

UNDER THE SHADOW OF THE IMAM

Morocco's Diverse Islamic Movements

By Emad Eldin Shahin

Among North African countries, Morocco seems to be the least exposed to the "threat" of political Islam. While several Islamic groups with different orientations and methods exist, there is no mainstream movement dominating Islamic activism. This can be attributed to the political structure of Morocco and to the particular evolution of the contemporary Islamic movements there. In its relations with the Islamic opposition, the regime has adopted a series of different measures, including suppression, confinement, and toleration (albeit without recognition). The regime's reaction to these groups depends a great deal on their acceptance of the political agenda as set by the monarch.

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Morocco's political structure is unique. The legitimacy of the monarchy rests on historical continuity and on the traditional *bay'a* (oath of allegiance). King Hassan II cultivates his status as the political and religious head of the country by asserting his legitimacy through the historical lineage of religious descent. The king is a descendant of the Prophet Muhammed, which implies that, in terms of religious authority, he ranks third after God and the Prophet. On the third of March of each year, he receives the *bay'a* from the political elites of the country, and this is usually articulated in a purely classical Arabic and loaded with heavy religious symbolism—a reminder of the days of the Islamic Caliphate.

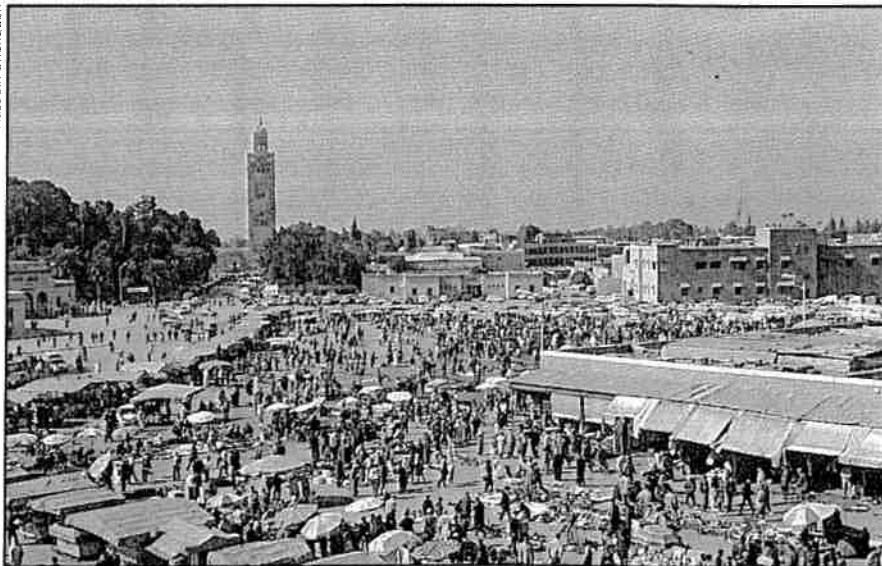
Furthermore, King Hassan is in charge of maintaining the religious symbols of Islam. This includes the extensive use of classical Arabic, over which he has an excellent command, Qur'anic references in his political discourse, and his emphasis on his *baraka* (divine bless-

ing)—particularly after the two failed attempts on his life in 1971 and 1972. He frequently participates in Friday prayers in the mosque near his palace, often appears in the public garb of an *alim* (religious scholar), sacrifices the first ram on *Eid al-Adha* (marking the end of the pilgrimage season), and donates generous personal gifts of alms to the poor during the various religious anniversaries. As an *alim*, the king presides over the Religious Councils as well as over the *Durus al-Hassaniyya* (the Hassanite lectures), which are held annually during the month of Ramadan. In these lectures to the *ulama* (religious scholars), the king presents his personal interpretations of the Qur'an and the *Hadith* (sayings and deeds of the Prophet).

The smooth continuation of King Hassan's role as Commander of the Faithful is further institutionalized in the Moroccan Constitution. The Constitution describes the king as "the symbol of unity, guarantees the continuity of the state, and safeguards respect for Islam and the Constitution." Therefore, any opposition on religious grounds to the legitimacy of the traditional monarchical institution is doomed to be weak and suspect. The regime in turn considers recognizing a political Islamic movement as antithetical to its religious basis of legitimacy.

