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From Proselytising to Ruling: The experience of Morocco's Justice and Development Party

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Upon official recognition in 1996, Morocco's Justice and Development Party (PJD) adapted its methods, as well as its ideological and political approach, enabling it to smoothly enter the political arena and ultimately rise to the presidency in January 2012. This was an exceptional achievement for a political party with roots in a contemporary Islamist movement that was initially influenced by Muslim Brotherhood teachings. To understand how the PJD has been able to exist as a legitimate, full-fledged political actor without provoking the type of political instability seen in other countries, it is necessary to consider the series of ideological, political, and organisational changes that took place within its broader parent movement, the Movement of Unity and Reform (MUR), over the last 25 years. Of particular importance is the process of structural differentiation that took place between the Islamist movement and its political arm, and in particular the separation of the work of proselytising from that of politics. This separation has proven critical to ensuring that the work of governing by the PJD remains independent and autonomous from the social-religious programmes put forth by MUR. This example stands in contrast to Morocco's other major Islamist party, al-Adl wal-Ihsane, and serves as an important model for reconciling the relationship between religion and politics.

Historical Context: Distinguishing Proselytizing and Politics

The Justice and Development Party in Morocco is an outgrowth of the Movement of Unity and Reform (MUR), and is the manifestation of a particular concept of political participation cultivated within the movement over 25 years ago. While in the media MUR is presented as the proselytising arm of the Justice and Development Party, or indeed the PJD is put forth as the

political arm of MUR, such representation is in fact quite simplistic and fails to acknowledge the important differentiations in the organisational and ideological structures of the two entities, and the important separation of the work of proselytising from that of politics. MUR is connected to PJD through a strategic partnership only. Importantly, the organizational division between proselytising work and political work – which Islamist movements in other Arab countries have not successfully achieved – resolves an ideological question of how the relationship between religion and politics can be rectified. The answer lies in considering them two separate and distinct fields.

The Movement of Unity and Reform (MUR) was officially established in 1966, following the merger of two organisations: the Movement of Reform and Renewal (HATM) and the Association of the Islamic Future. The union of these two organisations, which date back to the late 1960s and early 1970s, was the result of several ideological, political, and organisational changes. What distinguished MUR from similar movements in other Arab contexts was its successful establishment of a democratic system for the transfer of power, whereby responsibilities passed democratically from one person to the next, on both the national and local levels; its identity as an Islamic movement connected to the Moroccan context; its lack of organisational ties to Islamic movements abroad;¹ and its promotion of moderate Islamic thought based on the *maqasid* school.²

In its literature, the Movement of Unity and Reform describes itself as “a civil, Moroccan framework working to establish religion in individuals, families, the state, and *ummah*; cooperate with others for good; and call people to God through wisdom and good council.” The idea of “establishing religion” is an interesting one, and notably contrasts with the idea of “establishing an Islamic state” – popular currency in the literature of other Islamic organisations. This philosophy kept MUR from succumbing to a mindset of conflict and struggle for power. It instead provided the necessary conditions for democratic political thinking to evolve, thinking that aimed to create the cultural conditions in which the movement could compete for political power. As such, MUR could use political power to improve conditions in the country by working in cooperation with all of its institutions. In the end, the defining features of its proselytising project were based on a moderate vision, with emphasis

¹ Officials within the Movement of Unity and Reform do not hide the fact that they have benefitted from the ideological and organisational legacy of the Muslim Brotherhood and other groups. Indeed, they have never categorically rejected the idea of joining the International Organisation of the Muslim Brotherhood. Nonetheless, the PJD in Morocco differs from the Justice and Development Party in Turkey, despite their similar names. The name “Justice and Development” was adopted in Morocco in 1998, when the party changed its moniker from the Popular Democratic and Constitutional Movement. This was a year before Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the party’s founder, decided to split from Turkey’s Felicity Party.

² The *maqasid* school was developed by thinkers in the western Islamic world including al-Shatibi, Ibn Ashur, Allal al-Fassi, and Ahmed Raïssouni, who led MUR after it was reformed through difficult political conditions.

placed on employing a cooperative rather than confrontational approach with official institutions.

The Movement of Unity and Reform engaged in intense discussions from 1996 to 1998, resulting in the decision to differentiate political activities from the rest of the group's work. In 1996, when MUR leaders started to become involved in the PJD's General Secretariat for the first time, the question arose as to whether this was an alliance or a merger. MUR's Executive Office issued a statement declaring that "this is neither a case of one joining the other, nor an alliance between two entities;" it was simply that members who were interested in the movement's political work "would conduct it within the framework of the party," while MUR would continue to "to carry out its tasks as it had done before."

