

## **From Islamic Reference to Conservative Pragmatism: The Sinuous Paths of the Moroccan JDP Discourse**

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The relationship between the political and religious fields in Morocco is generally based on tactical choices and pragmatic issues, often far from simple ideological orientations. In this context, the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood ideology in Moroccan Islamic parties and movements is caught in a permanent political and intellectual debate that opposes two camps. The first camp thinks that Moroccan Islamism is home-grown, disconnected from the Muslim Brotherhood ideology. The second camp confirms that Islamic political parties and movements have always been under the influence of an imported Islamist ideology since their beginnings in the 1960s for some and the 1970s for others.

Paradoxically, Moroccan authorities are more inclined to allow a home-grown political Islam to an alien Islamist ideology, regardless of how similar they are. This ambiguity persists today in the Moroccan public space, which remains a showcase for good Islamic morality. Hence, the strategies of the Moroccan authorities toward the home-grown Moroccan Islamic-oriented political movements and parties have always been based on a combination of pragmatism and mistrust. Despite a strong attempt to control the scope of Islamic movements and to limit their aims and ambitions, the Moroccan authorities believe that the participation of these movements can help strengthen the basis and the legitimacy of the religious establishment in Morocco. On the other hand, the concerned movements believe that their participation in the political game, or at least their presence in the social field, would allow them to obtain long-term legal recognition and legitimacy.

In what follows, we will try to analyze the contradictions that structure the growing involvement of Islam in the political space. We focus more on the Justice and Development Party (JDP) as a place where these contradictions are concentrated. We will also discuss the branding of political Islam in Morocco, whether it is of Muslim Brotherhood, nationalist or Salafist origin. It would be wrong to claim exhaustive answers to these questions. However, Morocco's political history displays a particularism (and not an exceptionalism) that we cannot ignore when analyzing the evolution of political Islam in this country.

## **Introduction**

In the Arab world, the terms “Islamist”, “Salafist”, or “political Islam” represent different realities. More importantly, the actors involved in organizations that claim to have an Islamic reference do not necessarily share the same ambitions, as their readings of Islamic principles differ, and the way they seek to translate these principles into their social environment is dissimilar.

The use of Islam in the political sphere gives rise to different practices and modalities of execution. We distinguish between moderate Islamic parties – such as the Justice and Development Party in Turkey, Ennahda in Tunisia, or the JDP in Morocco – which have in common their attempt to participate in democratic processes and to gain popularity among their fellow citizens, and the movements that reject democracy as such and advocate radical and militant actions. In the case of the second category, it is obviously no longer a question of a political organization. It is a question of militancy, which aims at carrying out acts of terrorism. Between the political parties based on Islamic reference and the terrorist groups, there are also organizations that act in the political field, and whose agenda is to exercise power in the name of religion alone. It should be mentioned, however, that Moroccan Islamism has many facets. Alongside the political parties based on Islamic references, there are organizations, such as *Al 'adl wal ihsane* (Equity and Self-giving) and *Al islah wa attawhid* (Reform and Unity), who are much involved in the social field and enjoy some popularity among the population. Though not officially recognized by the Moroccan authorities, they are nevertheless allowed to gather as an association. This study, however, does not aim to analyze the ideology of these organisations.

In fact, the intertwining of the religious and political spheres in Morocco goes back to the pre-colonial period, which the colonial administration instrumentalized for its own purposes. After independence, the field of religion and its regulation became an issue of struggle between the first political parties, in particular the Salafist-based *Istiqlal* party and the monarchy institution. The first constitution of 1962 specified the pre-eminent role of the king as *Amir al-Mu'minin*, whose authority is to decide upon religious issues. As such, he is the *Commander* of the Faithful, and at the same time, the Head of State. From this point of view, no political party is allowed to compete with the king on matters of religion. As a legalized party, the JDP cannot claim to offer Moroccans a religious discourse that would compete with that of the *Imara al-Mu'minin* institution. Moreover, at the heart of this relationship between the king and his subjects is the *bey'a*, or the act of allegiance, a contract between the ruler and the ruled. The breaking of this alliance would automatically lead to a form of dissidence and rejection.