Morocco moreover has a relatively long history of pluralism, which prevents the radicalization of political dissent. The existence of several political parties with different orientations provides an opportunity and a wider spectrum for expressing discontent and opposition to the policies of the regime than is available in many other Arab countries. Political pluralism, in addition, divides the potential base of sup-

Hussein Srehatieh



Morocco's history of pluralism prevents a radicalization of political discourse; above, Marrakesh

port for the Islamic groups, which in this case are faced with the more difficult task of not only recruiting and mobilizing a following but also converting them first. The intensity of religious life and the strong mystical tradition in Morocco further fragments the Islamists' base of support. The Sufi orders, such as the Boutchichiyya, compete with the Islamist movements for the same constituency of middle and lower middle class social elements.

Another reason for factionalism among the Islamists is the close monitoring of the regime over such groups and its readiness to employ repressive measures against them whenever deemed necessary to prevent their evolution into influential and popular movements. This has been true of the Moroccan Islamic Youth Association, which was implicated in violent acts in the mid-1970s. Subsequent Islamic movements that the regime viewed with mistrust and suspicion have been treated in a similar manner.

In addition, despite their repeated attempts, the leaders of the Moroccan Islamic movements have been unable to develop a common platform and a unified organization. In fact, the reformist nature of the majority of these groups and associations keeps them divided over the details of reform and plans of action to achieve them.

A Perilous Beginning: The Moroccan Islamic Youth Association

In 1969, Abd al-Kareem Mouti, a former member of UNFP (National Union of Popular Forces), was influenced by the ideas of radical Egyptian Islamist Sayyed Qutb, and established the Moroccan Islamic Youth Association (*al-Shabiba*). The group was legalized in 1972 as a religious society with the objective of "contributing to the social construction of the Moroccan society, spreading moral values, and encouraging the Moroccan citizens to enjoin righteousness, virtue, and reform through the implementation of Islam." Al-Shabiba's formation coincided with a precarious phase in Morocco's political history. This period was characterized by severe political and economic crises, popular discontent, the spread of

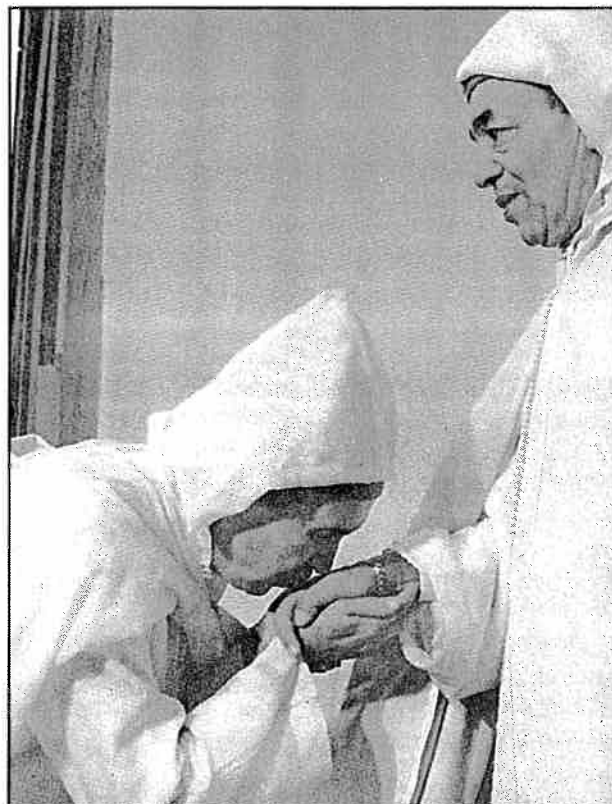
leftist influence, paralysis of the political process, and uncertainty over the future of the regime. The two attempts on the king's life in 1971 and 1972 obviously reflected this uncertainty. These factors explain the regime's initial toleration of the establishment of an Islamic movement that could defuse the wrath of the discontented youth and counterbalance the leftist threat in schools and universities.

Mouti's organization pursued a dual agenda of public and clandestine activities. In public, the movement presented itself as a legal, apolitical religious association, advocating reform and non-violence as a means of preserving Islamic values and confronting the Moroccan left. The association stressed that it represented only its members who constituted a community—rather than the whole community—of Muslims, thus denying any exclusivity to its activities and countering claims that the group considered non-members as non-Muslims. It also rejected violence as a means for resolving conflicts and fulfilling its goals.

