

*J. of Modern African Studies*, 44, 2 (2006), pp. 203–222. © 2006 Cambridge University Press  
doi:10.1017/S0022278X06001601 Printed in the United Kingdom

# ***Civil society, Islamism and democratisation: the case of Morocco***

Francesco Cavatorta\*

## ABSTRACT

The positive role that an active civil society plays in processes of democratisation is often highlighted in the literature. However, when it comes to the Middle East and North Africa, such activism is considered to be detrimental to democratisation because the predominant role is played by Islamist groups. The explanation for this rests with the perceived ‘uncivil’ and undemocratic Islamist ethos of such groups. This paper challenges this assumption and argues that Islamist associations can be a potential force for democratisation for three reasons. First, they are capable of political learning; secondly, they generate secular civil society activism as a response to their activities, increasing the number of actors in the political and social system; and finally, they can cooperate with other civil society groups on a number of issues, given that they are all subject to the same authoritarian constraints. The paper focuses in particular on the case of Morocco and the Islamist group *Jamiat al-Adl wal-Ihsan*.

## INTRODUCTION

The literature on democratisation pays much attention to the concept of civil society and its presumed ability to foster and sustain the democratic process. In fact, studies on processes of democratisation often highlight the positive role that an active civil society plays in transitions from authoritarianism. Thus, ‘building a robust civil society is ... postulated as a precondition for democratisation and democratic consolidation’ (Sardamov 2005: 380). This has important repercussions at both scholarly and policy-making levels. Academically, the focus is on ‘the zone of voluntary associative life beyond family and clan affiliations but separate from the state and the market’ (Hawthorne 2004: 5), in order to understand the

\* Lecturer in Politics, School of Law and Government, Dublin City University.

The author is grateful to Robert Elgie and three anonymous referees for their comments on earlier drafts. The usual disclaimers apply. The author also acknowledges the financial aid received by the School of Law and Government Research Committee and in particular Dr Gary Murphy.

positive impact on political change, particularly in terms of democracy training, that civil activism entails. From a policy-making point of view, the expansion of civil society has become the preferred tool to generate political change for both external donors and domestic opposition (see Carothers 1999). This has profound consequences in terms of how the domestic opposition is structured, and how external donors provide programmes aimed at promoting and sustaining non-governmental organisations in target countries to achieve democratic reforms at the macro level.

There is no doubt that the usefulness of civil society to generate political change may be overemphasised (see Tempest 1997), but it still occupies a prominent position in the literature, and its protagonists are convinced of the validity of the causal mechanism between expanding civil society and democratisation. The Middle East and North Africa has not escaped examination regarding the relationship between the state's authoritarian nature and the strength or weakness of civil society. Indeed, one of the strongest conclusions emerging from such studies has been that civil society in the region was too weak to have a positive impact on democratic reforms, and that 'the state financial and coercive power remains strong and far superior to resources available to its social, economic, and political opposition' (Abootalebi 1998: 46) within society. While this analysis (see Filaly-Ansary 2002) may contain some truth for certain countries, it should also be underlined that it has been contradicted by other scholars who convincingly argue that civil society activism is quite strong in large parts of the region. In particular, Norton (1995–96) demonstrated that Middle Eastern civil societies, far from being 'quiet' and passive, were indeed surprisingly active. In an interesting academic U-turn, it was then argued that democracy was not occurring in the region precisely because civil society was too vibrant and had an authoritarian nature, due in large part to the fact that much of the activism seemed to originate from Islamist movements (see Volpi 2004).

This study challenges the conventional wisdom that Middle Eastern and North African civil societies are inherently authoritarian because of the role that Islamist movements and associations play. It argues instead that some of these movements can be a potential force for democratic change, in the light of four variables. First, their political discourse is often couched in the language of democratic procedures, and emphasises the need to structure society on accountable political institutions in opposition to the incumbents' authoritarianism. Secondly, the internal structure of most of these movements is surprisingly reliant on democratic procedures, with a considerable role played by ordinary members (see Mishal & Sela

2000), although leadership charisma is also a relevant component. Thirdly, these movements have an indirect beneficial effect on generalising activism in society, because they have a polarising ideology which generates opposition from social groups that feel threatened by it. Finally, such associations have a rather precise understanding of social pluralism, and are increasingly tolerant of groups and associations that do not necessarily share their societal outlook.

All this does not mean embracing the view that civil society *per se* is, and should always be, positively associated with democracy. It simply means that the context within which the concept of civil society operates is extremely important for its analytical application. A 'definitional' positive perception of the pro-democracy role that civil society plays is misplaced, because both as a theoretical concept and as a concrete entity it should be construed as a neutral analytical category. However, we should not go to the opposite extreme, and accept that the ideological nature of Islamist actors negatively biases civil society. This view should be dismissed because it does not take into account the social structure and the political system of the societies within which Islamists operate. Civil society activism is context-dependent, and movements operating in different political settings may be confronted by radically different instrumental calculations, despite their ideological similarities. In the case of Morocco, civil society has for instance 'a connotation that is related to political contestation and to the legitimate expression of the Moroccan people in the absence of real democratic representation' (Sater 2002: 103). Following from this, this paper concentrates on Moroccan civil society and the role that Islamism plays within it. Attention is given primarily to the Moroccan *Jamiat al-Adl wal-Ihsan* (Justice and Spirituality Group, hereafter *Jamiat*), and its interactions with other non-governmental groups.

