

## Towards a New Political Thinking: The PJD's Ideological Revisions

Hamza Azaoui\*

Cultural Studies, Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University, Fez, Morocco

\*For Correspondence: Hamza Azaoui, Cultural Studies, Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University, Fes, Morocco, Tel: +212611093129; E-mail: azaouihamza@gmail.com

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### Review

#### ABSTRACT

It is nearly impossible to find a political party that still adheres literally the same initial ideology with which it has started its political journey. Given the fact that among the central functions of a party is to respond to the continuous and changing demands of the grassroots, introducing occasional revisions on the intellectual framework of the party is necessary for its political survival and relevance. While it is true that the party undergoes these revisions to cater for the needs of the grassroots, its ultimate preoccupation is to maintain good terms with the governing central powers. Thus, these reconsiderations should be understood as strategic and visionary attempts to win the trust of the regime before that of the populace.

**Keywords:** PJD, Political thinking, Moroccan monarchy, Political Islam, Ideological revisions

#### INTRODUCTION

Much roar surrounds always matters the identity. While it is commendable to have a fixed identity with cherished characteristics, it is also very essential to update and modernize it to keep it contemporaneous, and relevant to the environment of its operation. Political identities are no different; they entertain with this debate and elicit conflicting attitudes, which reflect that what justify the transformation in the identity are the motivations and potential gains behind it. Thus, the change in the identity should not be approached with black and white terms, because what might absorb it in one context might valorize it in another.

Chapters in the political history of the Moroccan party PJD (Justice and Development Party) stand as testimonies for the role played by the Islamist ideology in igniting the conflict between the party and the monarchical institution. The Moroccan Islamists worked at the beginning to Islamize the country they deemed non-religious, and showed a principled reluctance to participate in any form of co-operation with the regime. The latter on its part assumed the potential danger of the Islamists, and considered their fixed identity and distinct political project symptoms of a fierce competition with the religious and cultural legitimacy it enjoys. Therefore, it intervened tactfully to cause an ideological disruption within the unified body of the Islamists. Mohamed Tozy confirms that the measures taken by the regime resulted in the split of Al-Shabiba Al-Islamiyya movement into two groups: one group sided with the leader Abdulkarim Moutia, and became inspired by his revolutionary thought based on secrecy and coup ideology. The other group rejected this ideological choice, and started a series of revisions in order to clarify their strategy, including their stances towards the ruling regime, opting for a peaceful political participation, and starting to consider working in a public, legal way and shunning revolutionary actions [1].

The split that has taken place in the Islamist body marks a turning point in its history because it has inaugurated a new episode of co-operation and cohabitation with the regime. It has also initiated a long process of ideological and intellectual revisions, which have been intended basically to provide theoretical justifications for the new thinking the party is adopting for its political action.

The physical and symbolic crack down the Islamists have been subject to, served as a means to filtrate out two groups with different political visions. While the first one sided with the revolutionary choice and decided to continue their un-

conciliatory opposition to the regime, the members of the second group, on the other hand, have decided to undergo a reconsideration to their political thought and militant activism. What's worth mentioning in this regard is that the split within the components of Al-Shabiba Al-Islamiyya was not caused by organizational disagreements, as it was the case with Istiqlal and USPF, but was rather about ideological convictions <sup>[1]</sup>.

My interest in this section is not to go through the nuances of the first group because the long years of its secrecy and opposition to the regime have made its significance appear less important on the political scene, especially that its ideological stands haven't seen any change ever since. Therefore, the trajectory of PJD deserves much investigation because of the ideological revisions it has conducted, and the constructive political participation it has entered. The transition of the party from adopting a confrontational ideology into a rupture with it, finds its justification in the theoretical conceptions laid down in the works of significant PJD leaders like Saaeddine El Othmani and Mohammed Yatim.

In his explanation for the logic and wisdom behind embracing peaceful strategies of reform, Mohammed Yatim, one of the founding members of the PJD confirmed in an article published in Arraya newspaper that, both the revolutionary and reformist versions of Al-Shabiba Al-Islamiyya correctly draw from the Islamic scriptural texts, yet the problematic is how to apply the teachings of Islam to fit into the contemporary circumstances of our Islamic Ommah <sup>[2]</sup>.