The victory of the JDP in the 2011 elections provoked extensive studies on its ability to adapt to the existing political context regarding its religious reference. Speculations about the party's religious identity are part of the local and global discussions among specialists. For some, the JDP is an extension of the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt or the Turkish Justice and Development Party. In reality, the definition of the JDP's religious identity is primarily linked to the Moroccan political context and its historical trajectory. The analyses would be both hasty and undifferentiated if we associate the JDP's ideology with the above parties. The JDP is typically an Islamist home-grown party, as we will see later. Furthermore, it is not the only party in Morocco with an Islamic reference. Other political parties share this reference, such as the *Istiqlal* party, which emphasizes in its programme and constitution the Islamic reference. It is the first party in the Kingdom of Morocco to have defended the religion of the majority of Moroccans and their Arabic language against the French and the Spanish occupations. The founders of the *Istiqlal*, such as Allal al-Fassi, were in contact with external organizations, mainly with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt during the colonial period, and even later. Western studies, however, rarely consider this fact, as if the *Istiqlal's* Islamic reference would be less

Islamist.<sup>245</sup> What is more, many parties in Morocco claim a historical connection with the *Istiqlal*. The JDP is no exception; its main actors affirm that their Islamic reference is inspired from Allal al-Fassi's Salafist ideology.

During the 2021 election campaign, the JDP stated on page 8 of its programme: "Your vote is our chance to achieve reform," indicating that despite its adoption of the Islamic reference, the party does not consider itself distinct from any political party. For the leaders of the party, the Islamic reference is primarily a personal conviction, as it is conceived to be an authentic and civilization choice for the state and society. It expresses one of the constitutional requirements that place the Islamic religion in the foreground of the Moroccan identity. However, by swaying between the political and religious registers, the JDP betrays its inability to hold a clear discourse towards its electorate.

## 1. Muslim Brotherhood ideology and thinking in Morocco: Myth or reality?

When asked about their ideological affiliation to the Muslim Brotherhood, the answer of the JDP is straightforward; there is no connection between the Muslim Brotherhood and the party. Saad Eddine El Othmani, the former prime minister from 2017 to 2021, stated that the JDP's Islamic reference is inspired by the ideas of Allal al-Fassi, one of the founders of the Moroccan *Istiqlal* party, more than by the writings of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. In terms of political reforms, if one of the objectives of the Muslim Brotherhood is to establish Islamic republics in all Arab countries, the ambitions of the JDP are much more modest and of a different nature. According to El Othmani, the JDP differs fundamentally from the strategy of the Muslim Brotherhood, as the party has never been part of the organization, even if they share foundational Islamic principles.<sup>246</sup>

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245. A comparison between the JDP and the *Istiqlal* would require more time and a more detailed analysis of the Islamic reference of both parties.

246. "Hizb āl'dāla wā tatnmya āl-mgriby yarfud rabtuhu bilijwān ālmuslmyn" [The Moroccan Justice and Development Party Refuses Any Link to the Muslim Brotherhood], *āl-šrq ālawsaṭ*, March 7, 2017, <https://arabic.cnn.com/world/2017/03/07/pjd-muslim-brotherhood>.

*Al 'adl wal ihsane* is a Moroccan Islamist association intellectually closer to the JDP. Their positions and declarations allow us to measure the extent to which the JDP's Islamic reference is moderate. Their program can be summarized in a few words: transformation of the Moroccan political system, challenging the King's title of "Commander of the Faithful (*Amir al-Mu'minin*), and re-Islamization of the Moroccan society. This "program" is not part of the JDP's Islamic reference.

Aziz Rabah, the JDP former Minister of Equipment and Transport in Abdelillah Benkirane's government (2011-2017) stated that those who promote the existence of a relationship between the JDP and the Muslim Brotherhood are "lazy students who fail every time and stay at the same level, repeating the same broken record that only lets them down," while insisting on his loyalty to Morocco and to the Commander of Believers.<sup>247</sup> Before the 2016 elections, Benkirane told *CNN Arabic* that his party was not an extension of the Muslim Brotherhood movement, stating: "It is true that we had the culture of this movement in our early days, but after 1981, we established a special path that breaks with this culture and its symbols, and this is the path that brought us to government."<sup>248</sup>

Driss El Ganbouri, a specialist in Islamic movements in Morocco, confirmed that the relationship between the JDP and the global organization of the Muslim Brotherhood was a fact.<sup>249</sup> The proof lies in the participation of personalities from the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamic movements in the JDP conferences. The same is true for conferences organized by the Muslim Brotherhood. When asked, the JDP actors state that the philosophy behind this presence is to keep abreast of the progress of things, to prepare reports on the general situation of Islamic movements in various countries, to exchange experiences and interests, and to coordinate positions if necessary.