#### CIVIL OR UNCIVIL SOCIETY?

The concept of civil society has for some time been at the centre of the attention of both academics and policy-makers, in the light of its very close association with liberal-democracy, and is a highly controversial analytical tool and political concept. Civil society, understood as 'a cluster of institutions and associations strong enough to prevent tyranny, but which are, nevertheless, entered freely rather than imposed either by birth or by awesome ritual' (Gellner 1994), has always had positive normative connotations. In democratic societies, the existence of an autonomous space between the state, the market and the family is believed to sustain the democratic political system, due to its ability to bring citizens together

without coercion. The voluntary nature of movements which mobilise around very different and, at times, conflicting issues and interests allows society to develop ties that transcend kinship, and that do not see the state as the ultimate provider of material goods and services. The existence of such an active civil society is interpreted as a positive development for democracy, because it promotes the interaction of people in a voluntary setting, where differences of opinion have to be taken into account because such groups have diverse interests. The state does not interfere with this autonomous space where demands can develop, issues can be discussed and activities organised. It follows that the withdrawal of individuals from such activities is perceived as a problem for democratic societies, as highlighted by Puttnam (2000). The positive connotations that an active civil society has in democratic countries have been transferred to authoritarian states or democratising countries. In these different contexts, the ability of independent social actors to prise away an autonomous sphere of action from the state is perceived to be vital in undermining the authoritarianism that characterises political and social relationships. This is because a sphere with no official state intervention develops, and becomes an embryonic space within which to make political demands on an authoritarian political system. In addition, the 'participants' learn skills that can eventually be utilised in a democratising or democratised polity (see McLaverty 2002).

Following from this, the literature on transitions to democracy investigates the role of civil society as an explanatory variable for the demise of authoritarianism. A number of studies conducted on Eastern Europe seemed to confirm its explanatory power (see Rau 1991). As mentioned earlier, such enthusiasm for civil society has recently diminished, but has by no means disappeared. The literature points out that countries with a growing civil society were either democratic or getting there, while countries with a weak and passive civil society were deeply authoritarian and likely to remain so. Early studies on the Middle East and North Africa conformed to these assumptions, and the absence of democracy in the region was partly explained through the absence of truly active and independent civil societies; this absence was blamed on Islam, which was believed to require passive citizens. Mardin (1995) argues, for instance, that in the Muslim world society waits for the 'just prince' to initiate reforms and take control of societal development, rather than mobilising itself independently. Superficially, the significant and intertwined roles played by both state authoritarianism and ties of tribal kinship in Middle East and North African politics seemed to testify to the validity of such an analysis. However, Norton's (1995–96) extensive study on civil society in

the region contradicted much of this previous scholarship. His study demonstrated that civil society activism had been largely ignored in the academic world, but was an important political reality. According to Nonneman (2001: 143), 'Norton's study demolished the myth that the region was uniquely lacking in such a category, while examining the varieties and variations with it.' Norton's study quickly became the conventional wisdom, but it left open the problem of Middle Eastern and North African authoritarianism. If one wanted to explain the absence of democracy in the region through the category 'civil society', it could no longer be argued that these societies were passive, because there was now evidence to the contrary.

Thus, some were led to explain the absence of democracy in the region by emphasising that the few associations and movements that were truly autonomous from the regime were far *too* vibrant and *too* politicised to sustain democratic institutions. The popularity of this explanation is due largely to the fact that over the last three decades the most active and popular civil society actors have been Islamists. Their activism is perceived to be uncivil rather than civil, and therefore more conducive to authoritarian political and social relationships than to democratic ones. Sami Zubaida (2001: 239) gives a convincing account of this: 'many secularist writers have tried to exclude Islam and Islamism from definitions of civil society. This is partly on the grounds that Islam and Islamism are part of traditional and primordial formations, and partly on the perceived incompatibility of a religious-based society, sought by Islamism, with pluralist democracy.' Examples of movements such as the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood have therefore been used to undermine the previous positive connotations that civil society enjoyed, and to argue that such a concept should not be treated normatively (see Berman 2003). At policy-making level, Amy Hawthorne (2004: 12) also warns the US government not to be so enthusiastic about civil society in the Arab world, precisely because the most active actors are Islamists and the 'Islamist sector does not constitute a pro-democracy force'.

From a theoretical point of view, both Berman and Hawthorne make a very important contribution because they advance the notion that civil society should be treated as a neutral category and not as a normative one. Thus, while there may have been a high correlation between an active civil society and democracy in Eastern Europe or Latin America, this should not lead one to assume that a vibrant civil society automatically sustains democracy and liberalism. As Najem (2003: 186) also correctly points out, 'it is important to note that civil society closely reflects class and social divisions in society, and that substantial groups within society in a

state can be anti-democratic'. Civil society is *per se* neither good nor bad, but it is as good or bad as its actors make it. This study shares this theoretical perspective, but contests the way in which Islamist movements have been studied in the Arab world in order to make this theoretical point. There is an underlying assumption that all the movements which subscribe to Islamism are inimical to democracy, that they condone political violence, and that they have a totalitarian ideology, whose essence and objective are the desire to transform human nature and society once they manage to acquire power. To quote Berman (2003: 266): 'a final important lesson that the Egyptian case teaches is that at least in certain contexts, the civil society sceptics may have a clearer vision than the boosters. The growth of civil society should not be considered an undisputed good, but a politically neutral multiplier.'

