

Neither participation nor revolution.
The strategy of the Moroccan *Jamiat al-*
Adl wal-Ihsan.

Abstract

Scholars and students of Islamist movements are divided over the issue of Islamists' commitment to democracy and a number of studies attempted to discover the true nature of Islamist parties. This paper rejects this approach and argues that the behaviour of Islamist parties can be better understood through an analysis of the constraints and opportunities that their surrounding environment provides. Specifically, the paper aims at explaining the choice of the Moroccan *Jamiat al-Adl wal-Ihsan* neither to participate in institutional politics nor undertake violent actions to transform the regime. This is done through an examination of its relations with the other political actors. The paper argues that the *Jamiat al-Adl wal-Ihsan*'s behaviour is as much the product of rational thinking as it is of ideology and provides evidence to support this claim. Such findings are important not only in the Moroccan context, but contribute to a growing literature claiming that Islamist movements should be treated as rational political actors operating under 'environmental' constraints and opportunities.

Introduction: Islamism between ideology and rationality

Academic and policy-making debates on Middle Eastern and North African politics very often address the role and nature of Islamist parties and movements. At a time when democratisation is perceived to be the only solution for the problems affecting both these societies and the international system as a whole, the popularity of Islamist parties is very controversial. On the one hand, Islamist movements attempting to play the game of political participation are treated with a considerable amount of suspicion, as both domestic opponents and international actors fear their intentions. On the other hand there is the recognition that without the inclusion of Islamists in a regenerated political system, democratisation is very much unlikely to occur. Thus some scholars and policy-makers see Islamists as a potential pro-democracy resource, while others see them as enemies of democracy and potentially authoritarian. Such polarising attitudes are generally the product of the scholarly attempt to discover the 'true nature' of such movements, particularly with respect to their democratic credentials and commitment.

While it is recognised today that Islamist groups are very different from each other in terms of ideological differences and methods of action, this has not stopped scholars from investigating specific groups with the objective of determining *a priori* their ethos and therefore their potential role in processes of regime change. Broadly speaking, there are three types of radical Islamist groups across the region. The first group includes movements such as *Hamas* and *Hezbollah*, which combine traits of social movements, political parties and national liberation movement (Hroub, 2006; Palmer Harik, 2004). The second group includes the *salafi* movements bent on the use of violence to achieve their political objectives such as the Algerian Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb (former GSPC). The third group is made up of all those movements that do not employ violence and function as broad social movements (Wiktorowicz, 2004), but also have a specifically Islamist political agenda, which leads them to be involved in institutional politics when the opportunity arises. Recently, much greater attention has been paid to the latter group because of their direct or indirect involvement in political and institutional changes. It is these movements, rhetorically committed to peaceful democratisation, that have attracted much scholarly attention.

Investigating such mainstream movements is certainly worthwhile because it allows scholars to gain an insight on how such movements operate, how they are structured, how the leaders are selected and what their main policy concerns are.

However, such investigations remain highly problematic and subject to a considerable degree of speculation when it comes to determine beyond doubt whether they have an authoritarian or a democratic *ethos*. For example, recent analyses of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood have led to opposing conclusions regarding how the movement would operate within a more democratic polity. While Khalil (2006) argued quite strongly that democracy would not survive were the Brotherhood to take power, Mona El-Ghobashy (2005) comes to a radically different conclusion having analysed the ideological and strategic metamorphosis the Brotherhood went through in recent decades. Such studies therefore lead quite quickly to a rather sterile and fruitless debate because they attempt to find an ‘essence’ that is impossible to correctly pin down, as all political movements, while having an ideology to propagate and policies to implement, have to contend with institutional constraints such as electoral and constitutional rules, the presence of other political parties or the decisions of the courts. Furthermore, such studies assume that, once identified, the *ethos* is not subject to change. This might not in fact be the case as demonstrated in other contexts when seemingly extremist and anti-democratic parties went through considerable changes and even became supporters of democracy.¹ Thus the surrounding environment matters and influences the choices Islamist movements make and the strategies they adopt. Thus, attempting to determine *a priori* the true *ethos* of any movement neglects the relevance of the context within which they act. In addition, ‘ideologised’ analyses of Islamist organisations tend to marginalise the contribution of the comparative politics literature on political formations, specifically the trait of rationality of behaviour. Islamist political organisations should be studied through the same assumptions of rationality that are utilised for other non-Islamist formations. Thus, costs and benefits analysis is a trait of Islamist organisations, which take into account the surrounding environment and the internal dynamics of the group to constantly shift positions in order to advance their agenda. This study does not want to underplay the significance of an ideology inspired by divine revelation, which is a fundamental trait of Islamist movements, and it recognises its relevance, particularly when compared to the beliefs that secular parties espouse. However, the religious dimension cannot be the only lens through which Islamist movements should be analysed because many of their activities and their sloganeering focus on very practical political matters and are imbued with pragmatism. In other contexts, such as the case of Christian democracy, *realpolitik* pragmatism was just as important as the religious

ideology that inspired the parties at the beginning. This does not mean that Islamist groups do not have unique characteristics, just as Communist parties have, but this uniqueness should not place them in a special category beyond the reach of comparison with other movements dealing with the every-day constraints of the political game. As Wiktorowicz (2004) argued, 'Islamic activism is not *sui generis*.' With this in mind, it is possible to better grasp the strategies and activities of Islamists in a framework of rational behaviour. If the literature keeps looking at these parties simply through the dimension of religion and religious ideology, it runs the risk of not capturing an important part of their development and evolution.