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247. Ibid.

248. Ibid.

249. "ākanbury: Irtibāṭ āl'adala wā tanmya bi tanzym āl-Ikhwān āl-muslmyn ḥaqyqa" [Al-Kanbouri: The AKP's Association with the Muslim Brotherhood Is a Fact], *Hespress*, October 6, 2016, <http://bitly.ws/vPiK>.

The overlapping of these registers gives rise to discursive contradictions and blurred positions. However, taking into consideration the JDP's literature and official documents, we cannot hastily establish organizational links between today's Islamic-oriented parties in Morocco and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, for example. By means of the *Amir al-Mu'minin*, the religious authority of the king makes it more difficult for Islamic parties and movements to challenge the regime, while the legitimacy of the king allows him to rule out the less moderate among them and co-opt the others. There is, however, a firm reality in Morocco which is almost indisputable. The Salafist thought and its evolution is entangled with Moroccan Islamic movements and parties. Salafism has imposed itself very strongly in Morocco, which is a reality now admitted by the authorities. This partly explains why the monarchy recognizes some Islamic parties and movements, as it allows it to identify dissidents among the Islamists.

Allal al-Fassi's Salafism has been transformed into an intellectual project that aims to build a strong nation-state based on religious principles open to the progress achieved by human civilization.<sup>250</sup> The Muslim Brotherhood movement founded by Hassan al-Banna and Allal al-Fassi's National Islamic Movement in Morocco had the same objectives: the liberation of their countries from foreign presence and the rebirth of the Islamic nation. The Muslim Brotherhood interacted with the Moroccan cause and denounced the policy of the French colonizer against the Moroccan Muslim people. As a nationalist party, the *Istiqlal* mobilizes the Islamic reference in its ideas, actions and political proposals. It is today considered the true heir of the ideology of the Muslim brothers. Allal al-Fassi was furthermore hosted in Cairo during his exile in 1947, two years before the killing of Hassan Al-Banna in 1949. Following the execution of Sayyid Qutb in 1966, al-Fassi ordered a new Moroccan edition of *Ma'alim fi al-Tariq* (1964), which was published by *Istiqlal* in late 1966. Allal al-Fassi also wrote a powerful article in *Al-Alam* about the "Martyr Sayyid Qutb", in which he defended the

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250. Allal al-Fassi, *Āl-ḥrakāt al-istiqālīya fi al-mğrib al-ʿaraby* [Independence Movements in the Maghreb] Abdelsalam Jesous, 2019.

ideas of Sayyid Qutb and refuted the accusations made against the book *Fi Zilâl al-Qur'ân*. He said that he had read it and admired it so much that he mentioned this to the author, saying: "I consider it one of the few books that I wish [...] were one of my books."<sup>251</sup>

Today, in Morocco, the Islamic Group of Tawhid and Reform, which was created from the union of several Islamic movements, and which is the political branch of the JDP founded by Abdel Karim El Khatib in 1967, cannot be considered historically as an heir to the Muslim brothers of Egypt. Although ideologically the movement is closer to the Muslim brothers, it is important to point out that there is no organizational link between the two movements. The JDP system of thought is characterized by the bricolage between the political and the religious registers, the heterogeneity in terms of objectives, the refusal of identity-based bias, and the renunciation of the great global Islamic narrative.

## **2. Politics and religion in the discourse of the Islam-oriented JDP: From reference to reality**

The JDP came to power about ten years ago following the uprising of the 20 February 2011 movement. Its election was a necessity desired by the Monarchy and indirectly dictated by the changing geostrategic and international situation. Consequently, Morocco was able to escape the fate of neighboring countries, who were consumed by the revolutions of the "Arab Spring" and plunged into dark tunnels from which they have not managed to emerge until today. The ten years in office are marked by a series of political concessions and adaptations that reflect the central role of the "deep state" in Morocco, and its real administration of the country. After ten years at the head of two coalition governments, it would be wrong to conclude that the JDP has left an even deeper or more profound Islamic reference in Moroccan society. From 'clandestine action to legitimist activism', the JDP has finally become a party of public management, conservative and nationalist, with a slight Islamist flavor, but nothing more. In other words, a party of the system.