This debate on civil society in the Arab world is particularly welcome, in the light of the prominent role that it plays in the region. Contrary to other parts of the world where opposition political parties take the lead in attempting to extract democratic reforms from the authoritarian regime, political parties in the MENA region are both discredited and weak (see Willis 2002). For this reason civil society has taken on the role of the main opposition, as scores of political opponents have for instance abandoned the political struggle to focus on making changes in society that would have a knock-on effect on the political system. Parties are increasingly perceived, at least in the Moroccan context, as self-serving 'mediators between the political elite and the real wielder of power' (*Le Journal Hebdomadaire* 18.9.2004). Thus, far from being extremely weak and passive, civil society organisations have become the primary instigators of change, marginalising official political parties. Some authors argue this is not necessarily a positive omen for democratisation. A strong civil society coupled with weak parties allows incumbents to divide the opposition by selecting the issues that make it to the top of the political agenda, by rewarding some NGOs over others, and by remaining the ultimate decision-maker (see Langohr 2004). However, the rapid expansion of civil society cannot be underestimated in terms of the impact it has on the political system, and in the light of the demands it makes and the issues it is concerned with (see Chomiak 2002). Thus, it is theoretically possible to conceive it as being central to the processes of liberalisation in the region. In addition, Islamist associations that now operate within the sphere of civil society do so as NGOs, because they cannot become political parties and are therefore unable to articulate their demands in an institutional setting. If they were allowed to fully participate in a democratising process as legal political formations, political parties would assume much more

relevance, as other groups would be encouraged to organise in the same way.

The explanation that authoritarianism in the region remains robust because civil society is too active and Islamicised to trigger a real process of democratic political change therefore faces a number of shortcomings. First of all, the labelling of all Islamist associations as being un-democratic by virtue of their Islamic ethos may not reflect the reality, and is often derived more from prejudice than focused analysis. While Islamist movements have peculiar views about democracy, they strongly oppose incumbent regimes precisely because they do not rule consensually, and it could be argued that if they were to espouse the same logic of authoritarian rule they would be delegitimised. There are certain Islamists who indeed make a point of strongly emphasising their democratic beliefs and political behaviour, such as the Tunisian Ennahda Party or the moderate Algerian Movement for Society and Peace. Islamist groups also vary both in ideology and methods from one another, due to confessional differences, leadership style and external constraints. To assume that they are all the same because of a shared Islamic ethos is misleading in two ways. One, it presupposes that Islam is incompatible with democracy *a priori*, which may not be the case, while very often the demands put forth by Islamists are couched in the language of democracy; and secondly, it assumes that all Islamist associations share the same outlook on how society should be organised, which again may not be the case, given the enormous differences that exist between countries in the Middle East and North Africa.

The second shortcoming of the approach outlined above is the empirical focus on extreme groups and on their most illiberal demands. This leads to an oversimplification of the issues that such movements are primarily concerned with, and legitimises their label as 'uncivil' actors, even though they represent large sectors of society that would otherwise lack any representation, such as the marginalised youth of the shantytowns, women from poor backgrounds and sectors of the disaffected middle classes. Their welfare work and their constant criticism of the incumbents are the pillars of their strategy.

Thirdly, to argue that democracy is absent in the region because of the existence of an illiberal and undemocratic civil society underestimates the nature of the states under examination, which are highly repressive and rely heavily on the 'coercive apparatus' (see Posusney 2004).

Students of the region are very much preoccupied with the 'nature of the Islamist opposition', and tend to neglect the role authoritarian leaders and elites play. At times there seems to be a benign view of these regimes,

on the basis that if they were to fall, a much more confrontational and illiberal set of elites would come to power. Zakaria (2004: 2) is therefore able to argue that: 'the Arab rulers of the Middle East are autocratic, corrupt, and heavy-handed. But they are still more liberal, tolerant, and pluralistic than those who would likely replace them.' The problem is that we do not actually know whether this will be the case or not. Moreover, in the past such regimes were just as reluctant to liberalise even in the absence of an Islamist opposition.

It then becomes imperative to better examine both the nature of the state and the nature of the opposition, without utilising sweeping statements about the intrinsic illiberal nature of Islamist movements and their presumed 'totalitarian' social activism. The existence of a particular 'sub-culture' inspired by an authoritarian ideology should be not seen in isolation, but in the context of the wider society where competing ideas are exchanged (see Brumberg 2002a).

There are some starting points that need to be highlighted when discussing the phenomenon of Islamism. First of all, Islamist associations are not the only autonomous entities that characterise civil society in the Middle East, although they are the most popular. There are many other movements that, while possibly minoritarian, articulate alternative demands to the ones that the Islamist movement is concerned with, and operate in all sorts of sectors of civil activism from pro-democracy work to development goals and secular feminist values. This means that it is theoretically possible to assume that the interactions among such groups can generate a dynamic whereby the ethos and the actions of the Islamist movements may be challenged and re-shaped by rival organisations. To confirm the validity of such an expectation when analysing the case study, we should find evidence of political learning whereby the Islamist movement revises its stances and its actions, following confrontation on a range of issues that are the central concern of actors within the non-Islamist sector of civil society. Secondly, it is possible to hypothesise that a rise in Islamist militancy at the level of civil society generates mobilisation in the opposite direction, precisely because their discourse is perceived to be extremist and polarising. There are large sectors of society that are far from sympathetic to the views expressed by Islamists, such as the urban intellectual elites, which might be driven to form their own independent associations in order to contest the civil space that the Islamists occupy with alternative ideas and actions. These groups are often also opposed to the incumbent regimes. It is therefore conceivable that 'pushed' by the two forces of Islamism and regime authoritarianism, they would attempt to create their own space and articulate their own demands. This, in turn, may



have a positive effect on the pluralism of views and ideas that is the backbone of democracy. Thus, in the analysis of the case study there should be evidence of organisations being created or working harder because of the desire to spread a message different from that propagated by the Islamists.

