

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

## Islamic Governance Theory in Moroccan Islamist Discourse

<https://www.e-ir.info/2014/12/15/imamate-and-caliphate-islamic-governance-theory-in-moroccan-islamist-discourse/>

JUAN A. MACIAS-AMORETTI, DEC 15 2014

**This article is an excerpt from E-IR's free-to-download Edited Collection, Caliphates and Islamic Global Politics. View all of E-IR's Publications here.**

### Ideological and Political Background of Moroccan Islamism

Political Islam is a very wide ideological concept that includes diverse political movements and trends (Khan, 2014). A common element to all of them is the use of the 'Islamic reference' (*al-marji'iyya al-islâmiyya*) as the foundation of their political practice. Establishing the 'Islamic state' (*tatbîq al-dawla al-islâmiyya*) is the main goal of their political action, and this very concept sets Islamist political action within the framework of political modernity. Yet, while Islamist movements try to track their political legitimacy to the 'prophetic' action, they have to face many ideological challenges to adapt Islamic concepts and theories from 'classical' jurisprudence to modern political competition. This is the case of Moroccan political Islam, including major actors as the Justice and Development Party (PJD) [1] and the Community of Justice and Spirituality (CJS) [2]. Both of them do develop an Islamic theory on governance in their discourse, trying to adapt classical concepts as 'imamate' (*imâma*) or 'caliphate' (*khilâfa*) to their own ideological conception of power and to their specific situation in political competition.

To start with, there are many aspects dealing with political Islam as a political actor in Morocco. Most of the organisations belonging to what is called the 'Islamic movement' (*al-haraka al-islâmiyya*) in Morocco do share a historical background, from its first emergence in the early 70s when the first Islamic political organisations came up as an ideological response to the declining leftist secular opposition to the 'Alawi Monarchy regime. They also share an epistemological combination of *ikhwâni* –influenced by the political action of the Muslim Brotherhood – and *da'wi* –influenced by charitable religious associations – elements. Among these, the two most influential organisations of Moroccan political Islam, in quantitative and qualitative terms, are the Community of Justice and Spirituality (Jamâ'at al-'Adl wa-l-Ihsân [CJS]), and the Unicity and Reform Movement (Harakat al- Tawhîdwa-l-Islâh [MUR]) [3] – politically linked with the Justice and Development Party (Hizb al-'Adâlawa-l-Tanmiyya [PJD]) from the latter 90s. The CJS is an outsider, but visible, movement located outside the boundaries of the regime in terms of non-violent political resistance, while the PJD is a main institutional political actor located in the parliamentary opposition up to 2011 when it reached the government in coalition with other political parties.

Hence, Political Islam today is the expression of an ideological and political alternative in Morocco that underlines Islamic morality as a core element. Islamist ideologues, such as Abdelilah Ben Kiran (b. 1954), the Secretary General of the PJD and Moroccan Prime Minister from 2011, or Abdessalam Yassine (1928-2012), the charismatic founder and leader of the CJS, claim to derive the foundation of their Islamic political action from the Islamic moral reference. That said, they chose almost opposite ways of dealing with political power in the country. In this sense, the moral element in their political discourse does represent an attempt to draw a whole new contemporary 'Islamic narrative' (as political Islam is not a 'traditionalist' movement) and, therefore, to present the historical dynamic of political Islam as a movement that is essentially moral and 'prophetic', as it foresees a specific kind of Islamic utopia, and translating it in the discourse in terms of real democracy and social justice.