MUR proposed the need to make a distinction between the realm of proselytising and the realm of politics, and between the requirements for proselytising work and the requirements for political work. These discussions resulted in a detailed paper explaining the difference between the political party and the proselytising group, titled "The Party's Relationship with the Movement." The paper highlighted the various consequences of the officially adopted position. It stated that "the Movement of Unity and Reform and the Popular Democratic and Constitutional Movement [which would later become the Justice and Development Party] are two independent entities, both de jure and de facto. Neither one has any trusteeship over the other; they are joined together in consultation, cooperation, and coordination." This approach evolved to become an officially adopted organisational plan. MUR's Shura Council (its highest decision-making body) issued decrees on the matter, calling for differentiation between the functions, leading figures, and rhetoric of MUR and PJD.

In terms of functions, MUR determined that it would have three main domains of action: proselytising, education, and training. It handed the rest of its functions over to specialised bodies that had no official ties with the movement, only a commitment to common goals in relevant fields. This included work related to women, students, children, social relief, and the media. MUR also decided to enter into strategic partnerships with existing independent trade unions and political organisations (to this point, its relationship with the Justice and Development Party and the National Labour Union of Morocco are clear examples of this).

In terms of differentiation between leading figures, MUR decided on a set of practical measures, including banning preachers from running for elections and having mandatory responsibilities. MUR also decided to prohibit its central, provincial, and regional officials from having any organisational responsibilities in the PJD (although it did allow them to belong to the party on ordinary terms, since that is a constitutional right guaranteed to all citizens). The PJD, its organisational bodies, and routine decision-making became

independent, and MUR did not intervene in the party's work. New and old party members who were not members of the movement (and who thus did not enable the movement to dominate the party's decisions) helped further this distinction.³

In terms of discourse, that of leading figures in MUR is dominated by a proselytising element, and addresses everyone on a religious/proselytising basis. In contrast, the discourse of leading figures in the PJD is characterised by an engagement with issues in citizens' daily lives and a political/contentious element. This distinction is also shaped by the fact that MUR is no longer concerned with direct, quotidian political work related to elections and competing for organisational membership. Instead, the movement is interested in political work's broader goals, like encouraging citizens to actively participate in elections, urging them to choose the most viable and efficient choices, and standing up for values of fairness and transparency - matters that fall within the scope of civil society's work. The PJD, for its part, is keen to avoid the use of religious slogans in its political work, while MUR expresses how relative and time-bound its political programmes are. As Mohamed El Hamdaoui, former President of the Movement, stated, "The finest democracies cannot keep a political programme going for more than one or two sessions before it declines and an alternative political programme takes their place." For MUR, proselytising discourse should never risk its own future by selling itself out to serve a partisan political project.

As a result, in terms of organisational structure, the Movement of Unity and Reform became completely independent from the Justice and Development Party. MUR does not interfere with PJD's policies, programmes, and political positions, because PJD has its own independent leadership elected by members of MUR. MUR strives instead to be the moral conscience of society as a whole, not just the conscience of the political party to which it is inherently connected. This does not preclude spaces for general communication and exchange of ideas. Some PJD party members attend MUR's Shura Council, although this is not mandatory for the PJD and its leaders. Nonetheless, MUR has made clear efforts to position itself as a civil society entity working to guide religious discourse and call people to God. Given this, one of the most important changes to MUR's organisational structure was the shift away from a centralised and hierarchical structure towards a dynamic one, united by the goal of establishing religion and reforming society. Organisationally independent institutions and bodies converged around this goal, brought together in strategic partnerships to serve the overall project. The movement changed: it no longer revolved around a group but around a message; its united organisation became a united project. The fundamental aim of the organisation was no longer about gaining supporters and increasing membership; it was about bearing a message and influencing the status quo.

³ Young people in MUR largely chose to join the Popular Democratic and Constitutional Movement, led by Dr. Abdelkrim al-Khatib (one the most prominent leaders of the National Movement and leader of the Moroccan Army of Liberation).

The Uniqueness of the Moroccan Arrangement

One of the most important effects of the differentiation described above is that it allows proselytising work to be independent, not subject to changeable political work and its constraints. It also enables partisan and political work to evolve without influencing proselytising work and programmes. While political practice may be based on Islamic theoretical references, on a practical level, the topics that politics engages with are defined by the nature of their context. The way that the relationship between proselytising and politics has been managed in Morocco is certainly unique and is often put forward as an example of political maturity in the Arab world.

