

## Islamist and secular forces in Morocco: not a zero-sum game

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## Islamist and Secular Forces in Morocco

Not a Zero-Sum Game

Mohammed Masbah

In Morocco, unlike in other Arab countries, Islamists and seculars tend to cooperate in formal as well as informal politics. Political opportunities and pragmatic interests trump ideology most of the time, providing a suitable environment for a broadly inclusive political order. However, two factors stand in the way of sustained cooperation between Islamist and secular currents: on the one hand, sporadic upsurges of identity politics, and on the other, the strategies of divide and rule traditionally pursued by the “Makhzen” and its close allies. Rather than focusing on a set of partners who appear at first to be compatible with their values, Europeans should promote an inclusive political process that integrates all actors with significant popular outreach, such as the social movement Jama’at Al-Adl wa-l-Ihsan (Justice and Charity Association, AWI).

Political divisions in Morocco are typically driven by tactical choices and specific issues, and much less by ideology. To give but one example: In late October 2014, a coalition of labor unions, secular opposition parties, and the Islamist social movement AWI joined ranks in calling for a general strike against austerity measures adopted by the government, which likewise comprises secular and Islamist parties. For his part, Prime Minister Abdelilah Benkirane of the governing moderate Islamist Justice and Development Party (Parti de la justice et du développement, PJD) rejected attempts to single out his party as the target of the strike. Rather, he emphasized the cohesiveness and harmony of the governing coalition across ideological differences, a coalition that comprises – in addition to

the PJD – three other secular parties: (1) the Party of Progress and Socialism (PPS), which originated in the communist party and had a long history of ideological animosity with the PJD; (2) the Popular Movement (MP), a non-ideological pro-palace party; and (3) the secular pro-palace party National Rally of Independents (Rassemblement National des Indépendants, RNI).

### Islamists and Seculars – Who Are They?

In Morocco, as in the rest of the Arab world, the terms “Islamists” and “seculars” may refer to a wide range of actors. So-called Islamists are typically actors whose political and social platforms are based on specific readings of Islamic principles. This category

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SWP Comments 51  
November 2014

encompasses moderate Islamic parties striving to participate in democratic processes – such as the Justice and Development Party in Turkey, Ennahda in Tunisia, or the PJD in Morocco – and reaches to radical and militant formations, such as Salafi-Jihadis and al-Qaida affiliates, who reject democracy as such on ideological grounds.

In Morocco, the largest organizations with **Islamist orientation** are the moderate – but not legalized – social movement AWI and the moderate Islamist party PJD, alongside a range of Salafi groups of different orientations.

AWI is a social movement with a rigid hierarchical structure. Since its founding in 1987, it has chosen not to engage in formal politics. It is not opposed to formal political participation per se, but its founder, Abdessalam Yassine (who died in 2012), opted against participation due to his opposition to the monarchy in its actual form, which he described as a “compulsory authority.” Yassine was inspired by both Sufi spiritual teachings and the Iranian revolution. This is why AWI has been moderate at the ideological level but radical at the political level. Sufi spirituality provides AWI’s followers with qualities of discipline and patience. At the same time, AWI has succeeded in building a strong apparatus aiming to be the vanguard of the “critical masses” that would march peacefully to effect radical change.

Organizational strength and ideological indoctrination have provided the movement with strength against the regime’s sporadic “soft” repression. The latter has aimed at weakening the organization by, for example, shutting down its offices at the local level, but has not attempted to completely ban its activities and structures.

The PJD, by contrast, is a political party that shares some ideological affinity with the Muslim Brotherhood. The PJD stands for a genuine strategic alliance with the monarchy, as it believes that reform is possible through formal political participation and non-contentious politics. To achieve

this goal, it focuses on gradualism and cooperation with all relevant political actors. Thus, the main political difference between the PJD and AWI is the former’s pragmatism.

**Seculars**, on the other hand, are generally defined in opposition to Islamists, as Islam is not the main ideological driving force behind their political activities. They are not opposed to local Islamic culture and values – for this reason, we call them seculars and not secularists – and may, at the same time, have their own interpretations of Islam, which they conceive of as being distinct from the approaches of transnational political Islam advocated by organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood.

Similar to other Arab countries, until recently most Moroccan seculars would not have described themselves as such, not least to avoid the negative connotation of the term among the wider population, which tends to conflate it with atheistic or anti-religious tendencies. Recently, however, there has been a trend to adopt “secular” as a self-designation among intellectuals who wish to take a clear position against the advances of Islamists in the political mainstream.