This paper, building on Brumberg's (2002) work on Islamist parties, rejects the approach whereby it is possible to determine *a priori* the true *ethos* of a political actor by analysing documents, statements, structure and past behaviour. If interpreted in isolation from the surrounding institutional setting and in a political vacuum, the political actors' true nature will be highly dependent on the scholar's pre-conceptions and biased selection of evidence. Rather, this paper will examine the Moroccan Justice and Spirituality Group, *Jamiat al-Adl wal-Ihsan* (*Al Adl* from now on), in its institutional and political environment in order to explain its refusal to both participate to the Moroccan political game and to undertake more militant actions to change the regime they have so much contempt for. The strategies and tactics of the movement will be explored in the context of political rationality. It is assumed that by analysing the dynamic interactions that such movement has with the other relevant actors in the Moroccan system contributes to a better grasp of its political choices. Explaining the behaviour of the movement through rationalistic assumptions allows for a better understanding of how the ideology and the strategies of the *al Adl* dynamically change in a relationship of mutual influence.

The case of the *al Adl* is particularly interesting because it allows the possibility of examining how a prominent Islamist movement manages the balance between revolution and participation in an authoritarian context while retaining considerable popularity among ordinary Moroccans. The ability of the *al Adl* to adapt to the environment within which it operates indicates that the movement, despite its strong ideological positions on a number of matters, is capable to strategise and think rationally about the methods through which it can gain strength and, possibly, achieve its objectives. This study contributes to a growing literature attempting to explain the behaviour of Islamist movements under authoritarian conditions by looking at how

institutions and interactions with other actors shape behaviour (Hafez, 2003; Clark, 2004; Lust-Okar, 2005; Schwedler, 2006).

The first part of the paper will briefly outline how the Moroccan political system operates and describes the *al Adl*'s position within it. The paper will then briefly summarise the structure and work of the association. Finally, the focus will be on the 'environmental' constraints that explain why the Justice and Spirituality Group pursues a 'third way' to affect political, social and economic change.

It is this very decision that presents an interesting puzzle for the literature on opposition movements during periods of political liberalisation in authoritarian settings. Within it, it usually emerges that during political openings, opposition movements normally attempt to access the state institutions previously closed off in order to gain bargaining power for future confrontations with the regime with the long-term objective of changing the rules of political competition. Multiparty elections, even though are engineered by the regime and unable to conform to acceptable standards of freedom and fairness, represent significant moments for opposition parties to have an enhanced role in political life and measure their popular appeal. As Pripstein-Posusney (2002) argues 'by withholding participation, exposing and challenging electoral violations, and/or critiquing the electoral rules themselves, independent activists and opposition parties can diminish the executive's credibility.' The *al Adl* not only persistently refrained from participating, but remained and still remains completely outside the institutional game, including round-tables and meetings regarding the details of electoral procedures. This is despite its consistent calls for the establishment of procedural democracy. In addition, the movement has consistently refused to be co-opted the institutions of the state. This is in contrast with the behaviour of the vast majority of Islamist movements across the Arab world, including the Moroccan Party for Justice and Development or the Brotherhoods of Egypt and Jordan. At the same time, the *al Adl* has also refused to call for regime change through violence. It is contended that the very specific conditions and constraints of the Moroccan system determine such behaviour because the *al Adl* perceives the course of action it has taken to be the one that will eventually deliver its fundamental objective: the creation of an Islamic state.

The *al Adl* is at times accused of espousing a self-defeating strategy because it does not play the game it supports (procedural democracy) and, at the same time, refuses to play the revolutionary subversive card. This makes it an interesting case to

examine not only for the wider literature on opposition movements, but also for the more specific literature dealing with Islamist parties. In most other contexts across the Arab world, Islamist parties when given the opportunity, play the electoral game even in the knowledge that they game is rigged. Providing an explanation for the *al Adl*'s seemingly puzzling behaviour contributes to fill the gap on opposition movements' strategies in authoritarian settings and might give some insights on how policy-makers could deal with such political actors.

