation to other existing ones. Leaders of Al Adl continue to appeal for a "national pact," where they would bring together various oppositional movements, but it remains unclear what would transpire after such a pact was formed. Its leaders also talked, in the wake of the Arab Spring, of the desire for a "civil" state other than an "Islamic" one, but it nonetheless remains ambiguous what that state would actually look like.

Upon assuming office in 2011, one PJD leader was explicit about his party's aims: "Our goal," he said, "is survival." Three years later, the regional chessboard looked different: the Islamist electoral ascent was now on the wane. And that same leader bragged to a crowd of foreign government officials in 2014: "We're the one last Islamist party remaining in government in the region."<sup>37</sup> The implication was clear: any long-term plans have been subsumed by short-term realities and structural constraints. Merely surviving, was once again, cause for celebration.

The forces motivating the monarchy to continue the status quo are also compelling: as long as Islamists don't threaten the survival of the regime – and as long as those in government can act as shields or deflections for any unpopular government policies – there will be little motivation to crack down even further on them. But what if the shield overwhelms the state, if the PJD leader, in other words, proves too popular? With Benkirane's own term as party head up in 2016, he has little time to forge that personal popularity, even if it were even possible in the current political structure. Another challenging scenario might include increased pressure from Morocco's Gulf allies to clamp down even further on Islamists. Yet, thus far such allies appear quite content with Morocco's convenient blend of crackdown and co-optation.

A recent interaction between PJD's head, Benkirane, and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi exemplifies the continued dynamics between Moroccan Islamist parties, the government

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<sup>37</sup> Second quote relayed to author by Michael Willis, from a 2014 address by a PJD official in England.

structure, and internal competition. Less than two years after Sisi deposed the Egyptian Brotherhood, Benkirane, as prime minister, was faced with the difficult and precarious position of meeting with him in the spring of 2015. For many PJD youth activists, the meeting was tantamount to hypocrisy: how could their leader shake hands with the man who so violently cracked down on Islamists in Egypt? Of course, at the time of the coup, the Moroccan king had congratulated Sisi; and Benkirane's foreign minister had even been dispatched to Sisi's inauguration. But, for many in the rank and file, this face-to-face meeting was one step too far. Protests by young PJD members erupted in multiple cities across the country. A doctored photo of the meeting – in which Benkirane is pictured sitting on Sisi's lap – circulated on the Internet and suggested this distaste for Benkirane's alleged sycophantism.<sup>38</sup>

Benkirane, for his part, sought to stem criticism by stating that he was meeting Sisi as an emissary for the country and the king – and not as a PJD member. His response was, no doubt, diplomatic, but it also evinced a deeper message: that not only would he do whatever was asked of him by the king, but that he was also able to sublimate his loyalty to the party to that of the state. The ability of the party base to protest, however, also showed another lesson: that the presence of the haraka networks makes space for internal protest and, moreover, even those most critical of party leaders ultimately concede. How such a scenario might end under a less persuasive or popular party leader remains to be seen. Yet, even those within the party that are most critical of the accommodationist approach have relented or moved on, either to Al Adl or from politics in general. Even the historically most critical party leader, Mustapha Ramid, routinely abides by the king in his role as justice minister.

In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, the PJD's Benkirane analogized the ongoing protests in Morocco to a modest fire, one that heated rather than destroyed the political process. "The fire was sufficient to heat the bowl," he said. "Thank God, it was not enough to burn it." If it had destroyed it, then it would have also destroyed the main Islamist movements in the country – PJD and Al Adl – who abide by, and ultimately benefit from, it. Increasingly both movements endure by continuing not to "burn" existing political structures. Even if they do not outwardly defend the political status quo, both of the main movements in Morocco continue to preserve, and even bolster, it. They do so because their survival depends on it.

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<sup>38</sup> For a fascinating analysis of PJD youth and varied responses to Sisi meetings, see Idriss Benarafa, "Morocco divided over relationship with Egypt's Sisi," *Your Middle East*, April 8, 2015, [http://www.yourmiddleeast.com/culture/morocco-divided-over-relationship-with-egypts-sisi\\_31255](http://www.yourmiddleeast.com/culture/morocco-divided-over-relationship-with-egypts-sisi_31255).