# Islamic Governance Theory in Moroccan Islamist Discourse

Written by Juan A. Macias-Amoretti

This alleged religious (moral) legitimacy is a central reference in the use of ideology (Macias-Amoretti, 2014) as an almost exclusive resource in competing for power with the primary and secondary elites (Izquierdo Brichs, 2012). Thus, the Islamist alternative in Morocco is based on a political and social ideology that is founded on a religious discourse of political change (democracy) and social reform (justice), filled with concepts derived from the juridical tradition of classical Islam, but which are *politicized* in their origin (production of discourse-input) and *re-politicized* in the discourse (reproduction of discourse-output), and based pragmatically on the conditions of competition for power in Morocco and the position of each of the Islamist actors in this setting. The main specific factor here is linked with the specificity of the religious and political context of contemporary Morocco. In this sense, the non-negligible role of the 'Alawi Monarchy in the country must be mentioned. Indeed, its sovereigns possess a symbolic capital that irrefutably legitimizes their position as political and religious leaders, and decisively situates power relations within the framework of the state itself. According to current Moroccan Constitution (reformed in 2011) the King of Morocco –Muhammad VI from 1999 – holds the title of 'amîr al-mu'minîn' (Commander of the Faithful). This is something that is not a mere symbol. It implies the religious legitimacy of his power as the 'emirate', one of the most important titles historically held by the Sunni Caliphs, referring originally to their highest military powers (Belal, 2012). The King of Morocco is not merely the head of the Moroccan state, a modern and secular Muslim state-nation, but is also the highest religious authority and the personification of the Islamic community leadership in the country and even outside it, as the Moroccan 'imârat al-mu'minîn' is recognized by other Islamic authorities in Western Africa and among the Moroccan diaspora. In political terms, it is not possible to refuse the legal authority of the 'Alawi Monarchy from an 'Islamic' point of view, as their political power is inseparable from their religious legitimacy (Darif, 2010). This status makes the Islamic political action of political Islam in Morocco far more ideological than in other Muslim contexts. The use of juridical and political Islamic concepts as the 'imamate' (*imâma*) and the 'caliphate' (*khilâfa*) by main Moroccan Islamist actors PJD and CJS in their discourse are thus directly linked to the monarchical 'imârat al-mu'minîn' in terms of acceptance-reform or refusing-resistance. In that sense, it is therefore linked to a concrete model of 'Islamic government' in ideological terms.

## 'Imamate', Political Leadership, and Power in the PJD's Discourse

The nature of the PJD's political discourse is linked with its participative approach (Wegner, 2011). Since its initial debates, the PJD accepted the religious and political legitimacy of the 'imârat al-mu'minîn', and from this very clear stance it has attempted to present its political model of governance. The ideological foundations of such model are based on the full compatibility and suitability of the moral and legal principles of the sharia – guaranteed by the 'imârat al-mu'minîn' – with democratic principles and the political role of consensus reforming the political system from within. In this way, the aim of the PJD and the MUR is to establish an Islamic state in moral and legal terms, by applying democratic methods, namely free-competition elections. In the MUR's discourse, the call to *da'wa*, preach to Islamic values, lies at the heart of a democratic theory which is understood as a set of political techniques. The democratic principles to which the party's discourse subscribes are: popular sovereignty (*al-siyâda li-l-sha'b*), division of powers (*fasl al-sulat al-thalâtha*), and the guarantee of rights and freedoms (*damân al-huqûqwa-l-hurriyyât*). However, its theoretical development shows certain particular characteristics that link these democratic principles with the principles of Islamic theory on governance based on the 'imamate', in which the only real sovereignty and the highest legislative power belong to God alone. This well-structured democratic discourse, however, is set within the power struggle of a secondary elite that aspires to become a primary one. Thus, the party attempts to adapt its ideological discourse to the expectations of society on one hand, and on the other, to exceed the resources of the competing elites by trying to turn itself into a political actor that is singularised by its Islamic discourse and practice in moral terms. The PJD's discourse is therefore adapted to the circumstances of political competition, so it is sometimes populist, but it always acknowledges the Islamic legitimacy of the monarchy at the top.