Historically, Moroccan seculars were identified with the political left, although many veered toward liberalism after the collapse of state socialism in Eastern Europe in the early 1990s. Liberals, on the other hand, had been sponsored by the monarchy since the 1960s to serve as a counterweight to the left. However, they are firmly “liberal” only on economic issues, such as protection of property rights and private enterprise, whereas their commitments to civil liberties and democracy find limits in their deference to the palace.

In general, during the 2011 protest movement, the constitutional reform process, and the workings of the current governmental coalition, Islamist-secular cooperation and contention have been determined much less by ideology than by concrete interests.

## The 2011 Protest Movement

During the protests in 2011, Islamists were found on both sides. Ideology was of secondary importance; what mattered instead was the position vis-à-vis the ruling regime – the monarchy and its entourage in the state administration and the business community, locally referred to as the “Makhzen.” The decisions about whether or not to support the protest movement were based on political calculations, and more specifically the balance between the moderates and radicals in both camps.

This became clear in the responses to the regime’s initiatives to absorb popular anger in 2011. Both AWI and the radical left, led by the An-Nahj ad-Dimuqrati (Democratic Path, Nahj) party, rejected the king’s speech of March 9, 2011, describing his call for “deep political reforms” as a “trick” to give the regime a new lease of life. Thus, the palace’s top-down reform approach unified the radical opposition and led to an implicit agreement between AWI and the radical left to cooperate under the banner of what was to become known as the February 20 Movement (Mouvement 20 Février, M20F). Both AWI and Nahj are pursuing a maximalist approach and seeking radical reform that would give “people the right to choose” the political system of the country through a constitutional assembly, including the option to abolish the monarchy through a democratic vote. They believe that only radical regime change can improve the current situation, be it through the voluntary abdication of the king and a transfer of his authority to an elected constitutional assembly, or through popular uprisings and campaigns for civil disobedience.

Consequently, in March 2011 members of both groups refused to support a petition for political reform, including a transition toward constitutional monarchy. The petition had been signed by 166 Moroccan intellectuals and politicians – four of them members of the PJD who later became ministers – under the title “the change we want.” AWI and Nahj declined to sign the

petition that, according to them, put a ceiling on the “aspirations of the people.”

For AWI, the M20F provided an opportunity to acquire a greater presence in the public sphere after a period of hibernation that started in 2007, in which the authorities suppressed most of its activities, and thus its visibility decreased. For this reason, AWI joined the protest movement at an early stage to advance its claims and grievances. Due to its long history and numerical strength, it provided the movement with an organizational backbone and social resonance.

At the tactical level, AWI agreed to grant a greater share of representation to comparatively small secular parties in the movement’s organizational structure, meaning that AWI’s share of representatives in M20F’s national support bureau – and hence its visibility in the media – remained far below its share in the movement itself. Instead, young secular activists attracted much of the attention. These tactical moves were adopted to avoid regime repression and to build confidence with secular actors, thereby allowing AWI to be perceived as cooperative rather than hegemonic. However, AWI had a strong presence at the local level, and its members were very active in the local committees of the movement.

Although the M20F provided an opportunity for a rapprochement between Islamist and secular forces, it also demonstrated the limits of alliances between ideological rivals. For AWI, participation in the M20F did not come without concessions. It was obliged to accept the secular nature of the movement, and hence it had to avoid religious slogans. This was a contentious point in summer 2011, as secular activists refused any kind of religious rhetoric and sometimes showed little respect for religious participants. For instance, during Ramadan, protests often started during evening prayers, which are of special importance for observant Muslims. For some members of AWI, such a lack of consideration amounted to deliberate slights, which contributed to the ultimate dissolution of

the cooperation with secular forces by December 2011.

Yet, the main motivation for AWI to eventually leave the movement was political. An evaluation by its leadership of the actual political benefits reaped from its participation in the M20F led AWI to the conclusion that it had, in fact, facilitated the victory of the PJD in the November 2011 elections, without getting anything in return. In terms of costs and benefits, AWI thus found itself with a non-productive investment. Its position vis-à-vis the regime was not strengthened, nor did it gain acceptance in the secular milieu. AWI thus expressed its frustration with its secular allies and accused them of being exclusive. Another reason for AWI's withdrawal was the fear of harsh repression from the regime, or – as a leader of the movement put it in July 2014 – that “continuing the protests in the street [in 2011] would have meant confrontation” with the regime.

