

MOROCCO'S POLITICAL USE OF ISLAM AND ITS RELIGIOUS DIPLOMACY

*Sawsene Nejjar**

Introduction

After the 2003 bombing attacks in Casablanca, Morocco has been actively seeking to limit the influence of opposing religious doctrines to the “Moroccan official Islam”. This was followed by a restructuring of the religious field that started in 2004. Additionally, after the reforms that followed the 2011 uprisings, the King's sanctity was reaffirmed alongside his role as Commander of the Faithful (Amir al-mu'minin). The new constitution and the ensuing amendments further supported the symbolic role of the monarch and upheld his predominant role in the religious sector.

As stated in the preamble of the constitution, Morocco's unity is “forged by the convergence of its Arab-Islamic, Amazigh and Saharan-Hassanic components, nourished and enriched by its African, Andalusian, Hebraic and Mediterranean influences.” In the same fashion, Moroccan laws have been inspired by French civil law, Islamic law and local customs. This is combined with a linguistic *tajine*, particularly in the education system, where Modern Standard Arabic (Fus'ha), Moroccan dialect (Darija), Tamazight, French and now English are used.

Seeking unity is thus necessary to establish political and social stability. This is where religion comes into play. Morocco's historical use of Islam as a unifying factor has been established since the first Arab invasion in 680. However, more than 1,300 years later, the current use of religion as a binding tool raises questions as to the political reasons behind such an approach and its potential outcome. Against this background, this article examines Morocco's political use of Islam and its religious diplomacy as an instrument of political power and the expression of a will to fill an identity vacuum.

*DPhil Candidate, University of Oxford

Morocco's "Moderate Islam"

This section discusses the political use of "Moroccan Islam". This includes, first, a brief explanation of Morocco's strategy to "modernise" the *Madhhab*¹; second, the restructuring of the religious field; and, third, the training of religious preachers and imams.

Morocco's Maliki School of Thought

Since Islam was brought to the country in 680, whether it was under the Umayyads, the Almoravids or the Almohads, religion took different shapes and forms. Currently, Sunni Islam is the constitutionally established religion in Morocco, and it is based on three pillars: the Maliki school of jurisprudence, also called *maddhab*, Ash'ari theology (namely *kalam*) and Sunni Sufism (*tassawuf*). However, the Moroccan population is very diverse, resulting in different nuances in religious practices and beliefs.

The conflation of individuals' religious understandings and cultural diversity has created the need for a better restructuring of the religious field. In 2004, King Mohammed VI, the Commander of the Faithful, gave a speech on the importance of rethinking the national strategy of the religious sector. From the very beginning, he emphasised the importance of the Maliki rite as a central part of Moroccan identity: "the question of religion requires us to focus on our unique historical framework, namely, the Sunni Maliki rite on which the unanimity of this nation was built and whose protection is a duty and a mission of which we are the custodian."

The reaffirmation of this historic religious frame of reference shows that the question of religion is still receiving close review, especially in view of divergent opinions. According to the royal speech, a commitment to a single repository is not only a requirement but also the foundation of the Moroccan state and its religious field. This being said, one of the main strengths of the Maliki rite is its capacity to adapt to different environments and contexts, considering the diverse sources available including the Koran, the Hadiths², consensus of the companions and customs of the Madinites.

This allows more flexibility for the Ulama to exercise *ijtihad*³ and present solutions to contemporary issues that have not been addressed in the Koran and Sunnah.

Restructuring the Religious Field in Morocco

The objective of Morocco's reform process is to work with already established religious institutions, which include the High Council of Ulama. The restructuring plan started with

¹ Morocco follows the Maliki rite, one of the four major schools of thought of Islamic jurisprudence in Sunni Islam.

² Sayings or customs of the prophet Muhammed and his companions.

³ In Islamic law, *ijtihad* refers to independent interpretations of the Koran and Sunnah.

the Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs (*Habous*). To that effect, a *Dahir*⁴ has been issued to create a new direction for “traditional education” and another addressing the mosques. The institution of *waqf*⁵ was also reactivated, giving it a new chance to fulfil its role as a social solidarity instrument. Not only did these establishments fill the administrative gap, but they also served as a tool to manage both the religious personnel and the mosques, and oversee the Koranic schools through the traditional education department.

Another aspect of the institutionalisation and restructuring of the religious field in Morocco is the management of fatwas. The practice of *ijtihad* had been a priority for the government and its religious affairs. The lack of proper structure and control led to chaos and lack of balance in the field of religious jurisprudence. This regulation void was filled by the High Council of Ulama to control the issuance of fatwas and their content. This strategy also shifted the work of *ijtihad* from an individual practice to a collective one, under the umbrella of the institution.