This research is by no means attempting to marginalise the 'ideological' explanation for the stances that the *al Adl* takes with respect to its choices. Thus, it is important to emphasise how the ideological tenets worked out by the leader Sheikh Abdessalam Yassine are very relevant for the type of activism that characterises the movement. This is in line with recent developments in the literature on Islamist groups, which attempts to interpret Islamism as a traditional ideology, which should not be subjected to secular bias (Browsers, 2005). However, the ideology of the movement and the thinking of its leader have been explored in some detail elsewhere (Zeghal, 2005; Lauziere, 2005; Maddy-Weitzman, 2003) and it is the purpose of this research to instead concentrate the attention on how such ideological stances are operationalised in practice in the daily activities of the movement and how they are at times modified for strategic considerations. Ideology and rational choices are therefore in a dynamic relationship, where ideological tenets do not necessarily trump all else. The religious dimension of the movement should not obscure the fact that the objectives it wants to achieve and the transformation of society it envisages are very much 'political' and require a rationalistic understanding of the reality surrounding the movement.

Morocco's 'liberalised autocracy'

In 1997, Rémy Leveau (1997) defined the country as having a 'political system based on authoritarian pluralism.' Since independence the Royal family, and more specifically King Hassan II, ruled the country with an iron fist, but almost always permitted a degree of political pluralism in the form of competing political parties and civil society organisations. This pluralism was designed to give the impression that Morocco was always moving towards some sort of democratization and it was maintained mostly for external consumption. As Howe (2001) highlighted 'Morocco [was] generally respected by world powers as a stable constitutional

monarchy engaged in the democratic process and as an Islamic voice of moderation.’ In reality, genuine democratization never materialised, although King Hassan II began a more convincing move towards significant political change (known as *l’alternance*) in the early 1990s when he offered the Socialist Party, usually marginalised in perpetual opposition, the opportunity to head the government. This offer was eventually accepted in 1997. This change seemed to signal the genuine intention to move the country away from authoritarianism and to prepare the terrain for his son, Mohammed VI, who would succeed him with the objective of further modernising Morocco.

The early days of Mohammed’s VI reign were euphoric ones for both ordinary Moroccans and for political actors who had for a considerable amount of time called for the increasing liberalisation that the new King was promoting. Despite maintaining a solid grip on policy-making power through his constitutional prerogatives, Mohammed VI set about liberalising society. According to one civil society activist the new King ‘allowed it [Morocco] to breathe’ (Author’s Interview, 2005) after many years of suffocating repression. In a rather short space of time after coming to power much progress occurred so that Howe was able to state ‘nowhere else in the Arab world has the public mood of fear changed so dramatically in so little time, not have citizens acquired such extensive freedom of press, speech and assembly (Howe, 2001).’ However, the programme of democratic reforms was disappointing in the institutional and political domains. For example, there has been no revision of the constitution, which gives considerable executive powers to the unelected King. Nevertheless, Mohammed VI continued to integrate the Islamist party, the Party for Justice and Development (PJD), into Parliament. While severe limitations and constraints are placed on the party itself in terms of its ability to run candidates at elections (Willis, 2004), the PJD has been able to take advantage of the situation and has demonstrated both electoral strength and determination to remain in opposition.

The country, despite strong economic growth, is still largely mired in poverty, illiteracy and corruption. The lack of genuine political change is held responsible for this state of affairs, as the King continues to dominate policy-making without any accountability, while political parties in government continue to suffer from their lack of policy-making autonomy in key areas and continue therefore to be further discredited (Willis, 2002). Initially, it seemed that the strategy of ‘enlightened

despotism' would last until the King's power base was consolidated and he could move towards a new strategy based on the reinvention of a new ruling bargain with citizens (Maghraoui, 2001), but there never seemed to be the necessary political willingness to deliver on genuine reforms that would limit his own power. Supporters of King Mohammed VI emphasise that he brought a new generation of technocrats to power and delivered on some of his promise such as the reform of the family law (El Ghissassi, 2006), but in eight years in power it is still far too little in a country that needs a radical transformation.

The Casablanca bombings of May 2003 were a tremendous shock for the country. While the King authorised a heavy clampdown on Islamists that led some to argue that the country was sliding back to the days of Hassan's repressive policies, he also took two progressive initiatives. First of all a new family law, which improves women's rights, was passed and subsequently an Equity and Reconciliation Commission aimed at providing closure on past human rights abuses was launched. Such reforms however should not detract from the fact that since the attacks, the King has made full use of his constitutional prerogatives and marginalised further the political parties in government. In addition, no changes to the Constitution were introduced despite pressure from a number of social and political actors to do so. Finally, censorship and repression of the press increased. According to French journalist J.P. Tuquoi (2006), it is unelected technocrats and advisors who dominate policy-making through their personal influence on the King enforcing the perception of authoritarian rule. Whatever the King's own personal involvement in the running of the country, the Moroccan transition to democracy has stalled (Cavatorta, 2005). As long as the institutional and constitutional framework is not modified with the objective of diminishing the King's executive powers in favour of elected officials, it is difficult to see how Morocco is making progress towards democratisation.