The concept of the 'imamate' (*imâma*) is used by the PJD as a synonym of 'straightaway governance' in moral terms (*al-hukm al-râshid*). As such, it is not definitely a unipersonal institution as it used to be understood in classical Sunni Islamic thought – linked to the spiritual attributions and the 'supreme leadership' of the Caliph as successor to the Prophet Muhammad. Rather, it is to be understood as a general framework of good governance, a kind of prophetic moral guideline (el-Outhmani, 2010). According to the party's conceptual reference, political activity in 21<sup>st</sup> century Morocco is a matter of 'imamate', as it is a religious affair and must be implemented in the name of Islam. The PJD

# Islamic Governance Theory in Moroccan Islamist Discourse

Written by Juan A. Macias-Amoretti

states that Islamic political governance should be useful to the Muslim community and always endorsed by Islamic principles. The organic political action can be adapted to the changing circumstances, taking different shapes as a movement, political party, or juridical disposition implemented from the government, in the case of the PJD, keeping in mind that the 'imamate' is understood as the 'spiritual direction and organization' of a 'Civil State' (*dawla madaniyya*). This state – which is already an Islamic state (*dawla islâmiyya*) – fully complements the 'imamate' to the 'imârât al-mu'minîn' in political and religious terms, as they both are part of the Islamic leadership that guarantees the implementation of Islam and its moral values and juridical rules in Moroccan society.

As the PJD's official discourse states, reform (*islâh*) and renewal (*tajdîd*) are two fundamental elements in the political ideology and discourse of the party. This discourse always takes Islam as its main reference point, and any political action is endorsed by the authority of Islam (*al-marj'iyya al-islâmiyya*). This authority emphatically declares Morocco to be essentially a Muslim country. It also proposes to politically fight against 'deviations' (*inhirâf*), these mainly being a relaxation in morals and habits and the negative influence of poorly-focused Western modernity (PJD, 2002). Therefore, the party's discourse views moralising (*al-takhlîq*) as the necessary starting point for political action to end corruption in public administration. Thus, their discourse is pragmatic and attempts to create a mobilising ideology that ensures the support of very diverse sectors of Moroccan population, especially around the idea of fighting against corruption. In practical terms, the PJD has clearly made more efforts in this area than the other institutional actors, and this has strengthened its support by society and, in short, smoothed the way of the party to power in 2011. Generally speaking, the PJD's political discourse is highly pragmatic, founded on a conception of religion as a basic element of its ideology that includes political praxis for the purpose of improving the living standards of believers; or rather, political activity conceived as 'good and useful action' (*'amal sâlih mufîd*). Through the discursive development of these principles, the PJD considers that there is no incompatibility between Islam and democracy, a view that is basically an attempt to justify the party's participation in the Moroccan political system as a competing elite and, therefore, as an essential actor and an intrinsic part of the actual system (insider), and, at the same time, legitimising the system's validity from an Islamic standpoint. In this context, the PJD has been notable in a positive sense for encouraging high levels of internal democracy in its national congresses. Likewise, the party recognises Morocco's religious plurality, considering Moroccan Jews to be citizens with full rights, though Islam is considered to be the nation's religious, identity, and cultural benchmark. In the field of external relations, the PJD's discourse stresses the need to strengthen diplomatic, economic, and commercial ties with the rest of the Arab and Islamic world as a priority. In practice, the party has strengthened its ties with the main world powers, guaranteeing stability and cooperation in maintaining the market economy and the application of neoliberal formulas.