The years in power brought the wear and tear of the JDP. The adoption

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251. "Bayna 'alâl âlfâsy wa sayyid qutb," *Al-Qutds*, January 10, 2013, <https://www.alquds.co.uk>.

in March 2021 by the House of Representatives of a new electoral quotient condemned it to political isolation. Seven parties, four of which participated in the JDP-led government, adopted the law. The new measure provided for the calculation of election results and the distribution of seats according to the number of all those on the lists, even if they did not vote. The impact of this electoral measure is not the only crisis that faced the JDP. The crisis within the ruling party dates back to 2017, when Mohamed VI (since 1999) dismissed Benkirane as prime minister. The failure of the government to implement its social programs, which are at the basis of its political project, and the normalization of relations between Morocco and Israel have taken their toll on the cohesion of the party. The signature of the normalization agreement with the Jewish state by the party's secretary general and head of the Moroccan government, El Othmani, on 22 December 2020, triggered a controversy in Islamist circles, between those who supported the initiative and those who rejected any relationship with Israel.

In reality, the JDP entered the logic of political adaptation before its victory in 2011. The first signs of the party's adaptation to the system appeared as early as the end of the 1990s, during which the political issue took over, and the ideological pragmatism prevailed over the Islamic referential. There are many examples of this shift, one of which was when the JDP, an active defender of Arabization, yielded to the teaching of scientific subjects in French. According to Khadija Mohsen-Finan and Malika Zeghal,<sup>252</sup> the official historiography of the JDP dates back to 1967, when Abdelkarim Khatib (1921-2008)<sup>253</sup> created the Popular Democratic and Constitutional Movement. In the 1990s, Abdelkarim Khatib, the former head of the National Liberation Army met Abdellilah Benkirane, a forty-year-old who had gone from radical Islamism to a peaceful and legalist Islamism. These two contrasting political trajectories, which both refer personally and ideologically to Islam, through two political generations, led to the formation of a new political party, which in 1998 took the name of the Justice and Development Party. This party brings together an older political generation

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252. Khadija Mohsen-Finan and Malika Zeghal, "Opposition islamiste et pouvoir monarchique au Maroc: Le cas du Parti de la Justice et du Développement," *Revue Française de Science Politique* 56, no. 1 (2006).

253. An outstanding figure of the Makhzen, who started his political career within the *Istiqlal* party.



with a new breed of young activists trained in the matrix and contradictions of Moroccan Islamism in the 1970s and 1980s.

The JDP's many concessions are decisions based on an evaluation of the "risk-benefit balance."<sup>254</sup> This explains why Benkirane did not support the 20 February Movement in 2011. Yet, this movement decisively brought the JDP to power. Furthermore, this is probably why El Othmani hardly intervened in the case of the Rif Hirak (2016-2017) detainees. These non-interventions, which were very much misinterpreted by Moroccan public opinion, were supposed to be tactics to show ostensibly the JDP's loyalty to the monarchy system, while claiming in non-official meetings to change the system from within. In the end, the system changed the JDP, as it did the Moroccan left wing in the late 1990s.<sup>255</sup> During the years of El Othmani's government, the JDP's pragmatism showed itself to be more in line with the *Makhzen* by being open to the legalization of cannabis and to discussions on abortion, for example. It is the dual policy that the JDP has constantly conducted that has made it unable to position itself clearly on one register or another.

The year 2013 was a turning point in the JDP's political trajectory. In a global context that exerted unprecedented pressure on governments led by parties with Islamic references, and the overthrow of Mohamed Morsi's government in July of the same year, the JDP had to readjust its political action following the unexpected resignation of five *Istiglal* ministers on 11 July 2013. To safeguard his premiership, Benkirane had to strike an alliance with his political opponent, the National Rally of Independents (NRI). Ideologically, the two parties are radically opposed, the NRI being a liberal and pro-establishment party.