While the civil society space that Mohammed VI opened up has not been closed down and is indeed the only realm where genuine opposition politics can take place (Cavatorta, 2006), institutional reforms in favour of accountability have not occurred. The 'de-politicisation' (Maghroui, 2002) of the population is both evident and potentially dangerous because it plays in the hands of violent radical groups that have been so far very marginal actors on the Moroccan scene, but could build up legitimacy and resources over time. Cementing the Kingdom's political and economic

ties with the United States has also not proven popular at a time when US policies in the region are heavily criticised even by moderate political actors (White, 2005).

The Moroccan political system, based on both co-optation and intimidation of dissidents and opponents since the days of independence, still functions quite effectively, but its stability is much more uncertain because of the social changes within the country and the challenging international situation (Cohen and Jaidi, 2006). In particular, Morocco witnessed the unexpected growth of Islamism as a political force over the last fifteen years. In the past, the religious legitimacy of the Royal family insulated it from the criticism coming from Islamist movements, which were traditionally small and 'politically inefficient' (Munson Jr., 1991). Much of the criticism for the policies of Hassan II came from the Marxist and socialist left, while attempts to overthrow him were carried out by small groups within the military in 1971 and 1972. The religious legitimacy of the King to rule has however diminished considerably and is no longer as solid as a rampart against the criticism coming from vast sectors of political Islam. The immunity from criticism of the Commander of the Faithful has disappeared, as other political actors appropriated the language and symbolism of religion to question the very legitimacy of the king to rule (Mohsen-Finan and Zeghal, 2006).

Islamism in Morocco had 'caused considerably anxiety in the immediate aftermath of the Iranian revolution' (Munson Jr., 1991), but did not really become powerful until the 1990s. In the words of Laskier (2003), 'Morocco's problems have provided opportunities for Islamist movements to arise and claim they possess the best and perhaps only solutions.' In this respect, Morocco is no longer different from the other Arab countries in the region. Faced with the growth of political Islam, the Royal House adopted a three-pronged strategy to 'contain radicalism' (Willis, 2006).

First of all, it convinced the PJD to participate to multiparty electoral competitions. Thus, the PJD integrated the political system and its representatives sit in Parliament. In exchange for participation, the PJD accepted not to question the religious legitimacy of the King and refrains from challenging directly the *status quo*. In so doing, the King hoped that co-optation would decrease the appeal of Islamist militancy (Albrecht and Wegner, 2006), but this strategy has only been partially successful because the PJD does not represent the whole spectrum of Moroccan Islamism.

Secondly, following the attacks on Casablanca and the successive episodes of violence perpetrated by militants of the group *Salafist Jihad*, Mohammed VI reshuffled the security apparatus and granted the security services the resources and autonomy to carry out a very severe crackdown on all suspected militants, leading in the process to a considerable number of human rights abuses. While the crackdown was very severe, it had the support of most domestic and international political actors, including the PJD. Thus, the King signalled that violence to attain political objectives is not going to be tolerated under any circumstances.

Finally, the King allowed the *al Adl* to carry on with his activities in the open, although the association *per se* is in a legal limbo and its militants are at times harassed. The choice to allow the movement to operate with only a modicum degree of interference is dictated partially by the popularity of the movement, which, through its social activism contributes to alleviate the harsh conditions of the poorer sectors of the population. In addition, the King and his advisers hope to be able to eventually co-opt the *al Adl* once weakened because of the success of the King's policies. This attempt to marginalise the movement has so far not been very successful.

In conclusion, Morocco can be defined today as a 'liberalised autocracy' (Brumberg, 2002b), where there is a degree of political pluralism and a high degree of civil society activism, but where ultimate decision-making power remains in the hands of an unaccountable leader and his advisers. In the face of the social and economic crisis that the country faces, the leadership has not been able to provide a programme of transformation that mobilised ordinary Moroccans, who, like many of their Arab counterparts, are increasingly attracted to Islamist groups, be they institutionally integrated (the PJD), politically marginalised (the Salafist Jihad) or socially active (the *al Adl*).

The *al Adl*: organisational structure and political programme

Sheikh Abdessalam Yassine, an Islamic thinker and school inspector, who had risen to prominence in 1974 because of his open criticism of the policies of King Hassan II, officially founded the *al Adl* in 1981. At the time, the monarchy was under severe criticism from large sectors of society, particularly the traditionally strong left-wing movements, and the King had personally survived two military coups. One of the pillars for his legitimacy remained his role as Commander of the Faithful and it is precisely against the notion that the Royal family had links to the Prophet that Sheikh

Yassine criticised the King. In an open letter titled 'Islam or the Deluge', the Sheikh 'admonish[ed] him to hold firmly to the teachings of Islam and forsake the un-Islamic policies he had been pursuing' (Laskier, 2003). After such an open challenge to the monarch, Yassine was put in mental institution, although the challenge from Islamists was not particularly strong and the monarch was more preoccupied with the challenge coming from the left. The *al Adl*, since its foundation, 'suffered from systematic police harassment' (Laskier, 2003) and Yassine was placed under house arrest in 1989 to emerge from it only ten years later. In the meantime, political Islam has become a much more important political force in Morocco and the *al Adl* benefited quite strongly from it. Despite remaining only a semi-legal organisation the *al Adl* has been able to expand its activities and membership to such a degree that John Entelis (2002) affirmed that the organisation 'is by far the most popular Islamist group' in the country.