Finally, given that all truly independent civil society actors operating in an authoritarian regime face the same type of constraints on their activities and are subject to heavy scrutiny (see Wiktorowicz 2001), it is possible to hypothesise that Islamist and secular associations may cooperate on certain matters, in order to extract benefits from the regime and resist some of the pressure coming from above. The case of the Saint Egidio conference held in 1993/94 among Algerian parties, including the FIS, to put forth a common platform for democratic change in the country may therefore not be simply an isolated and exceptional cooperative attempt (see Impagliazzo & Giro 1997). Thus, there should be evidence of such cooperation on specific issues that are central to their operational capacities. If there were some evidence of joint demands and joint activities aimed at increasing the autonomy of the space available to civil society, it would signify that Islamism is capable of coming to terms with the pluralism of views that exist in society.

To conclude, while the almost naïve view that an active civil society is good for democracy should be challenged, this should not lead one to accept that all cases in the Middle East and North Africa fit the opposite category whereby a vibrant civil society where Islamists are prominent is by definition authoritarian. In between the two extremes there may be room to locate an Islamist civil society that can come to terms with the procedures of democracy and the pluralism of ideas through interaction and cooperation with others.

#### THE CASE OF MOROCCO

Morocco is a good case to analyse for a number of reasons. First of all there is an active civil society to analyse, given that the country is not as authoritarian as others in the region. King Mohamed VI's accession was followed by a relaxation of the most authoritarian aspects of Hassan II's rule: political prisoners were freed, the press became more outspoken, human rights abuses have diminished, and some political reforms have been launched to make the state more accountable to its citizens. These changes have had a positive effect on society as whole, which has used these newfound freedoms to set up associations and organisations dealing with a wide range of issues, from human rights to sustainable development to cultural protection (see Howe 2001). As a result, Brumberg (2002b)

places Morocco in the category of 'liberalised autocracies', meaning that decisions are ultimately taken by an unelected leader but society enjoys a degree of political pluralism. In a recent interview, Moroccan constitutionalist Omar Bendorou confirmed that under the present constitution, 'all power is really in the hands of the King' (*Le Journal Hebdomadaire* 23.4.2005). Secondly, Morocco has a strong secular intellectual tradition, including a number of civil society actors who subscribe to secular principles in the tradition of the French concept of *laïcité*. Finally, the strength of Islamism in the country is quite unexpected, given that the king of Morocco has religious legitimacy derived from his ancestral link with the Prophet, expressed in the title Commander of the Faithful. For this reason, it was believed by some that the kingdom would not be affected by the resurgence of Islam as a vehicle for political contestation (see Munson 1991).

It should be noted at this point that the findings regarding the complex relationship between Islamism, civil society and democratisation cannot readily be generalised to other countries in the region, given the methodological limitations of a single case study. However, such findings can indicate trends that may be found in other countries in North Africa, particularly in societies that have gone through a period of liberalisation, if not democratisation, over the last two decades.

#### *The Islamist illiberal ethos?*

The first point to examine is the assumption that Islamist associations have an 'illiberal' ethos that is intrinsic to their political and social discourse, which makes them 'uncivil'. The contention here is that this is not necessarily the case, and that the leading Islamist association in Morocco, the *Jamiat al-Adl wal-Ihsan*, may be a potential force for democratic change, not only for what it says, but also for its ability to 'learn' and adapt to its environment through interaction with other civil society groups. The *Jamiat* is by all accounts the leading Islamist association in Morocco, and represents quite well the Islamist sector of civil society activism, given its involvement in both developmental and political issues. It should be emphasised that the association does not represent the entire galaxy of Islamism in Morocco, as there are other groups whose political ideology is based on the Islamic faith, but it does constitute that part of Islamism which has turned neither to institutional politics (like the Party for Justice and Development), nor to violence (like the fringe salafi groups responsible for the May 2003 terrorist attacks in Casablanca and the March 2004 bombings in Madrid).

The *Jamiat*, founded in 1985 and led by Sheikh Abdessalam Yassine, is the largest Islamic association in Morocco; it has a membership variously estimated between 50,000 and 600,000, although the real number is anyone's guess. Its spokesperson (*Jamiat* int.) refused to disclose the information, as the association is technically illegal and its members could be prosecuted by the authorities for membership of an illegal organisation. The number of members is however of little relevance and would not tell us much about the impact of the association on the political life of the country. Precisely because it is illegal to be a member, many ordinary citizens prefer to be involved with it only in high profile events such as street demonstrations, or in voluntary work without formal links to the association itself. In this respect, the association and its leader may be considered very powerful because of the 'reach' they have among the general public, and many in the NGO sector recognise their strength (NGO leaders ints.).

