

Thomas Schiller: Islam and Democracy in Morocco. The Integration or the Decline of Political Islam?

For quite some time now, Morocco's political class has been anxious to steer an ambitious course of modernizing and opening the country. While the economy and the infrastructure are being reformed, political continuity is maintained. Political Islam appears to have no foothold in this part of northwest Africa. Although Islamist movements do exist, they appear surprisingly moderate. Is political Islam in decline? Can modernisation and identity preservation go hand in hand after all?

Morocco's heritage is tricky and complex: The country is oppressed by high unemployment as heavily as by the immense gap between rich and poor, between town and country. Deficits in the education and health sectors are great, corruption is enormous, and the economic potential of regional cooperation remains unused. The country ranks 123rd in the UNDP Human Development Index of 2006, while in the corruption index of Transparency International, it ranks 72nd.

The Moroccan king is endowed with far-ranging powers: It is he who appoints the government and leads the armed forces, besides holding authority in religious matters. Some analysts go so far as to call the country an 'executive monarchy' in which the political class and the political parties are nothing more than 'paid attendants' without power of their own. It is true that the new king, Mohammed VI, is trying to strengthen the democratic process, but Morocco has only just set out on the way to a living democracy.

Poverty, bad governance, oppression, and lack of progress in educational and social matters compel many Moroccans to turn to Islam for a solution to their problems. The PJD, a moderately Islamist party, has emerged as a dynamic force that outshines even the established parties. What is more, there is a powerful Islamist movement outside Morocco's party landscape called Al Adl wal Ihsan. Because of this, and because of the attacks in Casablanca that shook the country in 2003, some analysts are convinced that Morocco will form part of a future terrorist international in the region of the Maghreb. However, there are others with a more optimistic outlook, praising the king's commitment to reforms as well as the frankness of Moroccan officials who talk about the problems of the country without fear or favour.

And indeed, the Moroccan state has been neglecting the social question for a long while. It is for this reason that Mohammed VI supports the initiative for human development (NDH) and has already launched numerous social projects, especially in the remoter parts of the country. The economy is being modernised, the number of tourists is supposed to increase to ten million per year by 2010, and endeavours are made to lure more foreign investors to the north of the country. At the same time, the King regards himself as the traditional commander of the faithful and, consequently, as the linchpin of official Islam. The fact that his spiritual function is embedded in the constitution enables him to control the religious domain. So far, Mohammed has been deliberately using his status to reconcile socio-political reforms with the country's Islamic identity. He succeeded so thoroughly that the country is now regarded as a model of controlled modernisation. There can be no doubt that Islam enjoys a special status, being the source of legitimation for political action in Morocco. However, this is true not only for the traditional parties and the monarchy but also for the forces of opposition in the country.

Morocco has advanced because of reforms and modernisation, and by never neglecting to emphasise the Islamic character of the country, the promoters of this path helped to ensure that political Islam today does not constitute a serious alternative to the monarchy.

To the surprise of many, the conservative-nationalist Istiqlal party emerged victorious from the last parliamentary elections, while the moderately Islamist PJD had to be content with second place, although many had been celebrating its victory before the event. The party's bad showing is certainly not due to poll manipulations by the powers-that-be, as many claim. The fact of the matter is that the winner and leader of the Istiqlal, Abbas el Fassi, heads a party that is efficiently managed, which counts for much in Morocco where the common understanding of politics is based on personalities. Very likely, the fragmentation from which political Islam is suffering in the country played a certain role as well.

In the last few years, there have been many media reports on the PJD in which the party was described as a role model of the successful integration of an Islamist force in a process of democratisation. And indeed, the party is concerned less with introducing the sharia and more with 'moralising' politics, with fighting corruption, and with implementing an efficient social policy. Enjoying a sound structure, the PJD is embedded in a wide network of connections with like-minded civil-society players. And yet it was this very integration in the system over which the party stumbled: People fear the PJD's dynamism as well as the possibility that its dominance might transform the fragmented party landscape, constricting the hitherto enormous freedom of action of the *makhzen*, that specifically Moroccan unofficial network of power which operates in the environment of the royal palace. Furthermore, there are two parties that specifically mistrust the PJD: One is the system itself, which is not buying the PJD's cooperative attitude because of its contacts with other Islamist forces, some of which are much more radical. On the other hand, Islamist actors are blaming the party for integrating itself in the political process in the first place.

Unlike the PJD, Al Adl wal Ihsan rejects any such engagement but also dissociates itself from groups like Al Qaeda. There are not many features which this movement shares with Islamist groups in other Arab countries, a fact that is due to the personality of its leader, the charismatic Sheikh Abdessalam Yassine who has seen many summers, as well as to the way in which the Moroccans deal with the organisation.

Sheikh Abdessalam Yassine's character was formed by Sufism, a spiritual movement within Islam. With its hierarchical internal structure, his party is tailored entirely to his person. Al Adl wal Ihsan is attractive to quite a considerable number of Moroccans because of its character, which is spiritual as well as political.

While the state pulls no punches in its dealings with Al Adl wal Ihsan, it tolerates the movement, refrains from persecuting its adherents systematically, and even tolerates the interviews with Mr Yassine that are to be found regularly in the country's press. One reason for this twin-track strategy may be the usefulness of the movement which, after all, is needed as a bulwark against Wahhabism as well as the terrorism of Al Qaeda.

There can be no doubt that Al Adl wal Ihsan, which did not participate in the September elections, has not only a sound structure but also a great potential for mobilisation. If it were to participate in the political process in the future, it would certainly be a force not to be underestimated.

The relationship between Morocco's two Islamist players is ambivalent. While Al Adl wal Ihsan recognises the success of the PJD, it blames the party for kowtowing to the system, thus losing a great deal of its credibility. At that, its own future is highly uncertain, given the age of Mr Yassine. What course the movement will set after the demise of its charismatic leader, and what position it will then take up in the political fabric of the country, are questions that remain to be answered.

While political Islam in Morocco is certainly not dead, it is confronted by a dynamic society that is undergoing a process of social and economic reform that enforces constant adaptation. What is more, it is dealing with a monarchy which has for a long time been following a successful strategy of integrating opposition forces in the system and weakening them thereby.

To this day, King Mohammed VI has successfully pursued his course of enforcing reforms and modernisation without jeopardising tradition or the preservation of the country's Islamic character. At the same time, the recent elections clearly show that the population is detaching itself from the political system. After all, more than two in three Moroccans were indifferent towards the parliamentary election, which leads us directly to the crucial question of what Morocco's silent majority is thinking.