To date, attempts to reactivate the cooperation have been unsuccessful. Thus, since December 2011, M20F has been an empty shell. On its part, since that time, AWI has kept a low profile and been waiting for an opportunity to become engaged again. But at the same time, it seems that its leaders have adapted their discourse somewhat and begun assuming a more conciliatory tone toward other political and social actors. This might be due to what happened in Egypt, where the Muslim Brotherhood isolated itself from other forces and thus became an easy target for the crackdown by the regime. In any case, AWI clearly showed its fascination with the Tunisian approach of cooperation between Islamists and seculars. Still, it is hard to predict how AWI would behave with regard to cooperation if it participated in politics.

### **Constitutional Reform**

The constitutional amendment process initiated by the monarchy in 2011 likewise revealed shortcomings in the rapproche-

ment between Islamists and seculars in Morocco and again confirmed the split between moderates and radicals within both camps noted earlier.

For the radical opposition, both AWI and Nahj categorically rejected the process of constitutional amendments initiated by the palace and boycotted the whole process, i.e., participation in public discussions, meetings with the drafting committee, and the referendum on the constitution. They saw the constitutional process as being completely dominated by the palace, with the king delineating the narrow confines of amendments, appointing the committee members charged with writing the new constitution, and marginalizing the parliament and government in the process. It was thus considered nothing more than a renewal of allegiance to the monarchy. AWI labeled the drafting process for the new constitution a “comedy,” as it granted the king “absolute power” and lacked a response to “the minimum of expectations of the people.” Instead of a committee appointed by the king, it called for a democratic constitution drafted by an elected constituent assembly.

Nahj reiterated AWI's arguments and described the constitution as a “limited concession to absorb popular anger and abort M20F.” Yet, in contrast to AWI, Nahj published a memorandum advocating for a constitution that contains provisions for a “secular and democratic state that guarantees freedoms of belief, and prohibits the utilization of religion for political ends.”

Although the drafting of the new constitution was indeed controlled by the palace, ideological clashes still erupted between those involved in the process. During the public debates over the new constitution between March and mid-June 2011, Islamist and secular actors fought over issues of identity and the nature of the state. Ironically, all parties represented in parliament – seculars and Islamists alike – called to preserve a stipulation that asserts the religious authority of the king as “commander of the faithful” and to keep the ministry of endowments and religious affairs under the con-

trol of the monarchy. In this, both sides used mirror-images of each other's reasoning: Islamists came out for the religious authority of the king to prevent Morocco from becoming a secular state that pays little respect to Islam, whereas seculars saw the monarchy's tolerant version of Islam as a guarantee against a radical transformation of Morocco into a theocratic state, even if Islamists were to attain power.

Yet, conflicts surfaced over questions related to individual liberties and the role of religion in politics. The PJD and its support base in civil society pushed for strengthening Islamic references in the new constitution and for a guarantee that legislation would not violate the provisions of Islam. In mid-June 2011, the PJD even hinted that it might abstain from voting on the new constitution in case it contained provisions against Islam. By contrast, secular parties represented in the parliament expressed their support for individual liberties, such as access to abortion or the principle that sexual orientation as well as religious beliefs and practices – including fasting during Ramadan – should be considered private matters that are of no concern to the state. They also argued for international treaties to take precedence over national laws, including issues that, according to Moroccan law, fall under the jurisdiction of Islamic Sharia law, such as inheritance and family law.

In contrast to their enthusiasm for individual liberties, secular parties turned out to be far more conservative when it came to preserving the king's religious and political prerogatives, which they perceive as a guarantee to hedge against possible electoral advances by the Islamists. For instance, whereas the PJD proposed that the executive powers of the ministerial council (which makes strategic decisions and is headed by the king) should be transferred to the government council (which is headed by the elected head of government, i.e., the prime minister), the Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP) opted to preserve the former body's prerogatives.