The association is closely informed by an Islamic ethos whereby the political, social and economic problems of the country can only be solved if there is a widespread return of all citizens to the true spiritual values of the faith. This is the basic ideological tenet which informs the work of *Jamiat*. The sheikh himself has been a long-time opponent of the monarchy and believes that the current system should be dismantled, although change should not occur through violence but through civil society activism. The foundation of the association's work is therefore the *dawa*, whereby its members endeavour to become better Muslims and attempt through example to turn others into better Muslims, so that individual behaviour can slowly affect the whole of society. The emphasis is on 'education'. This is why it refuses to enter the political arena, or to compromise with the king on this issue. The association sees political participation not only as contrary to the doctrine of *dawa*, but also as a strategic mistake that many opposition groups make because they do not realise that they simply get co-opted without obtaining either power-sharing or the radical change that is needed to turn the country around. Although both scholars and policy-makers debate as to whether the ideological stances and Islamist ethos of the association are conducive to democracy or represent totalitarian objectives, this debate soon becomes sterile because there is a significant amount of second-guessing when we analyse the association's beliefs and internal structure in isolation, without referring to the surrounding context where other actors operate.

If we examine the *Jamiat* in isolation, we get two very different pictures. Through an analysis of the documents published by the sheikh and the

association (see Yassine 2000, 2003), it emerges quite clearly that these subscribe very strongly to the idea of procedural democracy as the best way to govern both the association itself and the country. The work on the ground through the *dawa* is always accompanied by a public call for political institutions to become accountable, and for the political process to be liberalised. For instance, in his memorandum, the Sheikh calls for the end to election rigging, and calls on the king to end the façade democracy measures implemented so far. The current political arrangements should be replaced by a truly new method of governance based on the procedures of democracy. According to Yassine (1999), ‘democratic rule, meaning in short the freedom and the right of the people to choose their own government, is the only way out of the darkness of authoritarianism’. This also emerges quite strongly in the conversations with leaders of the *Jamiat*, who emphasise how their association is governed by the principle of consultation (embodied by the existence of a ten-man council elected by members and responsible for selecting the leader), and how this sets them apart from the country’s political institutions where there is no democracy, as the leader is not elected by anyone and inherits power. The spokesperson (*Jamiat* int.) argued: ‘we are against the way the political system works in Morocco and therefore we would not want to replicate it within our organisation’. The leadership claims that the association listens very carefully to what ordinary members have to say about its operations and about its political positions (‘we do not lead a group of sheep’). Given that the *Jamiat* is also very clear on the issue of violence, which is flatly rejected as a method both to achieve political goals and to make individuals conform to what the association deems proper Islamic behaviour, the picture seems to be quite rosy. For all these reasons the association should be considered as being fully part of civil society.

Naturally, all this is challenged quite strongly when the opposite picture appears. First of all, the claim that the association has some form of internal democracy is disputed, as the sheikh who founded it runs it as his personal fiefdom and makes all the important decisions without any regard for what other members think. It has been reported that in order to become a full member of the organisation, candidates have to have a dream of the sheikh bestowing upon them the worthiness of becoming a militant for the *Jamiat*. This would hardly trigger a democratic debate within the group, as ‘obeying the orders of the Sheikh becomes the pass for Paradise’ (*Le Journal Hebdomadaire* 12.2.2005). Thus, the leader’s messianic role conditions the workings of the organisation. Secondly, the association, far from being against the method of rule in Morocco, is more precisely against the principle of the Commander of the Faithful, the *imarat al*

*mouminine*, which bestows religious legitimacy on the king. There is a stark difference between the two, because being against the *imarat* does not equate with being against authoritarianism. Indeed many suspect that the *Jamiat* wants to replace the institution of the *imarat* not with accountable political institutions but with the rule of religious scholars, as in Iran (see *Maroc Hebdo International* 24.6.2005). Finally, the association is also accused of espousing illiberal views in the field of personal rights. In this view, the *Jamiat* is far from being the democratic, responsive and open organisation it claims to be (see Maddy-Weitzman 2003).

The problem with this approach is that it is not conducive to understanding, because it is an absolutist debate that does not take into account how the group interacts with its environment, consisting of rival Islamist organisations, secular NGOs, and government-sponsored groups. If we examine this aspect more closely, it emerges that the *Jamiat* may not actually have the illiberal and anti-democratic ethos that some claim. While the statements made by its leaders about the high degree of internal democracy that supposedly exist should be treated with some scepticism, it is true that on very practical issues ordinary members do have a voice. This in turn forces the leadership to modify its stances on certain themes. The clearest example of this has been the recent U-turn performed by the association regarding the modifications to the 'family code' proposed by the king, which provides women with legal equality. As would be expected, a very lively debate accompanied such an important reform, with the king arguing for a complete revision of the previous family code and its transformation towards the granting of effective legal equality to women. When the new legislation was first presented, it faced substantial opposition from the *Jamiat*, which organised a massive demonstration in Casablanca to oppose its adoption. After some revisions that were more in tune with the Islamic tradition of the country, the association did a spectacular turnaround and today believes that the law does not go far enough in terms of equality. According to a BBC report (24.1.2004) 'Nadia Yassine, spokesperson of *Jamiat al-Adl wal-Ihsan* says [the law] does not go far enough because women remain minors under the penal code, which has not changed.' Not only that, but the spokesperson of the group (*Jamiat* int.) claimed that 'the Sheikh had previously written about the necessity to grant legal equality to women way before the beginning of such debate, and therefore the changes were in tune with the group's beliefs'. In fact, a change in attitude did take place and was the product of a number of factors, but an important one was the position taken by women members, with Nadia Yassine herself leading the way. Women members of the association campaigned within the group to have the initial decision

reversed if conditions changed. This triggered an internal debate that saw them come out on top once this had effectively happened.