The association was founded with the intention of disseminating the Sheikh's writings and thinking and did not have a very clear structure. However, with the growth of the numbers of militants² and the vast expansion of social services it became necessary to provide the groups with a much clearer structure. This has been done over the years and now the group has national, regional and local circles of militants. The militants and sympathisers then found associations organically linked to the *Al Adl* with the objective of providing specific services such as literacy classes or organising public conferences on various issues. In addition, militants hold discussion groups in private homes and proselytise among members of their social networks, following the same logic of recruitment of Islamist social institutions elsewhere (Singerman, 2004). Finally, the *al Adl* has a specific political aspect to its activism. At the national level there is a political circle that guides the strategic choices of the group in line with the Sheikh's teachings, partly the product of *sufi* mysticism. The political circle is the heart of the organisation and is in charge of 'assuring the links with the other political actors on the Moroccan scene as well as defining the societal project and the political programme of the association' (Graciet, 2006). The political circle has three different sections: trade union affairs, women affairs and youth affairs. Women in fact make up almost half the membership of the *Al Adl* and are extremely active in all domains of the associations' work. The poster girl of the group is the Sheikh's daughter Nadia. The spokesperson of the group is

Fatlallah Aarsalane, who is rumoured to be the future leader of the *al Adl* once the Sheikh passes away.

While the political programme of the *al Adl* is far from detailed, it emerges from the writings of the Sheikh and the pronouncements of the leading members that their objective is a radical transformation of the social, economic, political and cultural relationships that currently characterise Morocco. This transformation should obviously lead to the establishment of an Islamic state where *sharia* law would be implemented. In this respect, the programme for change is truly revolutionary because its aims to construct a political system based on Islamic rationality and spirituality rather than on Western modernity. From an institutional point of view the *al Adl* is favourable to the establishment of procedural democracy and the regular holding of elections would guarantee the accountability of elected officials. This should take place within the context of a new constitution, which would greatly reduce the powers of the monarchy. In fact, more recently, the association, via Nadia Yassine, has even flirted with republicanism. From an economic point of view, the economy should be completely reformed and Islamicised with a return to a truer market economy and not one dominated by corruption and lack of meritocracy. On the issue of free trade, there is a considerable degree of criticism for the way that the free trade agreements with the US and the EU have been negotiated. While quite conservative on social issues, the *al Adl* is much more favourable to equality of sexes than the PJD and the association performed quite a spectacular turnaround on the reform of the family code, switching from opposition to acceptance under the internal pressure of the women affairs section (Cavatorta, 2006). Foreign policy is clearly anti-Western and anti-Israeli, but this is not something that makes the association stand out with respect to the other Islamist and left-wing political actors on the Moroccan scene.

No revolution and no participation: the rationale

The choice not to participate to the political system despite its recent opening up and the choice to condemn violence to overthrow the regime seem on the surface to prevent the *al Adl* from reaching its goals. In addition, in the longer run, it might lead to a costly isolation. The explanation for such choices is held to be the ideology of the movement, from which it cannot deviate. Most studies on the *al Adl* are therefore preoccupied with identifying the religious sources of the Sheikh's thinking and writings. Through these sources, scholars then derive an explanation for

how the association operates and ‘strategises’ about the future. Thus, given the emphasis on *dawa*³ in the writings of Sheikh Yassine, this leads to focus on the social activism of the organisation and to examine how the group delivers social services to build up support. Theoretical discussions about the religious ideology underpinning the activities of the organisations are very useful in so far as they trace the quite unusual brand of Islamism that characterises the movement, combining post-Salafi discourse with sufi mysticism and focusing on the spiritual value of religion in affecting material conditions. Accordingly, it is assumed that the association believes that *dawa* will eventually lead to the establishment of the Islamic state, without the necessity for the group to engage directly with the state and with other political formations.

However, this does not explain the creation of a political circle within the organisation or the many political pronouncements of its leaders or their preoccupation for current political events. Thus, exclusively focusing on ideological tenets is not helpful in analysing how the *al Adl* operates as a political actor. Rather than concentrating on religious ideology to explain behaviour, it is more useful to look at how institutional factors and other political actors affect it.