There are a number of objective reasons that the situation in Morocco is so mature. Morocco has enjoyed political partisan pluralism since 1934. This pluralism has been cemented by successive electoral gains and popular consultations since 1962, even though elections themselves have been rigged, and not representative of popular opinion. Morocco's history is also shaped by the fact that it is a monarchy – something various political powers see as a source of consensus. The king plays a variety of strategic roles: he is arbitrator in major issues of contention, the commander in chief, and is relatively removed from political affairs. By contrast, the king's importance in tending to religious affairs as *Amir al-Mu'minin* [Commander of the Faithful] cannot be overlooked.

The nature of social and political reality in Morocco has also meant that the country has been relatively socially and politically open since independence, and considerably politically pluralistic. The country was more open in terms of politics and human rights during the period in which MUR evolved into its current form. And unlike other similar nations, Morocco did not adopt a policy of hostility towards Islamist movements, or decide to limit sources of religiosity in order to contain these groups. This had a positive effect in terms of the type of religiosity practiced in general and within Islamist circles, which tend to be moderate and flexible politically.

Likewise, the monarchy's relationship to political demands and opposition has been relatively more open than that of other Arab countries. For example, amidst the other revolutions of the Arab Spring, young Moroccans started protests demanding deep democratic reforms. As opposed to violence and repression, the monarchy chose instead to respond to with dialogue, quickly engaging with protestors in a direct speech, and by reforming sections of the constitution to include more advanced provisions for participatory politics. Notably, the protestors' demands did not call for the fall of the regime, unlike those in Tunisia and Egypt. This was an effect of the regime's deliberate policies of moderation and political openness towards the opposition, which it had pursued to varying degrees since independence. The Justice and Development Party also played a pivotal role in this success. The PJD responded to

the Arab Spring by presenting a political slogan of “Reform and Stability.” This was met with a considerable response in parliamentary elections held later that year. On 25 November 2011, the party won 107 seats in the House of Representatives, achieving a plurality for the first time in Morocco’s history.

This outcome was a result of the party’s intellectual foundation and political efforts. These include the fact that it broke with the call to establish an “Islamic state.” It valued the foundations of Morocco’s political legitimacy and focused on the importance of the Moroccan state’s historical roots, which stretch back for more than twelve centuries. It was also aware of the importance of maintaining the religious legitimacy on which the political system is based. The “Islamic Caliphate” has had a far lesser impact in Morocco than in the Levant. By and large, the Muslim State in Morocco is expected to last, and indeed has never faltered or fallen. This may create a sense of “Moroccan exceptionalism,” which has far-reaching effects on proselytising, organisation, and political style.

The Relationship with al-Adl wal-Ihsane

Nonetheless, not all Islamist movements in Morocco fit into the mold of the PJD/MUR. Most notably, al-Adl wal-Ihsane has a different position and has taken a different approach in the development of the relationship between the movement and party.

Al-Adl wal-Ihsane is an opposition Sufi Islamist group that embraces the call to to establish “an Islamic caliphate according to the manner of the Prophet.” This is as a well-established political ideology for the group, and aligns with the foundational political and ideological teachings that it uses to guide its political project. The late Abdesslam Yassine, the founder of the group, considered “a caliphate according to the manner of the Prophet” to be the fourth and final strategic aim, after founding a national group, establishing a national Islamic state, and unifying Islamic nations. In preaching this aim, he relied on a Prophetic *hadith sharif*⁴ that he included in most of his books. In this *hadith*, the Prophet (PBUH) describes the evolving stages of government, saying:

The Prophethood will remain among you as long as God wishes him to remain, then God will remove it if he wishes to do so. Then there will be a caliphate according to the Prophet’s example, which will remain as long as God wishes it to remain, then God will remove it if he wishes to do so. Then there will be a distressful kingdom which will remain as long as God wishes it to remain, then God will remove it if he wishes to do so.

⁴ Hadith sharif refers to the Prophet’s own utterances, as opposed to a hadith qudsi, in which God Himself is speaking through the Prophet.

Then there will be an inevitable kingdom which will remain as long as God wishes it to remain, then God will remove it. Then there will be a caliphate according to the manner of the Prophet, and then he was silent.

This conception still has currency within al-Adl wal-Ihsane.⁵ Yet, Yassine's writings lack an exact definition of the concept of a caliphate, even though the idea is central to his political thinking. The contexts in which he uses the idea refer to the political model that the Prophet (PBUH) and the four caliphs after him described that did not last for more than thirty years. Evidently, some groups still espouse a superficial vision of this political model, oppose the deep transformations that have taken place in modern society, and take issue with existing political institutions in which individuals are only part of the ruling political system. What form would the caliphate that members of al-Adl wal-Ihsane are calling for take? What would it be like? What would set it apart from modern systems of governance?