Al-Shabiba offered Islamic education, literacy programs, summer camps, public health campaigns, and many other religious, educational, artistic, and athletic activities aimed at socializing the youth.

Clandestine Activities

At the same time, however, Mouti built a clandestine structure for his organization and adopted a radical position against the regime. He criticized the "un-Islamic" practices in Moroccan life and called for the overthrow of the regime and the total reconstruction of society. In a study he wrote for circulation among the association's cells in 1970, Mouti viewed Moroccan



The Embassy of Morocco

King Hassan's strong religious legitimacy keeps local Islamic movements weak

society as passing through a critical historical transition, resulting from the tremendous pressure of social, economic, political, and cultural interactions. These conditions reflected an uneven growth and social inequality among a deprived majority and a well-to-do minority, political division among opposition and loyalist parties alike, and various ideological orientations leading to the despair and disorientation of the Moroccan people. By comparing the current situation with preceding periods in Moroccan history, Mouti concluded that political collapse, and perhaps even foreign intervention, would follow. (Two years later the king barely escaped two coup attempts and the whole system seemed to be bordering on collapse.)

Mouti warned against the forthcoming conflict among the left, the most organized force, the emerging Islamic trend, and the authorities. Thus, he deemed it necessary for the militant Islamic movement to reorganize itself into active units to undertake the task of mobilization, socialization, and control.

This dual approach enabled al-Shabiba for some time to function

legally, focus on the recruitment of followers, and work on the socialization of its members. It was meant to provide the association with a legal facade for its activities and to distract the attention of the regime, which had already become concerned about its orientation and degree of influence. In 1975, however, the regime announced that some members of al-Shabiba were implicated in the assassination of Omar Ben Jelloun, the editor of the USFP (Union for Popular Socialist Forces) paper. This incident ushered in the second phase of the movement's history.

In 1975, al-Shabiba was outlawed and its presence was reduced to sporadic activities in the university and the distribution of statements in some Islamic periodicals. Mouti was forced to flee the country and was sentenced to life in prison in absentia. In 1979 and 1980, after the Iranian Revolution and the takeover of the Holy Mosque in Mecca, the regime, concerned about a potential threat from Islamic revivalists, further tightened its grip over al-Shabiba's activities, launching several arrest campaigns against it and barring its members from congregating in the mosques.

Within the System: The Movement of Reform and Renewal (HATM)

During his period of exile, Mouti tried unsuccessfully to maintain the organizational structure of al-Shabiba and his control over the group's activities. His leadership style reflected poor organizational skills that led to the eventual disintegration of the group. Mouti initially appointed a six-member leadership to run the affairs of the group during his absence. Concerned over its growing independence, Mouti then decided to replace it with another committee—which the deposed former leaders refused to recognize. To contain the growing confusion and disorder within the ranks of the organization, Mouti named a third leadership

clique, which was actually manipulated by a fourth shadowy group selected by Mouti. This mess led many members of al-Shabiba to withdraw from the organization. The breaking point occurred when Mouti, following his sentencing by the Moroccan authorities, declared his fierce opposition to the regime and produced a publication, *al-Mujahid* in March 1981, in which he called for violence and harshly criticized the monarchy and its policies regarding the Sahara issue.

The mounting disgust with Mouti's personalistic style of leadership and his



Abd al-Ilah Benkiran

HATM has accepted the political parameters as set by the regime and avoided any unnecessary confrontation. This pragmatic attitude will help it broaden its base of support. On the other hand, it also brings upon HATM the criticism and suspicions of having been co-opted by the regime

radical position led the al-Shabiba members to hold a general assembly in 1981 to reconsider the movement's policies and strategy. While agreeing on dismissing Mouti, the participants in the meeting differed on the nature of the group's future activity—clandestine or public—and on the measures to be taken to transform the organization. This period of indecision lasted for three years for some groups within al-Shabiba and prompted the Rabat branch of the movement to split off in April 1981 under the leadership of Abd al-Ilah Benkiran.

Benkiran published a statement in January 1982 in which he clarified the

group's position regarding al-Shabiba. He denounced the practices of Mouti and announced the total separation of his group from the mother movement, while pledging the continuation of Islamic action within a legal framework. A year later, Benkiran declared the establishment of *al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya* (The Islamic Group Association) and applied for legal recognition as an Islamic organization. The association produced a charter outlining its nature, principles, objectives, and method of action.