From the very beginning of his article, Mohammed Yatim based his argumentation on the common points that unit the different fractions of the Al-Shabiba Al-Islamiyya, to convince them that the application of God's law is primarily a matter of approach more than anything else. By doing so, he showed an implied readiness to negotiate with the radicals for the sake of persuading them to think about the reformist approach he embraces. Moreover, Yatim seemed to deviate away from the common religious justifications, and choose instead a realistic discourse that stipulates that, the requirements of our contemporary times renders the logic of rejection irrelevant, [...] and makes the logic of participation a necessity, especially with the growing potency of secular values which call for eliminating religion from the institutions of the state <sup>[2]</sup>.

The way Yatim communicated his contention reveals a growing awareness with the intricacies of politics. While he tried to prove the irrelevance of the radicals' rhetoric, he did not miss the opportunity to remind though implicitly, that the challenges that face Islam should be their common preoccupation, and a catalyst for unity. Although Yatim's camp has chosen to align itself with the regime, its split from Al-Shabiba Al-Islamiyya would remain all the time a landmark of deficiency that might lead to its instrumentalization and manipulation. Thus, the cautious way with which Yatim addressed his adversaries indicates that he assumed the repercussions of not maintaining a unified political thinking on the ability of the party to secure support and avoid criticism from other movements that uphold the same Islamist discourse. In this context, the author insistently formulated four main considerations, which he presents as thoughtful justifications to attest to the incorrect reasoning of the radicals.

The first consideration stipulates that, withdrawing from the political life, while attacking all attempts to compete with corrupted elites, is actually collusion with the opponents of the Islamic movement, who call for secularizing the country and its institutions. Participation, then, is indeed a pressure on the corrupted people and elites <sup>[3]</sup>.

The article of Yatim can be considered largely a political lesson for the novice radicals, who did not consider thoroughly the consequences of maintaining a fundamental opposition in unfavorable conditions. Irrespective of the good intentions they show, their political thinking remains lacking in foresight and political maturity to see beyond the moment. Thus, Yatim seems to speak about a new strategy of defending Islam and its centrality, which takes into consideration the contemporary variables with which Islamists should interact wisely to promote their discourse. Strategically speaking, it is a preventive logic that intends to stop the opponents of the Islamic movements from promoting their secular projects at the expense of the Islamic oriented ones. Therefore, the decision of participation is envisioned as a form of Jihad <sup>[1]</sup>.

The second consideration that Yatim provides to persuade the radicals to give up their unconciliatory approach finds its roots within the Islamic religious texts they all subscribe to. It stipulates that, refusing participation is actually against the normal logic that frames the relationship between boycotting and participating. From the Islamic perspective, going out to the people, promoting virtues, and calling-to-goodness, is the original approach. However, withdrawing from this mission is only an exceptional preventive approach and punitive behavior, not the normal relationship Islamists are required to develop with others <sup>[3]</sup>.

Yatim states that by refusing to participate in official politics, the Islamists miss the opportunity to promote the Islamic virtues they are required to spread in decision-making positions and among people. Since the message of Islam advocates openness and condemns closure, the Islamist radicals are invited to reconsider their nonconformist stand because as Yatim clarified, Withdrawing may be desirable in case of weakness; however, withdrawing while having the ability to change the evil is in fact a failure and a negative approach because it leads to abandoning the duty of promoting the message of Islam <sup>[3]</sup>.

Probably, the idea that Yatim tries to advocate through his article, is that the Islamists of Morocco were not in a state of weakness; therefore, their decision to relegate themselves into the passive ranks of opposition is not justified. In fact, the Islamists of Morocco hold cultural and organizational means that can prepare them for decision-making positions. Beside their historical and grounded presence in the Moroccan culture, they enjoy an organizational capacity to mobilize people and win their trust easily. All that potential can make their discourse a challenging political power to face any opponents.

Concerning the third consideration, Yatim examined closely the decision of opposition and provided an implied assessment to its impact on the Moroccan political sphere. He said, since opposition logic is a punitive procedure we use to decry and condemn what is evil, its impact is what defines its viability or not. If opposition could not bring about a substantial change, or remained unable to widen the basis of goodness, then participation is likely to bear fruition<sup>[3]</sup>.