## Spiritual 'Caliphate' and Political Government in the CJS's Discourse

The political theory of the CJS was devised to frame the historical and methodological progress of the definitive transition from 'the tyrannical, oppressive government' (*al-hukm al-jabrî*) – or rather, the Moroccan regime symbolised by the 'Alawi Monarchs – to the Islamic Caliphate (*al-khilâfa al-islâmiyya*) made up of the progressive union of different national Islamic states (emirates) headed by their own emirs. The claim for a 'caliphate' is directly launched against the temporal powers of the Moroccan king as 'amîr al-mu'minîn', and it seeks a higher moral legitimacy holding a deep spiritual and even mystical meaning. In his famous work *The Prophetic Path* (*al-Minhâj al-nabawî*), Abdessalam Yassine did point out that the majority of Muslim believers, regardless of nationality, must uphold the Islamic system (Yassine, 2001). He defended the re-unification of the whole Muslim world in a single political structure that guarantees the 'government of Islam' led by the principles contained in the Qur'an and the Sunna. According to Yassine, these principles could be adapted to the changing social, political, and economic circumstances of the time by implementing a deep 'reform' (*islâh*) and a 'renewal' (*tajdîd*) in moral terms, keeping faith and spirituality on top. The above-mentioned political structure is based on the 'government of the *shûrâ*' (*hukm al-shûrâ*) or *shûrâ*-cracy. In practical terms, it would be a kind of pyramidal and highly hierarchical structure, with the figure of the 'emir' on top, as he should be responsible for any decision and action made by the state in any possible field. On the other hand, the 'emir' must accept internal criticism and reach consensus following the Qur'anic commandment of 'mutual consultation' (*shûrâ*), so he must be supported and advised by a 'Consultation Council' (*majlis al-shûrâ*). Yet the 'emir' is a political figure, according to his attributions. He must be legitimated by the act of allegiance (*bay'a*) as a religious leader symbolically considered the successor to the prophet Muhammad. To Yassine, the recourse to the *bay'a* guarantees also the free election of the leader, and implicitly rejects the hereditary

# Islamic Governance Theory in Moroccan Islamist Discourse

Written by Juan A. Macias-Amoretti

model represented by the Moroccan monarchy and by the historical caliphate from the early Umayyad period (late 7<sup>th</sup> c. A.D.). As a successor to the Prophet, the 'emir' is literally a 'Caliph' in spiritual terms, and it is from this spiritual perspective that the CJS understands this figure, far away from the historical and political restoration vindications of other Islamist movements. From a 'regional' perspective, the political structures of each Muslim country would be transformed peacefully by the ideological work and the education, according to the CJS's discourse, into regional Islamic states headed by their respective 'emirs' and ruled by the '*sûrâ-cracy*'. Those states would be then unified within the structure of a single caliphate with moral and spiritual attributions. The believers must support the progressive advance of these emirates and caliphate structures in any case, but Islamic organisations such as the CJS are seen as being at the vanguard of the movement by their active educative work and their ideological consciousness, thus seemingly in a lineal structure of power. This progressive movement of liberation and unification would always be implemented by peaceful means in different stages, the first and most important one them being the substitution of the 'despotic government' (*al-hukm al-mustabidd*) by the 'government of the *shûrâ*' (*hukm al-shûrâ*). This stage would be followed by the general call to the 'real' Islamic message in moral and spiritual terms, and the implementation of the Islamic education, and finally by the economic and political 'liberation' of the Islamic *Umma*. Bearing in mind the moral parameter, the 'caliphate' is linked here to the improvement of the social and economic conditions of the Muslim people by liberating them from the dependence of external financial resources and internal corruption, so implementing a 'real Islamic economy' and bringing back national economic resources to Muslim hands. To the CJS, when the economy is adapted to the moral principles contained in the Qur'an and the Sunna, mainly to the Islamic values of 'justice' (*'adl*) and 'solidarity with the left out people' (*insâf*), only then is a real Islamic government possible. These are thus the moral foundations of the Islamic caliphate defended by the association. This Islamic discourse is addressed directly in the name of Islam to the Moroccan monarchy, whose kings are delegitimised as 'emirs' and represent to the CJS the negative values of the 'other' in moral terms (tyranny, despotism, hypocrisy).