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254. Nina Kozlowski, "Maroc: les islamistes du PJD face à l'usure du pouvoir," *Jeune Afrique*, January 22, 2021, <http://bitly.ws/vPH3>.

255. According to Mohamed Mesbah - The "brothers" of the Lampe party have long instilled the idea that it is possible to change the system from within. But in the end, it is the system that has changed the JDP, like it did the Moroccan left in its time.

### 3. The Islamist movements in Morocco: Between tensions, recognition and contradictions

Unlike other political parties in Morocco, the JDP did not originate as a political party. It emerged as a result of an intellectual struggle between various Islamist movements, who eventually became convinced of the need for political participation. The merging and positioning of the actors produced a new vision with Islamic references in the Moroccan political field. New objectives emerged, with specific operational modes for implementation. In a country governed by a Commander of Believers, the objectives and *modus operandi* have been the object of a power struggle centered on both alliances and confrontations. The two coalition governments under the leadership of Benkirane and El Othmani impart the idea of a deceptive ideological levelling. For the majority of Moroccans, the political alliances of circumstance between conservatives, progressives, independents and Islamists are beyond understanding. Even if they provisionally had to bury their rivalries, these loose arrangements maintain the confusion in the imagination, depriving Moroccans from clear political landmarks while cementing the idea that these alliances are nothing more than just efforts toward short-term personal ambitions. From this point of view, the JDP is in a worse position than other parties, since during its electoral campaign it emphasized corrective measures to reduce the gap between the poor and the rich, the degradation of values, the upsurge of corruption, etc. In short, the formula used by the JDP in 2016 (for the 2017 elections) – “support reform (*islah*) in the framework of stability and reconciliation of citizens with politics” – did not work. Most of the reforms undertaken by both governments did not live up to the expectations of the Moroccan people.

Between the break and the continuation, with regard to its origins, the JDP would evolve from an organization towards the position of a political party, whose mission it would be to manage public affairs. This evolution is surrounded by many ambiguities, since the JDP has hardly been able to get rid of its predicative spirit, which is in fact its DNA, in order to transform itself into a political party that tackles issues related to Moroccan society with a political conscience. In the analysis of the discourse of

influence, a distinction is always made between two types of targets: direct and indirect targets. Logically, in order not to provoke collusion with any of the targets, a balancing act is required. The JDP has simultaneously managed the two targets at the same time. While its first target is its Islamist ideological family, its second target is the Moroccan people – mostly Muslims – who expect the government to take effective action against the country’s economic difficulties. By leading this double discourse, the JDP necessarily leaves a clear contradiction in the minds of Moroccans. The case of Amina Mae El Ainine, a JDP deputy who posed for a photo without her hijab in front of the Moulin-Rouge in Paris, in January 2019, crystallizes this double discourse among the party’s actors.<sup>256</sup> While Mustapha Ramid, the former JDP Minister of Human Rights and President of the JDP’s Integrity and Transparency Commission, accused the deputy of misleading the electorate who voted for her because she wears the veil, Benkirane’s words stood in contrast to those of his minister. Before a group of journalists, he declared: “Is this a violation of religion? Moroccan law? The party’s laws? So, you can see that in the end it is only a personal matter. Our brothers do not blame her for that [for taking off the veil]. What they may blame her for is the lack of clarity.”<sup>257</sup>

Beyond the contradictions in the discourse, the paradoxical relationship between Islamist movements and the monarchy, alternating between recognition and rejection, reflects, according to Mohamed Fadil, the diversity of their modes

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256. According to Mohamed Tozy, for a large part of the people on the Web, Amina Mae El Ainine has been taken in flagrante delicto of “hypocrisy”. Progressives” – or at least those who report themselves as such – accuse her of using the hijab as a “work outfit”, of “trading on piety” and of “misleading her constituents”, who will vote for her moral correctness. Some of her political colleagues even suggested that the party should consider sanctions for breaching the rules and doctrinal line. “The electorate has voted for her as a woman wearing the veil; she does not have the right to abandon it,” said Mustapha Ramid, Minister of Human Rights and President of the JDP’s Integrity and Transparency Commission. See Mohamed Tozy, “Pourquoi l’affaire Amina Mae El Ainine en dit long sur la vision marocaine des libertés,” *Jeune Afrique*, February 14, 2019, <http://bitly.ws/vPvj>. As for Azzeddine Taoufiq, one of the first ideologues of the Movement for Unity and Reform (MUR), he was very keen to point out that “a part of the woman’s body must be covered according to the Malikite rite. It cannot be said that the choice of dress is a matter of individual freedom.”