Proponents of the caliphate do not trouble themselves with the details; they are content with speaking broadly about the difference between the caliphate and modern nation state. Even if Yassine had determined the geographic borders of the caliphate beyond the nation state, and combined Muslim nations on the basis of a single religion, the crux of the matter would still be vague. That is, it would still be hard to define how the caliphate's form of political organisation would differ from that of contemporary institutions of governance. Neither does Yassine explain how the relationship between the rulers and ruled are structured, nor how the *shura*⁶ principle or *bay'ah*⁷ system was revealed.

By avoiding going into detail about the idea of the caliphate, the concept is emptied of any practical value, and instead charged with emotion. The idea becomes no more than a political slogan to stoke zealous youth's emotions, and make them sympathetic with a historical "Islamic" principle that fails to engage with the complexities of reality and tangible issues of daily life. It becomes more about the broader intention than the specific form or name.

⁵ Ahmed Raïssouni, a maqasid fiqh scholar, commented on this hadith, saying "this hadith is weak in terms of proof and soundness. The most that specialists can say about it is that it is 'good in terms of reliability.' Neither weighty judgments nor serious matters are built upon it, the most it is suited for is preaching and spreading hope. There should be sound and solid evidence if it is to be taken seriously and more broadly, otherwise it should not be." Specialists believe that there is another hadith on the subject of at least the same level. This is a hadith from Safina, may God be pleased with him, in which the Prophet (PBUH) says "the Prophetic caliphate will last thirty years, and then God will deliver His kingdom to whomever he wishes." This hadith does not mention a second caliphate that will follow the first caliphate and be according to the manner of the Prophet. In sum, neither of these two hadiths contains an order or prohibition; that is, they do not command anything. Who claims that by announcing a caliphate and all that entails he is doing a duty God has given him? Where does God command this? Where does this duty come from? If it is not in the text, then people are doing something He does not command.

⁶ Shura refers to the process of deciding affairs in consultation with those who will be affected by that decision.

⁷ In Islamic terminology, bay'ah refers to the oath of allegiance to a leader.

In inspecting the most important elements of al-Adl wal-Ihsane's approach, it is clear that the differences between this group and the Movement of Unity and Reform, and by extension the PJD, run deep. They differ in the type of religiosity they hope to inspire, and the nature of their political project. Al-Adl wal-Ihsane staunchly opposes the nature of the existing political system, refuses to politically participate under the laws of the current constitutional system, and instead calls on people to boycott elections outright. By contrast, the Justice and Development Party tries to normalise its relation with the existing political system, and works to further integrate with state institutions, regularly participating in elections since 1997. The relationship between these two organisations is characterised by recognition of their deep differences. At times, these differences have led to tension and harsh criticism of one another. Even so, the leaders of both have been keen to emphasise respect for each other's *ijtihad*⁸ and keep criticism within reasonable limits.

Conclusion

The functional differences between the Movement of Unity and Reform, a civil proselytising entity, and the Justice and Development Party, a political entity involved in public affairs, were not an isolated decision but the result of numerous ideological, organisational, and political changes within the movement. This process began with the distinguishing of proselytising work and political work, as a practical consideration on the path towards specialisation. MUR was determined from the beginning to develop this approach until it reached the stage it has today: a strategic partnership between two independent organisations, MUR (an educational/proselytising group) and the PJD (a political party). Although they both draw on the same theoretical foundations, there is a separation in their organisational framework. Neither organisation is subordinate or dominant in this partnership; both work in service of their project of reform.

Religion plays an important role in shaping Islamic movements' ideas and positions on issues of state and society. Yet first and foremost, Islamic movements are social movements. As with other forms of collective action, Islamic movements are governed by human social codes and the laws of evolution. Here, differentiating between proselytising and politics was a case of evolution more than an instance of controlling the relationship between religion and politics.

I argue that the Justice and Development Party in Morocco transcends the concept of traditional Islamic parties whose discourse and programs are centered around ideology and

⁸ Ijtihad is an Islamic legal term referring to independent reasoning or the thorough exertion of a jurist's mental faculty in finding a solution to a legal question.

identity-based issues. Despite the PJD's Islamist origins, its arrival in the executive branch has forced it to adopt a purely political agenda. Thus, it has prioritised issues of political and economic stability, public finance reform and overseeing financial balances, positive engagement with international monetary institutions, fighting corruption and shaping public life, ratifying international human rights agreements, and reforming the administration. These and other issues mean that the PJD is a civil political party, working in public affairs with purely "secular" tools, while still maintaining a strong moral character, guided by an Islamist theoretical foundation. This is an exceptional case in the Arab world. It undoubtedly requires more follow-up, analysis, and exploration of the possibilities for the future of the relationship between religion and politics as contemporary Islamist movements see it.

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