This does not necessarily mean that the association is indeed a shining example of internal democracy, but it points to the fact that involvement of members may be greater than expected and that the Islamist ideology is flexible when the political rewards are high. Furthermore, this indicates that once society at large is at peace with radical legal changes that might be opposed in principle by the group, the latter is able to adapt.

### *Triggering a reaction?*

One important paradox that is often overlooked when pondering the strength of Islamism and its negative impact on the ‘civility’ of society is the fact that this perceived incivility may trigger a reaction, whereby non-Islamist sectors of society organise themselves in order to counter the expansion of Islamism. The case of Morocco is particularly telling because we do indeed find evidence of such behaviour. This is a very important aspect of the civil society debate, because it indicates that Islamism may indirectly be a beneficial contributor to the democratisation process.

As outlined by Pierre Vermeren (2002), Mohammed VI’s accession to the throne in 1999 opened the way for a relaxation of procedures in the creation of new non-governmental associations, coupled with greater intellectual openness. Thus the most important factor in the impressive numerical surge of NGOs is certainly the considerable change in the political sphere with regards to freedom of association. However, it should also be highlighted that some of the work done by specific secular groups such as CIOFEM (Committee for the Rights of Women), ‘Springtime for Equality’, and other more local NGOs (particularly in remote villages and poorer urban neighbourhoods) has been motivated by the necessity to stem the rising tide of Islamism. This takes place at two levels. First of all, at an intellectual level, some secular NGOs try to spread a message of *laïcité*, which goes against the message that ‘Islam is the solution’ propagated by the *Jamiat*. They were particularly active at the time of the family code reform debate, and doubled their efforts once the *Jamiat* made its opposition to the project known. Secondly, given that the greatest strength of the *Jamiat* is not necessarily its political independence from the king, but its provision of social services, some NGOs try to compete on this terrain. As one ideological opponent of the *Jamiat* admitted: ‘they [the Islamists] provide jobs to the unemployed, they pay for weddings and funerals. They have a network and they are very active’ (NGO leader int.). In order to counter this activism, some groups therefore operate on the same terrain.

This is the case for instance in small villages where Islamism is not as strong, and where individuals now create associations to manage the land better, solve local disputes through cooperation, and practise some form of local social democracy, in order to improve their lives without necessarily subscribing to the political message of the *Jamiat* (NGO leader int.). In rural areas, villagers remain for instance very much pro-monarchy while the *Jamiat* is increasingly hardening its discourse against the monarchy, with one leading member openly advocating the necessity for Morocco to become a republic (*Al Osbou'ya Al Jadida* 2.6.2005). A similar competition is taking place in urban settings where the *Jamiat* is considerably stronger. Leftist groups are beginning to see the necessity of competing with the Islamists on the provision of social services, in order to show that a social-democratic project can not only deliver human rights (a rather abstract concept in Moroccan shantytowns), but also practical results. This is however a particularly difficult task, because the largest leftist political parties are actually quite disconnected from the associational movement, and are therefore unable to articulate a clear political project that would benefit such NGOs. As one former leftist political prisoner put it (int.): 'political parties of the left have abandoned this strategy of providing social services directly. Their strategy is to make changes from the top, by being involved in the political process. NGOs that have leftist leanings do that work now.' Another difficulty that they encounter is, as one militant lamented, 'the lack of financial means' (NGO leader int.), while Islamists have considerable funds at their disposal. Obviously, the *Jamiat* can easily point to the fact that the left has sold out, and that the secular project has failed to bring development and justice to Morocco.

Difficulties notwithstanding, it is important to underline that the expansion of Islamism as civil society activism has also generated a response from secular sectors (the feminist movement has been particularly active, because it perceives itself as a potential victim of Islamist resurgence), and this points to an expansion of the sphere of autonomy and debate that can be beneficial to the process of democratisation.

#### *Coincidence of interests?*

Another interesting element of the current state of Moroccan civil society that seems to contradict some of the assumptions of the literature on civil society in the Arab world is the coincidence of interests that may exist between Islamist associations and other organisations that belong to the opposition camp. This is also an aspect that has been underinvestigated, because of the widespread belief that too much civil society is not truly

conducive to democratisation. This belief may hold true in the short term, when many groups, in order to obtain results, bypass the discredited party system and directly address the country's leadership, reinforcing its position as ultimate decision-maker. However, in the longer term, it is possible to hypothesise that such groups may come to realise that the strategy does not pay off in terms of real structural changes, and that they therefore need to build bridges with other NGOs opposed to the wielders of power, even if these do not share a similar outlook on what the future society should look like. True opposition movements constituted in the civil society sector operate under the same constraints because the ruling elites deal with them in the same manner: repression, selective co-optation, or bare tolerance. Thus, it is conceivable that all these groups, irrespective of their objectives and ideological beliefs, have some interests in common such as expanding the sphere of independence from the state and making demands that see their concerns improved. This could lead them, at times, to conduct the same battles for certain objectives or to use the same methods to promote their views. In Morocco, such a coincidence of interests has not gone as far as creating a common front that would pit all sectors of civil society against the king, but there have been instances when there has been a degree of informal cooperation on certain themes. At the political level, Morocco has not gone as far as Egypt, where the emergence of formal coalitions comprising Islamists and other leftist secular groups is attempting 'to break the monopoly of the state and official opposition parties over the issue of reform' (*Al Ahram Weekly* 27.6.2005), but there have been rapprochements around the issue of political change. For example, there has been formal cooperation between Islamist associations and human rights groups on issues ranging from freedom of speech to the end of torture and the legal protection for political prisoners. On the issue of freedom of speech, many secular groups have defended the right of Nadia Yassine to question the validity of the monarchical system, which has been a taboo for a long time in Morocco.