In the CJS discourse, the democratic parameters are compared as a set of negative moral values with the positive ideal of the Islamic '*shûrâ-cracy*'. Democracy is associated with secularism, and thus it is viewed as a 'Western' cultural product that is morally inferior and not extrapolated to the Islamic political and cultural tradition. The alternative to democracy is the *shûrâ*, with the sharia as its legal foundation. Clearly, the structure of this political and social system, and the way it would be introduced, is not sufficiently developed in the CJS discourse, in which it represents an ideal for mobilising the people, but without any detailed particulars. In spite of this discourse on the *shûrâ*, the structure of the CJS is organised into a singular pyramidal power system, where absolute political leadership is indisputably exerted by the Secretary General along with the 'Political Circle' (*al-dâ'ira al-siyâsiyya*), and legitimated by an unshakeable spiritual link to the Guide-General. The relationship between the CJS and the so-called 'official Islam' is one of negation. The CJS does not recognise the institution of the *imârat al-mu'minîn* as the attributed right of the 'Alawi monarchy, instead believing that this attribution of caliphal powers is unlawful. This stance, just like all the movement's discourse in general, is set within a power struggle in which the resource of ideology – based on the legitimacy of a specific interpretation of Islam in a political sense – plays a central role. Thus the CJS's discourse once again stresses the Islamic moral element as a power resource.

## Conclusions

The wide diversity of ideological options in Moroccan Political Islam is manifested in a broad Islamist discourse that shares a series of fundamental elements that link the concepts of *imâma* and *khilâfa*, from the moral and legal standpoint of Islamic reform (*islâh*), to that of *imârat al-mu'minîn* terms of acceptance/reformism or refuse/resistance. However, the discourse of Islamist parties and movements as the PJD or the CJS differs in terms of the more pragmatic or strategic elements they use, as it must be borne in mind that the ideological element is the essential power resource for them, and it is by using this resource that each of them attempts to turn itself into a main political actor and into a moral point of reference within the framework of political competition for power in Morocco. The main vector of their discourse and the ideology that backs it up (and which essentially frames Islamist political practice) is the use of Islamic moral references linking the role of Islamic governance to the governed, and the role of the 'Islamic state' to the citizens-believers, in the vanguard of which (either in resistance, opposition, or reformism) each of the actors in Moroccan political Islam claim to be situated.

# Islamic Governance Theory in Moroccan Islamist Discourse

Written by Juan A. Macías-Amoretti

## Notes

[1] Justice and Development Party.

[2] Community of Justice and Spirituality.

[3] Unicity and Reform Movement.

## References

Belal, Y. *Le cheikh et le caliphe. Sociologie religieuse de l'islam politique au Maroc*. Casablanca: Tarik éditions. (2012).

Darif, M. *Monarchie marocaine et acteurs religieux*. Casablanca: Afrique orient. (2010).

el-Outhmani, S.E. *Al-Dîn wa-l-siyâsâ. Tamayyûz lâ fasl*. Casablanca/Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqâfî l-'Arabî. (2009).

Izquierdo Brichs, F. (ed.) *Political Regimes in the Arab World: Society and the Exercise of Power*. London: Routledge. (2012).

Khan, M. 'What is political Islam?' *E-International Relations*. (2014).

Macías-Amoretti, J.A. 'Political Islam: discourse, ideology and power'. *E-International Relations*. (2014).

PJD. *Farîq al-'Adâlawâ-l-Tanmiyyabi Majlis al-Nuwâb: hasîlat al-sanawât al-khamsiltizâmwa 'atâ', 1997-2002*. Rabat: PJD. (2002).

Wegner, E. *Islamist Opposition in Authoritarian Regimes. The Party of Justice and Development in Morocco*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press. (2011).

Yassine, A. *Al-Minhâj al-nabawî: tarbiyyawa-tanzîmwa-zahf*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., Casablanca, Dâr al-Afâq. (2001).

---

## About the author:

**Juan A. Macías-Amoretti** is a Senior Lecturer in Arabic and Islamic Studies at the University of Granada, a Research Fellow in Contemporary Arab Studies at UGR, and a Research Associate Fellow at the Jacques Berque Centre in Rabat. His areas of research include political Islam and contemporary Arab political thought.