The political and religious reforms have undoubtedly aimed for a better management and a clearer homogeneity of the religious field. The reforms also filled the void of a strong identity, making Maliki rite and the Moroccan King the tie that binds.

Mohammed VI Institute for Training of Imams

The Mohammed VI Institute for Training of Imams was inaugurated in March 2015 and aims to provide training for religious preachers and imams from the Sunni rite. The number of recruits has been increasing dramatically every year since then. Not only do students come from Morocco, but also Tunisia, Mali, Ivory Coast, Chad, Guinea Conakry, Nigeria and France. In fact, expanding the training to foreign religious preachers is the result of two features: first, the increasing demand from other countries to engage in a training that would allow the spread of a “moderate” Islam; and, second, Morocco’s willingness to use religious diplomacy as a foreign policy tool.

The Mohammed VI Institute is used to assert Morocco as an important actor across Africa and the world. It is important to acknowledge the fact that the institute’s name bears that of the monarch, which is also a political statement in itself. It aims to affirm the centrality of the King in the essence of Moroccan life and the state. Through this eponym, the message is being sent to both domestic and foreign audiences.

Morocco’s Religious Diplomacy

Morocco’s religious diplomacy has been the consequence of both domestic and political factors. Therefore, this section looks at the reasons behind the Kingdom’s restructuring

⁴ A decree issued by the King of Morocco.

⁵ An endowment under Islamic law that involves donating assets for religious or charitable purposes.

of the religious field. As part of the analysis, three points will be addressed: first, the security aspect of Morocco's religious diplomacy; second, the social division within Moroccan society; and, third, Morocco's will to reconnect with its diaspora.

The Security Argument

The context in which the religious reforms have been initiated says a lot about the intentions of the Moroccan authorities. One of the major triggers was the 2003 Casablanca bombings, where 45 people were killed (including 12 terrorists), the deadliest terrorist attack in the history of the country. This atrocious episode shook Morocco's longstanding belief that the country was immune from violent extremism and cast doubt on the Kingdom's claim to be a model of moderate Islam. Since then, and especially after the start of the restructuring of the religious field, the term "Spiritual Security" has been widely used by officials to promote the reforms. This term came as a reference to the counter-terrorism and counter-radicalisation efforts initiated by the Kingdom.

Another reason that compelled the Moroccan state into action is international Islamic terrorism. A considerable number of young people with North African origins (including Morocco) have been found to be part of active terrorist cells across the globe. This raises a crucial question for the Moroccan authorities on the matter of radicalisation clusters, both within the country and abroad: are these clusters the consequence of ill-informed religious practices and guidance or an active attempt to belong to a community and steer away from socio-spatial exclusion conditions? This brings us to the next part of this section, which is the divide within Moroccan society and its consequences.

Divided but United? The Cultural Aspect of the Religious Debate in Morocco

Morocco's religious diplomacy and the religious state reforms can be seen as a consequence of a growing moral divide in Moroccan society. In the religious sphere, such divergence has been expressed on different occasions. We choose to feature three examples.

First, the 2004 Mudawana (personal status code) was the result of years of struggle between conservative and secular groups. Its enactment fostered further controversial debates. In order to better understand this process, it is important to look at the main trigger of the reform. In March 2000, a rally was organised in Rabat to support the Plan of Action for the Integration of Women in Development (PAIWD) and another one in Casablanca to oppose it. The PAIWD was promoted as part of the 1993 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The two rallies showed the divide within Morocco, which was also expressed in the rise of rival political factions. The main actors were the Moroccan Minister for Religious Affairs opposing the plan, and the Moroccan cabinet supporting it. This ultimately prevented the

implementation of the PAIWD but triggered the need for intervention in the form of royal arbitration. One year after the rallies, King Mohammed VI announced the creation of a commission to reform the Mudawana.

Second, the Mawazine International Music Festival further illustrates the already existing polarisation within Moroccan society. Every year, the festival is attended by over 500,000 Moroccans and is broadcast across the country on national television. However, the debate over Shakira's "inappropriate" belly dance or Jennifer Lopez's "suggestive" moves sparked people's "outrage". Ms Lopez's performance was later described as "unacceptable" and "against broadcasting law" in a public tweet by the Minister of Communication and spokesperson of the Islamist Justice and Development Party (JDP), Mustapha Khalfi.

Third, the debate on equality in inheritance has resurfaced during these last years. It has provoked the same division between the conservative segment of society, which claims that Shariah should be followed, and proponents of equal inheritance, who argue that the time has come for Morocco to change its stance on the matter. Besides, the resignation of Asma Lamrabet from the Mohammedia League of Scholars and her replacement by Farida Zomorod, a conservative religious scholar, has raised some questions.