Groups as diverse as Amnesty International, Synergie Civique and the *Jamiat* have come together to condemn the use of torture in Moroccan prisons, and have expressed concern at the massive crackdown that followed the Casablanca bombings, complete with torture and show trials. This has led the director of a large secular NGO (int.) to state:

I have to say that on many topics, we find that Islam can actually be of help because most people are in fact able to make the connection between human rights as we 'teach' them and the religion. The Islamist organisations as well, we have no problems at all with them, there is no confrontation and we do not get harassed. On some things (i.e. torture) we even lead a common struggle, probably



because recently it is something that concerns them directly. That said, there are some topics about which our message is difficult to make without coming in opposition with some sectors of Islamism.

For its part, the *Jamiat* recognises that Morocco is a pluralist society, and that there are groups that will promote very different values and policies to those that the *Jamiat* espouses, but at the same time, there are other groups with which a dialogue can be held, although this statement was rather qualified: 'very few of these associations are actually free. There are some that are truly independent and we co-operate with them' (*Jamiat* spokesperson, int.).

Finally, one area of 'coincidence' is the treatment of political prisoners and dissidents. Both the *Jamiat* and secular organisations such as the OMDH (Organisation Marocaine de Droits de l'Homme) or the Moroccan antenna of Amnesty International are in agreement when it comes to defending the rights of dissidents against unfair imprisonment or exile. The OMDH for instance hailed the king's decision to let Yassine out of house arrest, despite the organisation's very different beliefs and political objectives (*Reuters* 3.10.1999). For its part, the *Jamiat* heavily criticised the regime for the harsh treatment that members of the leftist opposition received during Hassan's reign, and argues that the same should not happen today to the popular Islamist opposition.

However it should be emphasised that some in the secular sector of associational life still believe that the Islamists are still not to be trusted as 'the surge of Islamist activism is a danger for democracy in Morocco because the vast majority of the different components of Islamism do not believe in the universal values of representative democracy. They just want to use it to come to power' (NGO leader int.). It follows that cooperation should not be envisaged with them.

Despite the differences that exist among secular associations and the rather self-congratulating attitude of the *Jamiat*, a process of building bridges has begun on certain important themes between them. While at this stage it is improbable that a formal alliance for political change will be constituted, it is possible to envisage that in the long term the links that are being created might lead to such an outcome given that the stated preference of all actors is 'dialogue with all the expressions of Moroccan society' (*Jamiat* spokesperson int.; NGO leaders int.).



Recent work on Arab civil society has the merit of challenging the conventional wisdom on the normative character of civil society, and

correctly emphasises that the concept of civil society is neither positive nor negative *per se*, and should be treated as a neutral category. The problem however is that this important theoretical point is derived from a very partial and controversial empirical examination of the role of Islamism in the region. Thus, civil society should not take on a negative connotation simply because in the region it expresses itself largely through Islamism.

The findings from the case study of Morocco point, although not decisively, in the direction of the democratic potential that the activities of Islamist organisations have in three respects. First of all, their discourse itself has democratic connotations rather than authoritarian ones. This is due not necessarily to the ideology itself (which many accuse of being totalitarian), but rather to the surrounding environment where other associations exist and where social confrontation takes place on a number of issues. The *Jamiat* is very aware of what is outside the organisation, and in order to maintain its strength it is able to change with society and adapt both its discourse and its activities. These interactions have an effect on how ordinary members behave, which is then reflected within the organisation. Secondly, the surge of Islamist activism both in the welfare and political sector has provoked a surge in the activism of those social groups that are inimical to the Islamist project and do not share its outlook on how the future of the country should be shaped. This increases the degree of pluralism that exists in society, which in turn affects the ability of the authoritarian elites to keep society in line. Finally, given the type of constraints that truly independent social actors face, there is some evidence of Islamists cooperating with some secular organisations on key themes with which both are concerned, particularly in the field of basic human rights and political reforms.

All this may not be sufficient to demonstrate that Islamism is a democratic force, but it is sufficient to question the assumption that Islamist associations are devious groups solely bent on 'lying' their way to power. This has important academic implications, because it points to the importance of civil society in promoting political change in the Arab world, particularly in the long term. There are also considerable policy-making consequences. Lately, there has been an increase, particularly in the United States, in the number of warnings given to the American administration regarding the funding of civil society activism as the best tool to promote democratisation in the Arab world. It is argued that civil society actors have a very limited impact, they can be easily accused of selling out to foreigners, and they can be taken over by security officials rendering them ineffective. All this may be true, but the perceived failure of the funding of civil society activism is also due to the fact that there is very little

engagement with the truly popular civil society actors: the Islamists. The coveted quest for 'secular, nationalist, and liberal organisations' (*International Herald Tribune* 13.8.2005) is not very productive if it occurs in isolation. Engagement with Islamist groups becomes a necessity because the political parties are discredited, and 'secular' civil society is not yet as strong. For the time being there is no way around Islamist groups if the objective of Western policy-making is a pluralistic political order. This view is beginning to be accepted at European level, as Roberto Aliboni (2004) recently indicated, and may represent an alternative to exclusionist policies that have not produced many positive results.