Indeed, some members of the constitutional committee with a secular background expressed their misgivings when several secular and leftist parties and members of the committee called to award “absolute powers” to the monarchy, which was interpreted as an indication of their lack of trust in political parties and the wider population. Such antagonism likely stems from fear of an Islamist tide. Major secular parties prefer an executive monarchy and an authoritarian regime to an elected Islamist government. This also explains why the secular left, in 1997 and 2002, accepted to become part of a weak coalition government without any real power or guarantees of a democratic transition. To substitute for the lack of a strong social base, they have preferred instead to align with the monarchy and promote themselves as a safe alternative to Islamists. The ultimate nightmare for seculars would be a conservative coalition between the monarchy and Islamists that leaves them marginalized. Yet, their adopted elitist positions have only succeeded in alienating them even more from the wider population.

### **Government Coalition**

Moroccan Islamists have displayed readiness for pragmatic concessions. After its success in the November 2011 parliamentary elections, the PJD established a government coalition with three secular parties: the conservative Istiqlal Party (PI), the PPS, and the MP. The USFP declined an invitation to join the government as a result of internal conflicts over the modest results it achieved in the elections and the question of whether participation would weaken or strengthen the party. In October 2012, the secular pro-palace party RNI joined the coalition to substitute for the PI, which had withdrawn half a year earlier (for details, see Mohammed Masbah, *Morocco's Slow Motion Reform Process*, January 2014, SWP Comments 6/2014).

Since the PJD has no majority of its own, and since no other Islamist parties are rep-

resented in parliament, the PJD has had no other option but to partner with secular parties. In the process, it has learned that it has to avoid ideological struggles if it wants to keep the government coalition coherent. Since taking over the government in early 2012, it has moved in the direction of moderation and pragmatism. Significantly, during its seventh national party conference in July 2012, “freedom of belief” was included in the program. The program also argues for a functional relationship between religion and politics, whereby religion should function as a set of guiding principles and values, without “sacralizing” human activity. The PJD has also made remarkable progress on issues of individual liberties, indicated by its endorsement of a United Nations resolution on religious freedoms in March 2014.

As a result of this ideological adaptation, the PJD has been successful in avoiding ideological conflicts with its secular coalition partners and has been able to focus mainly on socioeconomic issues. Even when it comes to issues related to ideology, the PJD and its ideological ally, the NGO al-Tawhid wa-Islah (Unity and Reform Movement), have shown much greater flexibility than in the past. For example, while still in opposition, the PJD had been critical of the “corrupting” influence of state-sponsored music festivals, in particular the annual MAWAZINE event in Rabat, which is officially under the patronage of the king, and the association organizing the event is headed by his personal secretary. Since assuming power, such displays of concern for public morals have largely ceased.

The void thus left by the PJD has increasingly been filled by Salafis, who have achieved more visibility on questions of identity and values. For instance, Salafi sheikhs publicly condemned demands to secularize the inheritance law – which, in Morocco, as in most predominantly Muslim countries, is regulated by Sharia law – and calls by secular intellectuals to reform religious education in primary schools, considering such calls a “war against Islam.”

One little-known Salafi even accused the authors of apostasy, amounting to an implicit call for violence against them. The PJD, for its part, kept calm and blamed both sides for creating useless tensions.

### **Islamists’ Pragmatism**

To understand Islamists’ pragmatism, one has to look at the cost-benefit calculations they follow and the actual options they possess. Moderate Islamists feel rooted in Moroccan society; they are active in providing social services to the unprivileged through a large network of NGOs that similarly share a religiously inflected identity; they are active in mosques; and their messages resonate among young urban middle classes. Moreover, the flexible nature of the “enlightened” or “competitive” authoritarianism applied by the Moroccan regime has given political actors some room for maneuver. Islamists have benefited from this margin and turned it into political opportunities, using the resources mentioned above to mobilize the population, predominantly around social grievances.

At the same time, the threat of repression and pressure from the regime has also forced them to make concessions and display pragmatism. For instance, in the aftermath of the Egyptian coup in July 2013, the PJD voluntarily handed over several key ministerial positions to pro-palace parties or technocrats. Similarly, AWI did not push for an escalation on the streets, so as to avoid a violent reaction from the regime against the backdrop of repression against the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

In addition, the PJD and its allies have built well-organized structures with a comparatively young leadership – especially when measured against secular parties – and a culture of internal transparency and dialogue, which allows them to compete with seculars on their own turf, e.g., with regard to internal democracy, freedom of expression, and the role of women. PJD leaders are clearly practicing a more democratic and transparent style of leadership,

its youth section has more freedom to criticize the leadership, and women are more visible in party organs, including the upper echelon, than with most of their secular competitors. For example, the PJD has the highest percentage of women among its members of parliament of all the parties represented in parliament. Also, the NGO Unity and Reform Movement recently elected a woman as vice-president, the highest position a woman has ever reached within an Islamic movement.