257. Mohamed Tozy, “Pourquoi l’affaire Amina Mae El Ainine en dit long sur la vision marocaine des libertés,” *Jeune Afrique*, February 14, 2019, <http://bitly.ws/vPvj>.

of thought and action. These relations are notably “torn between a transnational Islamist literature globally obsessed with the establishment of an Islamic state, and initially embodied by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, and a reformist tendency producing its own ideologues who negotiate in its name the inscription in modernity.”<sup>258</sup> More importantly, Mohamed Fadil poses the question: “Has Moroccan Islamism in its *Chabiba*/JDP<sup>259</sup> version managed to distance itself from the literature of the Brotherhood, and thus to forge its own identity?<sup>260</sup> In this case, the JDP is a typical example of a party with an Islamic reference that has played a major role in the evolution of the Islamist scene in Morocco. About twenty years ago, Islamist movements showed their willingness to establish a normal relationship with the monarchy by first recognizing the legitimacy of the king’s religious authority, through the institution of the *Imarat al-Mu’minin*. This tendency has become the norm within the various groups of Moroccan Islamists. Thus, a large part of the formations of the *Chabiba* era are once again united, but this time under the authority of a political party, the JDP, which, 16 years after its creation in 1996, will lead the Moroccan government. From this point of view, the JDP is both the synthesis of Moroccan Islamist expressions and the place where the end of a confrontation with the *Makhzenian* power is expected to be enacted. This trend offers a partial answer to the question raised by Mohamed Fadil.

Over the years, under the influence of local particularism, Moroccan Islamism has developed political positions that betray its integration in a party system, while being keen to keep contact with other movements, whether it be the Muslim Brothers in Egypt or other Islamist movements throughout the Arab-Muslim world. Throughout

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258. Mohamed Tozy, *Monarchie et islam politique au Maroc* (Paris : Références Académique, 1999) : p. 172.

259. Chabiba Islamiya is an illegal movement founded in 1969 by Abdel Karim Muti’ and Ibrahim Kamal. It is considered the first organised Islamic movement to emerge in Morocco. Many of the components of the current Islamist movement in Morocco are an outgrowth of the Islamic Youth, such as the former Secretary General of the Justice and Development Party, Abdelilah Ibn Kiran, and the current Minister of Justice and Freedoms, Mustafa Ramid.

260. Mohamed Fadil, “Du mouvement au parti: la trajectoire mouvementée de la mouvance islamiste marocaine,” *SciencesPo*, March 2018, <http://bitly.ws/vPxe>.

its mandate, the JDP has had to deal with the thorny issues of abortion and the apostate. Regarding abortion, the JDP government decided to allow in cases of rape, incest, and malformation of the fetus or psychiatric disorders of the mother, the termination of pregnancy. Considering the apostate, it has been decided that no law can or should punish them. The responses to these societal issues clearly position the JDP in a political wing that distances it from its ideological origins. Nevertheless, ambiguities in both the discourse and the positions taken remain as issues that detailed research may address.

To conclude, the contradictions and ambiguities may lead the JDP to its disintegration. Following its electoral defeat, an open conflict between the Benkirane and Othmani fronts erupted. Unless the party profoundly reconsiders its identity to create a political legitimacy that goes beyond its Islamic reference, its ambiguities in a context where the powerful religious establishment hegemoniously dominates the spiritual life of all Moroccan believers, the JDP will be doomed to spend some years in the shadow of the opposition. Furthermore, since September 2021, the party has shifted from a position of an Islamic party managing public affairs to an Islamist protest party.<sup>261</sup> Whether this shift will have an effect on the Islamic reference, its mobilization and its exaggeration in the coming years, remains to be seen.

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261. In the final communiqué of the extraordinary session of its National Assembly, the party “expressed its denunciation of the violations and imbalances observed during these elections”, including “the massive use of money, or the manipulation of files, and the non-delivery of some of them, and the delivery of others outside the polling stations, or direct advice to voters on election day.”