## REFERENCES

- Abootalebi, A. 1998. 'Civil society, democracy and the Middle East', *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 2, 3: 46–59.
- Aliboni, R. 2004. 'Promoting democracy in the EMP: which policy strategy?', *EuroMesco Report*, November, 5–20.
- Berman, S. 2003. 'Islamism, revolution and civil society', *Perspectives on Politics* 1, 2: 257–72.
- Brumberg, D. 2002a. 'Islamists and the politics of consensus', *Journal of Democracy* 13, 3: 109–15.
- Brumberg, D. 2002b. 'The trap of liberalised autocracy', *Journal of Democracy* 13, 4: 56–68.
- Carothers, T. 1999. *Assisting Democracy: the learning curve*. Washington, DC: Carnegie.
- Chomiak, L. 2002. 'Civil society in transition: the experiences of centres for abused women in Morocco', *Journal of North African Studies* 7, 4: 55–82.
- Filaly-Ansary, A. 2002. 'State, society and creed: reflections on the Maghreb', in A. Sajoo, ed. *Civil Society in the Muslim World: contemporary perspectives*. London: I.B. Tauris, 294–318.
- Gellner, E. 1994. *Conditions of Liberty: civil society and its enemies*. New York: Penguin.
- Hawthorne, A. 2004. 'Is civil society the answer?', *Carnegie Papers* 44: 1–24.
- Howe, M. 2001. 'Fresh start for Morocco', *Middle East Policy* 8, 2: 59–65.
- Impagliazzo, M. & M. Giro. 1997. *Algeria in Ostaggio*. Milan: Guerini ed Associati.
- Langohr, V. 2004. 'Too much civil society, too little politics', *Comparative Politics* 36, 2: 181–203.
- Maddy-Weitzmann, B. 2003. 'Islamism, Moroccan-style: the ideas of Sheikh Yassine', *Middle East Quarterly* 10, 1, available at <http://www.meforum.org/pf.php?id=519>.
- Mardin, S. 1995. 'Civil society and Islam', in J. Hall, ed. *Civil Society: history, theory, comparison*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- McLavery, P. 2002. 'Civil society and democracy', *Contemporary Politics* 8, 4: 303–18.
- Mishal, S. & A. Sela. 2000. *The Palestinian Hamas*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Munson Jr, H. 1991. 'Morocco's fundamentalists', *Government and Opposition* 26, 3: 331–44.
- Najem, T. P. 2003. 'State, power and democratization in North Africa: developments in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya', in A. Saikal & A. Schnabel, eds. *Democratization in the Middle East: experiences, struggles and challenges*. Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 183–201.
- Nonneman, G. 2001. 'Rentiers and autocrats, monarchs and democrats, state and society: the Middle East between globalisation, human agency, and Europe', *International Affairs* 77, 1: 141–62.
- Norton, A. 1995–96. *Civil Society in the Middle East*. Leiden: Brill.
- Posusney, M. 2004. 'Enduring authoritarianism', *Comparative Politics* 36, 2: 127–38.
- Putnam, R. D. 2000. *Bowling Alone: the collapse and revival of American community*. New York: Touchstone.
- Rau, Z., ed. 1991. *The Re-emergence of Civil Society in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union*. Boulder, CO: Westview.
- Sardamov, I. 2005. 'Civil society and the limits of democratic assistance', *Government and Opposition* 40, 3: 379–402.
- Sater, J. 2002. 'The dynamics of state and civil society in Morocco', *Journal of North African Studies* 7, 3: 101–18.
- Tempest, C. 1997. 'Myths from Eastern Europe and the legend of the West', *Democratization* 4, 1: 132–44.

- Volpi, F. 2004. 'Pseudo-democracy in the Muslim world', *Third World Quarterly* 25, 6: 1061–78.
- Vermeren, P. 2002. *Le Maroc en transition*. Paris: La Découverte.
- Wiktorowicz, Q. 2001. 'The new global threat: transnational salafis and jihad', *Middle East Policy* 8, 4: 18–38.
- Willis, M. 2002. 'Political parties in the Maghrib: the illusion of significance', *Journal of North African Studies* 7, 2: 1–22.
- Yassine, A. 1999. <http://www.yassine.net/lettres/memorandum.htm>, 14.11.1999.
- Yassine, A. 2000. *Winning the Modern World for Islam*. Iowa City: Justice and Spirituality Publishing.
- Yassine, A. 2003. *The Muslim Mind on Trial*. Iowa City: Justice and Spirituality Publishing.
- Zakaria, F. 2004. 'Islam, democracy and constitutional liberalism', *Political Science Quarterly* 119, 1: 1–20.
- Zubaida, S. 2001. 'Civil society, community, and democracy in the Middle East', in S. Kaviraj & S. Khilnani, eds. *Civil Society: history and possibilities*. Cambridge University Press, 232–49.

### *Newspapers, News Agencies and Broadcasts*

*Al Ahram Weekly* (Cairo), *Al Osbou'ya Al Jadida* (Casablanca), *International Herald Tribune* (Paris), *Le Journal Hebdomadaire* (Casablanca), *Maroc Hebdo International* (Casablanca), Reuters ([www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com))

### *Interviews*

- Former political prisoner and current activist (NGO against torture), Casablanca, 12.8.2005.
- Former political prisoner and current journalist and NGO activist, Casablanca, 12.8.2005.
- Human Rights NGO leader, Casablanca, 9.8.2005.
- Human Rights NGO leader, Rabat, 11.8.2005.
- Human Rights NGO leader, Casablanca, 11.8.2005.
- Jamiat al-Adl wal-Ihsan* spokesperson, Rabat, 10.8.2005.
- Women's group leader, Casablanca, 11.8.2005.