### **Divisive Rule**

Alliances between secular and Islamist political forces have been marred by a long history of mutual animosity and mistrust, and by disagreements between moderates and radicals within each camp about the merits of such strategies. But they have also faltered as a result of the divisive rule practiced by the regime. The palace has a long tradition of applying strategies of divide and rule and of exploiting existing animosities to nurture the division between Islamists and seculars. Playing actors off one another is one of the palace's traditional strategies to retain power.

Before the 2011 protests, the regime used to create and prop up secular parties to confront the Islamists. This was obvious in the case of the Authenticity and Modernity Party (PAM), which was established in 2008 by a close adviser of the king as a result of a tacit agreement between circles within the palace and the secular far left, which constituted the backbone of the new party. Ideologically disposed against the Islamists, they were more than ready to confront the PJD and received positions in state institutions and the parliament in return. Since the creation of PAM, ideological quarrels between the two parties (then both in the opposition) have been a constant, mainly over issues of individual liberties and the role of religion in public life.

In October 2011, a few weeks before the elections, PAM initiated a collaboration with seven other secular parties under the

name "Alliance for Democracy" (also known as G8) to create a broad front against the PJD. In this fashion, the palace hoped to hit two birds with one stone: to deliver on the promise to allow electoral fairness and transparency on the one hand, and to keep tabs on the election results on the other. The worst-case scenario for the palace would have been a landslide victory for the PJD, which could have enabled the party to establish undisputed control over the legislative branch and then challenge the prerogatives of the monarchy on the basis of a clear popular mandate. The secular alliance failed, however, to perform as expected, leading the palace to suspend its support for PAM. Yet, some circles in the palace still entertain the idea that the party could be built up into an alternative to the PJD if the current cooperation between the regime and the Islamists were to collapse.

The regime also exploits the Islamist-secular divide by adopting a neutral and passive position when violence between the two sides breaks out. For instance, in April 2014 left-wing students at Fes University attacked a roundtable meeting organized by the PJD-affiliated organization Al-Tajdid al-Tullabi (Student Renewal) that aimed to discuss possibilities of rapprochement between Islamists and seculars in Morocco, leading to the death of a student leader of this organization. The far-left wing within PAM vociferously defended the attackers, placing responsibility on the minister of higher education, who happens to be a PJD member. Although the regime has no qualms about acting with an iron fist against radical Islamists, the authorities have been slow in responding to such instances of violence by leftists against Islamists. The most plausible explanations for such differential treatment are, first, the state's security-oriented approach, which focuses on maintaining a balance in which Islamists and secular forces keep each other in check, and second, to systematically prevent any rapprochement between the two camps by consciously exacerbating ideological conflicts.



## Conclusion and Recommendations

In Morocco, Islamists and seculars – be they moderate or radical – have been prepared to make concessions and to form alliances with each other based on cost-benefit calculations rather than ideology. Thus, they are not viewing politics as a zero-sum game, which has led to much less polarization and tension in Morocco than in other countries of the region. In this context, moderate Islamists have scaled back ideology and proceeded toward moderation while internalizing values of tolerance and acceptance of others. This tendency should be appreciated and enhanced. Both secular and Islamist forces need to build trust through frank and in-depth dialogue. They also have to craft sustainable structures and mechanisms of cooperation that allow them to manage ideological differences and focus on shared interests.

A genuine transition toward democracy in Morocco will only be successful if all relevant political forces are integrated in the formal political process, including AWI. For this reason, Europeans should encourage the palace and the elected government to start a genuine dialogue with AWI, allow it to create a legal political party, and convince AWI to be part of the formal political structure.

In addition, Europeans should press the palace to deepen political reforms that would restore confidence in the political process by: ceasing to interfere in internal party affairs, guaranteeing free and fair elections, and replacing the supervision of elections by the ministry of the interior with a truly independent commission.

More generally, Europeans should treat Islamist parties that comply with democratic standards as functional equivalents to conservative parties in Europe and include them in international networks of conservative political parties, such as the International Democrat Union. At the same time, they should not accept at face value parties that claim “liberal” or “progressive” platforms only because they are secular. Rather, they should scrutinize their posi-

tions and behavior the same way they would Islamists in order to assess the practical quality of their commitment to democracy.

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