The charter stated that the association was a national group not affiliated with any foreign organization or state. It perceived itself not as the only representative of Islam or its sponsor, but as a group of Muslims working on establishing religion in all walks of life in cooperation with others who strive to achieve the same objective.

The movement gave itself seven main goals: to renew the understanding of religion; to call for the respect of individual rights and public freedoms; to advocate the implementation of the Islamic *shari'a*; to improve the material and living conditions of Muslims; to perform charitable works; to achieve a comprehensive cultural renaissance; and to achieve the unity of Muslims. In a later statement, the association added "confronting the ideologies and ideas which are subversive to Islam and participating in raising the educational and moral level of the Moroccan people" to its objectives.

Al-Jama'a described several ways through which these objectives could be attained, including individual, public, cultural, social, economic, political, union, and educational activities. It categorically condemned the use of violence. The association also devised a rigorous program for the social, spiritual, and moral education of its members.

Though awaiting formal legalization since 1983, the group has been tolerated by the authorities, allowed to conduct itself as an active organiza-

tion, and open branches in different parts of the country. It began production of a monthly publication, *al-Islah* (Reform) in February 1987, which became the association's channel for expressing its views on various internal, regional, and international issues. The banning of *al-Islah* in 1990 sent a signal to the group with regards to the limits of the regime's toleration. Al-Jama'a issued another publication, *al-Raya* (The Banner), in 1990, which appeared first bi-monthly and since June 1993, weekly.

Following its general assembly in August 1990, al-Jama'a asserted its commitment to the "sacred components" of the country: Islam, the Maliki legal school, the constitutional monarchy, territorial integrity, and the Arabic language. Not coincidentally, these elements have been set by the king as indisputable constants of the Moroccan nation and as prerequisites for participation in the political process.

Toward Elections

Al-Jama'a went a step further in February 1992 by changing its name into *Harakat al-Islah wa al-Tajdid bel-Maghreb*—HATM (The Movement of Reform and Renewal in Morocco), and omitting any direct religious reference from the new name. HATM explained the reasons behind changing their name as to eliminate any possible misperception of the exclusivity of the group and to highlight the essence of its activities, mainly to reform the conditions of the Muslims and renew their understanding of and commitment to Islam. [*al-Raya*, no. 15 (February 2, 1992): 1&3]

With this condition satisfied, HATM intensified its public activities and improved its organizational structure. It issued statements on various domestic and foreign issues; its representatives appeared frequently in cultural and political gatherings held by other parties and even in those sponsored by the Ministry of Endowment; it participated in marches and public

demonstrations; it persistently raised the case of the detained Moroccan Islamists and their conditions in prisons; it organized national campaigns for health and social services; it held special lectures and seminars during religious occasions; and it established a student branch in the universities. HATM also revised its bylaws, institutionalizing the practices of collective leadership, consultation and democracy within its organs. The movement holds periodic internal elections (every four years), whose lengthy procedures combine the practice of

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Abd al-Salam Yassin

consultation and the mechanisms of modern democracy.

In March 1992, King Hassan announced that local elections would take place that October. As its activities expanded and its recruitment ability increased, HATM needed to articulate the demands of its constituency and ensure the political participation of its members within a legal framework. The leaders of HATM, along with some of its members, hoping to participate in the coming elections, established *Hizb al-Tajdid al-Watani* (The National Renewal Party—NRP) in May 1992 as the political wing of HATM and applied for recognition.

Though it is evident from the bylaws of the party and their ensuing statements that the founders attempted to conform with the laws regulating the formation of political parties and calm the concerns of other forces in society, the authorities rejected the NRP's request for legalization. In addition, the government banned the issue of *al-Raya*, in which HATM published a response to the decision.

HATM had to look for other means of legal participation. It approached the Constitutional and Democratic Popular Movement (MPCD) and formed a federation with it. The MPCD is an old party which broke away from the Popular

Movement in 1967 under the leadership of respected politician Abd al-Kareem al-Khatib, and had been politically dormant recently. This federation is expected to be convenient for both sides. The inclusion of members of HATM into the MPCD would certainly revive the activities of the MPCD, while at the same time provide HATM's members the opportunity to participate in politics through formal channels. So far, HATM has revitalized most of MPCD's branches throughout the country with its members.