As mentioned above, the very creation of a political circle testifies that beside the spiritual dimension and charitable activities, the *al Adl* is and wishes to be very much involved in the political game. Unlike, however, many other Islamist organisations across the Muslim world and in Morocco itself, the *al Adl* is not seeking acceptance from the regime in order to participate to political life. This choice is not simply the product of ‘religious’ beliefs that would see participation as blasphemous because it would mean the acceptance of the exclusive role of the Commander of the Faithful. Compromising on the issue is not a price worth paying because the movement perceives that its current success is based on the refusal to sit at the same table as all the other political actors in Morocco. In this respect, the reading of the *al Adl* of the liberalising reforms and the democratic changes that Morocco has experienced since the arrival of Mohammed VI to the throne differs quite radically from the reading of all the other parties. In sum, there is nothing to gain from participation because the current changes are not ‘real’ and not simply because it would imply recognition of the figure of Commander of the Faithful. After all, Sheikh Yassine does not dispute the existence of such an institution *per se*, but disputes the fact that at the moment it is occupied by the Alawi dynasty (Zeghal, 2005).

Civil society actors, in particular the largely secular NGOs linked to the human rights movement and to the women's movement, have had a considerable degree of praise for the liberal reforms the King introduced and they have willingly participated to the different forums the regime organised to discuss issues of relevance to the country such as the reform of the family code or the new human development programme to fight poverty (Author's Interviews, 2005). While the *al Adl* might have quite a bit to contribute to such debates, it refuses to take part. This stems from the belief that as long as the overarching structure of government is not changed, incremental reforms are not going to lead to neither political transformations nor economic development.

All political parties, including the Islamist PJD, legitimise the current system by participating to the elections, subject to the conditions of the Palace. The King and his advisors present such broad participation as a step toward full democratisation, but the interpretation of the *al Adl* is different. According to Mr. Arsalane 'in Morocco there is no democracy, we just have the names people associate with democracy: parties, parliament and human rights' (Author's Interview, 2005). Refraining from being included is a rational move at the moment and the *al Adl* calculates that such a stance will be more than beneficial in the long run to the movement for a number of reasons.

First of all, there is widespread dissatisfaction with political parties among ordinary citizens, as official parties, with the exception of the PJD, are largely discredited. Being associated with them in different forums and even in Parliament might represent a potential cost rather than a benefit. When it comes to leftist and secular parties, the possibilities of co-operation with them for reforming the system from within are very slim, as secular parties are aware of their weaknesses and would rally to the King in defence of their privileged position in the system rather than promoting changes from which they think will benefit their opponents. When it comes to the PJD, *al Adl* might end up competing with it for a significant portion of the 'Islamist vote' and this would diminish the influence that the *al Adl* could have, particularly in the absence of constitutional reforms. Thus, by remaining outside the system, the *al Adl* calculates that the PJD's choice to be included in the system will eventually lead to failure. The PJD is poised to make an impressive score at the September 2007 elections, leading it to government. However, the *al Adl* assumes that a participation of the PJD to government without prior institutional and constitutional

changes would set the PJD up for failure, much like the USFP failed in the past to have influence in policy-making. This would lead to the *al Adl* catching the support of disillusioned PJD voters.

Furthermore, the scale of change that the *al Adl* wishes to implement is considerable and would inevitably be frustrated through parliamentary participation where a number of compromises might be required. Such compromises, in turn, would lead militants and activists to question the very validity of the choice of participation and could potentially weaken the movement from within. Given the widespread lack of credibility of those who do participate in a rigged game, the *al Adl* contends that it is better to exploit its role as the outsider that does not compromise. The obvious cost of this strategy is that the *al Adl* is marginalising itself and that, particularly in the case of genuine democratic reforms being introduced, it will become an irrelevant actor, as its support is likely to shift to a successful PJD.

The PJD, which could represent a potential ally in the struggle to Islamise Morocco, is perceived as a competitor and the relationship between the two actors is fraught with difficulties. The PJD, in order to participate and ‘enter’ the political system had to proclaim its allegiance to the King, whose religious authority is not questioned, and also had to restrain its electoral ambitions. The PJD ‘plays the game’ and hopes to reap the benefits of participation in the long run. Such participation is unacceptable to the *al Adl*, which would participate only on the condition that the role of the King was constitutionally diminished before the setting up of new rules of the game and on the condition that there would be no obstacles to the free will of the people. On Al Jazeera, Nadia Yassine (2007) recently stated that ‘our movement is one of *da'wa*, which enjoins on us not to fish in troubled waters, nor fall into the traps of political scheming. The movement will not participate unless it has guarantees that it will participate in a real political process, not in a comedy, and that it will not be imprisoned in the vicious circle of carrying out instructions from the high echelons of power.’⁴ Given that policy-making power is in the hands of the King, the *al Adl* calculates that they would lose support if they participated to institutions that are believed to be unable to affect change after investing so many resources and legitimacy capital in condemning the system. Mr. Arsalane had this to say about the other political actors that have decided to enter the state’s institutions: ‘theirs is a hypocritical stance because they participate in government. They are just pretending to be in opposition to the ruler; in reality they are fully part of the Makhzen’ (Author’s

Interview, 2005). As much as ideology, rational calculations seem to be central to the decision to refrain from compromising. It is implicit from the declarations of some members of the *al Adl* that if more significant changes were introduced and the waters were to become less troubled, they might revise their decision.