There may be more at play than competing religious and moral approaches. All of the aforementioned examples have the role of women in society at the heart of the debate. The described events, one could argue, are examples of entrenched patriarchal norms within Moroccan society. While this is coherent, it is nonetheless important to acknowledge the centrality of the "religious argument" in the discussion. In other words, opponents of conservative ideas and their proponents tend to work within the realm of religion without questioning the supremacy of the state religion.

Reconnecting with the Moroccan Diaspora

The sizeable Moroccan diaspora has been an important source of economic growth in Morocco. In fact, from January to June 2018, Moroccans living abroad, also called "Marocains résidant à l'étranger" (MRE), sent around 31.9 billion dirhams to Morocco. These remittances constitute a good source of foreign currency for the Treasury and help improve the country's foreign assets. However, behind the term MRE remains a new notion of national identity, one that crosses the physical borders of the Kingdom. The state draws on the multiple forms of identity (culture, ethnicity, religion...) by designing new forms of attachment and sense of belonging based on its official "Moroccan Islam". To that effect, the promoted religious identity provides a feeling of inclusion and assimilation. It also asserts the symbolic position of the King as the Commander of the Faithful, establishing, or reinforcing, a strong national identity. In France, where Islam is

the second largest religion, the Moroccan diaspora constitutes the biggest concentration of Moroccans outside their country of origin.

The Moroccan state finances the maintenance and construction of several mosques, making it the biggest donor for religious affairs in the Republic, especially since, according to French law, the French state is forbidden to fund the establishment of any places of worship.

The Way to Move Forward

Looking at Morocco's modern history helps us understand the issues the state is currently facing. Religion and politics have long been intertwined in the Kingdom. The diplomatic use of religion, especially the Sunni Maliki rite, coupled with the restructuring of the religious field, is the result of a new political strategy to manage religious thoughts and practices and assert better control over a socially divided country, henceforth making religion and the King the base of unity.

The current restructuring of the religious sector, however, does not preclude religious beliefs and belongings from being expressed in competing ways. Nevertheless, having an official "Moroccan Islam" could certainly fill the vacuum of identity and serve some political interests. The flexibility and adaptability of the Maliki rite allows it to be more open to the realities in which people live. Questions still remain as to whether or not those who disagree with the "official discourse" will be allowed to express themselves. Another potential issue is the question surrounding the identity crisis many Moroccans are facing. Basing a national identity on religion could further alienate other aspects of identity, including culture or ethnicity.

The process of restructuring is indeed necessary but the strict control over the religious field can lead to repressed individual liberties. Morocco needs stronger institutions with a more encompassing approach, where cultural diversity is at the centre. The blurred line between religion and politics leads to a sacralisation of politics and establishes it as the main source of values for individuals and for the mass. This approach makes it difficult, if not impossible, to question the political discourse without potentially facing serious consequences. Therefore, creating a strong civil society and establishing a better foundation of stability while ensuring respect for human rights, freedom of conscience and democracy, is the way to move forward.

References

BADRANE, M. (2018). Transferts MRE: Des retombées macro et micro économiques. Retrieved from <http://aujourd'hui.ma/economie/transferts-mre-des-retombees-macro-et-micro-economiques>

DISCOURS ROYAL RELATIF À LA RESTRUCTURATION DU CHAMP RELIGIEUX AU MAROC. (2018). Ministère des Habous et des Affaires Islamiques. Retrieved from <http://www.habous.gov.ma/fr/Islam-au-maroc/29-Activit%C3%A9s-d-Amir-Al-moumine/574-Discours-royal-relatif-%C3%A0-la-restructuration-du-champ-religieux-au-Maroc.html>

EL-KATIRI, M. (2012). The institutionalisation of religious affairs: Religious reform in Morocco. *The Journal of North African Studies*, 18(1), 1-17. doi:10.1080/13629387.2012.712886

ELOUAZI, S. (2018). Morocco Leads Foreign Funding for French Mosques. Retrieved from <https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2018/02/240510/morocco-leads-foreign-funding-for-french-mosques/>

FULL TEXT OF KING MOHAMMED VI'S SPEECH ON THRONE DAY. (2015). *Morocco World News*. Retrieved from www.moroccoworldnews.com/2015/07/164318/full-text-of-king-mohammed-vis-speech-on-throne-day

HARRAK, F. (2009). The history and significance of the new Moroccan family code. Working Paper Series. Institute for the Study of Islamic Thought in Africa, Northwestern University. Retrieved from https://buffett.northwestern.edu/documents/working-papers/ISITA_09-002_Harrak.pdf

MOROCCO'S CONSTITUTION 2011. (2011). Constituteproject.org. Retrieved from https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Morocco_2011.pdf