No Compromise: Al-Adl wa al-Ihsan

Larger in its base of support than HATM, *Al-Adl wa al-Ihsan* (the Association of Justice and Benevolence) was originally founded in 1979 as al-Jama'a (The Group) by Abd al-Salam Yassin, an influential thinker of the contemporary Islamic revival in Morocco. It was Yassin's open letter to the king, *Al-Islam Aw al-Tufan* (Islam or the Deluge), however, which earned him fame as a political activist and a three and half-year imprisonment in 1974. Yassin wrote this 114 page "suicidal" letter and distributed several copies of them before sending it to the king. Highly critical of

the monarchy and the widespread corruption in the country, the letter clearly reflects Yassin's elegant style and confident command of the language.

Yassin began publishing his own periodical, *al-Jama'a*, in 1979, after the outbreak of the Iranian Revolution. From the first issue, its militant orientation was clearly expressed. *Al-Jama'a* appeared quarterly and then turned into a monthly, before being banned following its eleventh issue in 1983 for its critical and militant tone.

Yassin tried to issue a new publication, *al-Subh* (The Morning), in 1983. *Al-Subh* appeared as a daily newspaper, but was immediately banned, after 7,000 copies had been distributed in two days. Yassin was arrested soon after in December for writing articles "calling for public disorder." After spending a few more years in prison, Yassin was released in December 1985 and confined to his house. Then 1989, he was officially placed under guarded house arrest.

Yassin has tried repeatedly to obtain legal recognition for his association. In 1982, he applied for a license for his group under the name of Al-Jama'a Association. When his request was rejected, he reapplied in 1983 under a new name, *Jami'yat al-Jama'a al-Khairiya* (The Philanthropic Group Association), stating clearly in its bylaws the political nature of the movement. Despite the denial of recognition, the association worked on recruiting followers, especially among high school and university students, teachers, civil servants, laborers and peasants. It also built an organizational structure that resembled in many respects that of the Muslim Brothers of Egypt. Most of al-Jama'a's constituency is based in the center of Morocco, especially in Rabat and Casablanca.

In 1987, the association raised the slogan, "al-Adl wa al-Ihsan" as its motto, and has since become known by that name. The association was then officially banned by the authorities in January 1990 and its leadership and many of its followers were imprisoned for two years.

Despite the restrictions on the group's members and activities, al-Adl wa al-Ihsan was able to expand its popularity and increase its influence. This could be attributed to the charismatic leadership of Yassin, who has been able to provide a coherent ideological framework for the members of the group. Moreover, Yassin's sufi influences (he

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originally belonged to the Boutchichiyya sufi order) and the moral and spiritual program he devised for his followers made al-Adl attractive to a wider following, especially the lower and middle classes, civil servants, peasants and workers—the usual recruits of the Sufi orders. This gives al-Adl an advantage over HATM, which appeals more to intellectual and student elements. Also, the government's long history of suppressing and confining the movement, and al-Adl's uncompromising language and comprehensive outlook, generate sympathy and draw supporters to the group. This popularity was evident when, in February 1991, ten thousand members of al-Adl took to the streets in protest to the Gulf War.

Yassin's Political Thought

The key concept behind Yassin's ideas is mobilization—that of a leader, a community of believers, and society as a whole—to bring about the overall transformation of the Muslim nation. He often uses inflammatory language, yet eloquent and original, in which he replaces the un-Islamic terminology of *jahiliyya* (which usually refers to pre-Islamic practices) by proper Islamic ones. Unlike many Muslim thinkers

and members of the Islamic movements who were influenced by and adopted many of the phrases, symbols, and slogans of the Iranian revolution, Yassin had already used and extrapolated on them long before 1979.

Yassin uses strong language to condemn the secular policies of the French-speaking elite in Morocco. He argues that this elite has become part and parcel of the *jahiliyya* bloc—a *jahiliyya* shielded with Western technology, material power, and anti-Islamic principles of decay and decadence.