Holding out is rational for a second reason. There is diminishing popular support for both left wing parties and for civil society organisations associated to the left and run by former leftist political dissidents. Diminishing support forces such organisations, in order to achieve some of their objectives, to rely on the King for support when it comes to modify legislation or obtain funding. In this manner the King becomes the all important arbiter and ties his fate to the fate of the liberal reformers who are aware of the growing impact of Islamism and are therefore keen to stop it. As Brumberg (2003) noted, ‘in the Middle East [...] fear of Islamist victories has produced “autocracy with democrats”, as key groups that might choose democracy, absent an Islamist threat, now actively support or at least tolerate autocrats.’ While there are certainly many points of disagreement between Islamist groups and such civil society organisations, on some themes they actually have room for co-operation. For instance there is a commonality of interests in the respect for the rights of prisoners and on a number of socio-economic rights such as the sexual exploitation of children. Despite such coincidence of interests, the level of co-operation between the *al Adl* and the secular sectors of civil society is quite low. The organisation is in fact keen to distance itself from what it perceives to be a ‘un-holy’ alliance with groups that not only differ ideologically from the *al Adl*, but also tend to be seen by many ordinary Moroccans as the representatives of post-colonial elites disconnected with the real needs of the population (Wiktorowicz, 2004). While both sectors draw militants and support from the educated middle-classes, their ideological and cultural references are almost irreconcilable. The successful French-educated and French-speaking middle classes are perceived to be the new instruments through which Morocco is being re-colonised. Furthermore, the *al Adl*, because of the extent of its social welfare programme, can claim to be speaking for the poor and marginalised. The *al Adl* refrains from creating official links with these secular civil society groups because it sees them not only as ideological enemies, but because it assumes that they are not interested in a process of change that will reveal their weakness in society to the benefit of Islamism.

A third reason for holding out is the complicated relationship with the Palace. The King is not in principle against the direct participation of the *al Adl* and there have been extensive contacts between the two actors to try to strike a deal that would suit both actors. Nadia Yassine (2007) stated that ‘the regime tried more than once to negotiate with the movement’, but the *al Adl* has so far refused because it would be obliged to recognise the religious primacy of the King. Aside from being highly a contested theological point, such recognition is perceived within the organisation to be the beginning of a co-optation with negative consequences for the movement. The attitude of all of the other players in the system is that such recognition is the price to be paid for entering institutional politics and attempting to then impose democratisation on the monarchy. For the *al Adl* however the strategy of the other players is fundamentally flawed because by participating they then give up the right to deny legitimacy to the monarchy. Such denial of legitimacy is what, according to the *al Adl*, would trigger the necessary radical transformation of the political system. This is the reason why the organisation calls for a constitutional assembly that would discuss such matters without the interference of the King. While it is widely believed the monarchy as an institution is both popular among ordinary Moroccans and necessary for political stability, the *al Adl* banks on the fact that such popularity is diminishing with the growing economic and social difficulties of the country. International events also compound problems for the King, who is a supporter of the war on terror, but seems unable, through his western allies, to obtain satisfactory results on issues of great concern for ordinary Moroccans such as the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Thus, being seen to have legitimised the policy-making role of the monarchy for such a long time is not going to prove popular with citizens. The *al Adl* however keeps its distance from the monarchy, criticises it from the outside and pours scorn on those political actors that have been co-opted in exchange for some privileges. This strategy is believed to lead to a strengthening of the organisation, which will be the main beneficiary of the disillusionment of ordinary citizens with their system of government. Some commentators also share this negative view of the monarchy’s performance and the potential danger it runs (Tuquoi, 2001).

Remaining outside the institutional game might have a number of benefits, but it also carries a number of potential costs and the *al Adl* is quite aware of that. The first potential cost is that by choosing to stay out of institutional politics, the organisation will miss out on the opportunity to influence the future direction of the

country if the situation presented itself were the King to decide that full democratisation was the solution to the ills of Morocco. In that case the parties already present within the state institutions might benefit from their past compromising attitude, as they could claim to have been decisive in influencing the king's decision. The *al Adl* leadership is however very sceptical of this possible change of heart of the King and this is the reason why more recently they have been provoking the monarchy through the 'republican card.' The second potential cost is that by not directly engaging the state and with a deteriorating socio-economic situation, more radical and violent elements might out-flank the *al Adl*. There is a clear recognition of this danger. As Aarsalane mentioned, 'we believe that democracy is the solution... the alternative is radical violence' (Author's interview, 2005). The attacks in Casablanca seem to confirm such fears. Thus, the second potential cost is perceived as being a very real possibility. The *al Adl* has a very long tradition of condemning the use of violence and it is partly the product of experience. The *salafi* groups are not popular and the vast majority of ordinary citizens perceive them to be dangerous and detrimental to the well-being of Morocco, as the anti-terror marches indicate. Violence is therefore not an option for the organisation because it would lead many activists away and it would trigger state repression with the subsequent inability to carry out other important social welfare activities, which attract supporters. It is also not an option because it would alienate a great number of members who have bought into the spiritual aspect of the organisation and would not be keen on the use of violence. Finally, the leadership is very well aware of the fact that violence has not led to the achievement of political objectives in any other Arab society, where *salafi* groups have all failed to get to power.

Thus, the *al Adl* remains in a sort of limbo, having chosen neither participation nor revolution to achieve its objectives. This attitude does not necessarily indicate strategic confusion nor blind ideological commitment, but can be explained through an analysis of the environment surrounding the organisation, which seems to be biding its time before committing to a course of action that the *al Adl* believes will deliver on its objectives for Morocco.

Conclusion

The literature on opposition movements in the Middle East and North Africa, and particularly the one dealing with Islamist movements, tends to overwhelmingly

focus on attempting to discover the true nature of such movements in order to make claims about their democratic credentials or lack thereof. This usually leads to a rather sterile debate about their ideological positions as if they were fixed both in space and time. This is because Islamist movements tend not to be analysed through the assumptions of rationality that comparative politics provides. The outcome is that the surrounding environment is not taken into the due consideration and the rational calculations that such movements might make are neglected when it comes to explain why they operate the way they do and make the choices they make. The debate about the true nature of Islamist formations takes place because of the highly controversial nature of the conflation between religion and ideology that Islamist groups embody, but it overlooks the rational calculations that Islamist movements make when active in dynamic relationships with other political actors. This research does not underestimate the relevance of the ideological tenets derived from religion and how they affect the decision-making process of such groups. It fully recognises that Islamist movements have unique characteristics due to the influence that ‘divine revelation’ has on their ideological beliefs. However, studies on Islamist movements cannot be simply reduced to one dimension and can benefit from the findings of the wider literature on comparative politics on the rationality of political actors. Thus, the research deems it important to underline that there might be a neglected component to the decision-making of Islamist groups. Such component is constraints and conditions that the surrounding environment presents, particularly in terms of relations with other actors. Thus, this environment offers different courses of action subject to institutional constraints and subject to the choices that other players in the system make. Following from Pripsetin-Posusney (2002), it is therefore interesting and useful to look at how of Islamists strategise in an authoritarian context and within a framework of rational behaviour.

The case of the *al Adl* in Morocco is particularly significant because the movement refuses both participation and violence to achieve its objectives. This is not simply the product of its ideological allegiance to *dawa* and social activism, but is also the product of Moroccan ‘liberalised autocracy’, where the King plays a complex game of ‘divide and conquer’ in order to remain the exclusive decision-maker. The findings indicate that in such a game the *al Adl* calculates its costs and benefits through its reading of the relationships that it has with the monarchy, with other political parties and with civil society actors and through its reading of where

Moroccan society as a whole stands with respect to the most important issues the country faces. The *al Adl* has come to the conclusion that democracy is the way forward, but wishes to change the rules of the game before engaging directly in politics and banks on the dissatisfaction of the public with the monarchy to hold out and keep thriving. These ‘subtle calculations’ are meant to strengthen the bargaining position of the association and lead it in the future to conquer political power on its own terms and with the prospect of radically transforming society. Given the popularity of Islamism in Morocco, these calculations might be correct (Beau and Graciet, 2006).

While the *al Adl*’s choices are certainly the product of specifically Moroccan conditions, an approach based on clarifying how the environment conditions strategic calculations can have more general applicability in the study of Islamist movements. The main finding from this research seems to be that while religion as an ideology is important in giving a direction and a theoretical framework of understanding of reality to movements that define themselves as religious, such movements are also rational political actors whose objectives are shaped as much by political realities as they are by ideologies. This is good news for those policy-makers in the West who might decide to take the chance of engaging such groups.

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Notes

¹ This is the case for example of the Italian and Spanish Communist parties, which over time integrated the liberal-democratic system they were so critical of and became active supporters of the system.

² The spokesperson of the organisation refused to say how many members the group has and thus it is impossible to have a definite figure. By most accounts the organisations seems to be able to count on at least 50,000 committed militants and up to 500,000 sympathisers. At demonstrations on Palestine and Iraq or against the reform of the family code, the *al Adl* was able to mobilise over a million people each time.

³ The concept of *dawa* can be equated to propagation of the faith. It has become a politically important concept because it does not simply mean proselytising, it 'becomes the very act of activating Islam through deed in all spheres of life' (Clark, 2004). This includes being politically active and strive to create the conditions for changing the nature of society through 'public virtue and personal piety' (Clark, 2004), which will eventually lead to the establishment of the Islamic state from below.

⁴ Transcripts of the interview are available at www.nadiayassine.net Accessed on April 12th 2007.