On the level of internal politics, Yassin advocates the need for installing a just regime conducive to consultative rule and the social transformation of the present Muslim community. This should take into account the divine principles included in the teachings of the Qur'an. As Yassin puts it, "With no single exception, all systems in dar al-Islam (Land of Islam) today are systems of terrorism, coercion, and suppression." As such, he formulates the groundwork for bringing about economic, political, and military liberation.

In Yassin's view, the revivalism of Islam is based on the notion of socializing the individual members of the community, a process that would eventually encompass society as a whole. It then would be concerned with reaching out to revive Islam throughout the political, economic, cultural, and administrative structures of the country. This is a process that, according to Yassin, would involve a crisis on two levels: the crisis of leadership; and the crisis of devising and implementing an appropriate paradigm.

On the level of leadership, Yassin argues that historically the Islamic umma as well as the state were founded on the basis of *al-da'wa* (call to God, and in this context referring to religion and religious scholars). Over the years, the *dawla* (the state) has subdued the *da'wa*, rendering it an instrument for the justification of its unjust policies and authoritarian rule. This process in Yassin's view has been responsible for the decadence of Muslims. To redress this situation and

avoid further deviation from the principles of the Qur'an, the da'wa must remain independent of the politics of the regime, yet retain a dominant role in shaping the lives of the Muslim community. The regime would need to conform to the new body of Islamic scholars, who would be represented in a council of learned men.

Yassin expounds on the nature and method of political action considered necessary to bring about the establishment of the Islamic state. He perceives three alternative means to achieve this objective. The first is through participation in a multiparty system and national elections, a process that is expected to end the regime's marginalization and containment of the Islamic movement, and at the same time, enable the movement to compete for public support and corner the official Islam of the regime and that of the other political parties. The second channel is through political violence, which Yassin firmly rejects as he considers it suicidal for any reform movement and as contradictory to the Islamic concept of *Ihsan* (benevolence). The final option is a popular revolution, which would come as a result of the maturation of the first alternative following the full preparation of the Islamic party and the involvement of the masses in the transformation process.

Unlike HATM, what al-Adl wa al-Ihsan proposes in fact is an alternative model for the state and society. This model stems from a highly critical view of Morocco's present conditions. While HATM recognizes the historical and religious legitimacy of the monarchy and considers Morocco to be sufficiently Islamic, notwithstanding some deviations, al-Adl questions this legitimacy and works towards the establishment of a "true" Islamic state. While both movements reject the use of violence to affect change, al-Adl's message is clearly more militant in tone than HATM's.

Conformity or Confinement

The often repeated assumption that



Hussein Shehadeh

Islamist movements face competition from numerous religious currents in society

Morocco has weak Islamic movements is certainly incorrect. Not only are such movements active, but they have good prospects for further expansion and increase in influence. The conduct of these movements, however, is different from that of their counterparts in other countries such as Algeria, Tunisia, or Egypt. In Morocco, they have to conform with the historical, cultural, and political uniqueness of the country.

Apparently, HATM has recognized this lesson and demonstrated a high level of realism and flexibility. It has accepted the political parameters as set by the regime and avoided any unnecessary confrontation. In the meantime, while determined on exercising its right of political participation, it has shown a willingness to give concessions—changing its name, choosing not to pursue legal action against the authorities' decisions against the movement, nominating candidates under the name of other parties, and accepting federation with another party. This pragmatic and realistic attitude will definitely help HATM broaden its base of support and increase its influence, if the movement does not grow impatient or exceed the limits of the regime's toleration. On the other hand, this same attitude brings

upon HATM the criticism and suspicions of some other Islamic movements which perceive it as having been co-opted by the regime and having compromised the true Islamic values for the political objective of securing its participation in the political process and ensuring the safety of its organization.

Al-Adl wa al-Ihsan, on the other hand, despite being larger and more influential, seems to reject the issue of conformity. It still challenges the legitimacy of the regime and is unwilling to give concessions, either with regards to its program or for cooperation with other forces in the country. This makes al-Adl look more genuine as an opposition force, but will keep the movement under the regime's confinement for some time. It was not a surprise that the list of political detainees that were granted amnesty by the king last July did not include any of al-Adl's members.

Morocco need not fear that it will turn into another Algeria in the event of an Islamic movement gaining influence and popularity. For Moroccans, the continuation of the institution of the monarchy is necessary for the unity and stability of the country, and the pluralistic nature of the political structure is a safeguard against its fragmentation. ■