Political participation and opposition are two logics whose application depends on the results they generate. They are context-based, in the sense that they come as a response to the requirements of the political scene. Since participation is the normal logic in the political operation; therefore, opposition should be adopted with reservations because it represents a reaction to odd cases of political impasse. Moreover, the validity of the opposition and all the measures it entails depends on the amount of change it succeeds to make in the decision making process. In other words, opposition is paralleled by the impact it leaves and the extent of freewill it enjoys to address criticism and express disapproval.

However, opposition might be the beginning of an end, if it is not preceded by a deep consideration to its long-term implications. In this regard, Mohammed Yatim seemed to notify the radicals of the danger of embracing a furious opposition whose outcomes are not known. In authoritarian contexts, political opposition is not likely to perform its duties feely because of the unfriendly attitudes that have been constructed about it. Therefore, it risks being subject to oppression and state penetration. In order to avoid such a scenario, Yatim provides a pragmatic understanding to the Moroccan politics, which advocates a moderate participation in a political system he sees as evolving toward negotiating their political vision. The reading provided by Yatim and by extension PJD, regards the participation of the Islamists in the official politics as an inevitable decision given the fact that it shows a mature engagement with the nature of the political system. Since Morocco is made up of a wide range of political parties with different ideologies, relegating one's self into the ranks of opposition would not alter the political spectrum considerably, so long as many subservient alternatives are ready to participate under any terms. More than that, withdrawing from official politics would only strengthen the discourse of opponents and widen their scope of interests.

As far as the fourth consideration is concerned, Yatim developed his argument in a way that shows his Ijtihad (diligence) in the way matters of the state should be approached. He stated that, since political participation entails usually assuming decision-making positions, achieving complete justice or full reform is not a conditional requirement. The objective of participation however, is to reduce evil and minimize its damages on society. This might involve tolerating some abuses if they lead to achieving desired benefits<sup>[3]</sup>.

The flexible manner with which Yatim approached political participation implies that he is aware of the transformative changes Morocco has undergone since independence. These changes affected considerably the political choices of Moroccans and introduced them into new political visions, which are not necessarily from the Arab-Islamic heritage. Thus, Islamists are required more than ever before to accept difference and modernize their political vision and project to fit into the contemporary condition of the country. It is a challenge that requires going through the decisions and attitudes that have long been taken for granted, and revisit them considerably.

Despite the fact that the article of Yatim has been published in 1997, it shows a great awareness with the importance of developing theoretical insights that can frame the operation of the Islamists and bear their distinct political project. The new thinking he is advocating through his article is symptomatic of an ideological rupture with the weary logic of opposition, which does not respond compatibly to the movement of history. Despite the fact that these ideological and intellectual revisions have led to a split within the Islamist's body, the PJD's camp insists that their transformation is consistent with the basics and the fundamentals of Islam. As an example, Yatim proved the adherence of the decision of participation to the core principles of Islam laid down in the scriptural texts. He said, we have been accused of being complicit with the corrupt elites, but this claim is religiously disproved. What counts are the intentions and objectives we relied on in our interaction with the different institutions of the state, and the amount of reform we have succeeded to introduce<sup>[3]</sup>.

It is fair to say that the moderate Islamists accepted to participate in official politics with no guarantees that they would be given the chance to govern or even soar their prominence. Yet, the objective reading they have given to the Moroccan politics and its prospects made them the unrivalled winner in 2011 elections. Despite the fact that its success is associated closely with the popular uprising of 2011, the secret behind it can be fathomed only through recourse to its ideological foundations. It is true that the party has given up some of its ideological resoluteness to be accepted within the official fabric of the state, yet their conduct and behavior still can be understood from a religious perspective. Political participation may not fall sometimes within what is merely religiously permissible; it may actually be considered a

religious obligation if linked to the big purpose of warding off evil as much as possible and enjoining as much good as possible [4].

Much ink has been spilled on the debate of whether Islam is compatible with the Western-based notions of democracy and elections. Although there is an apprehension that Islam-oriented parties would not conduct themselves to the democratic rules, the PJD has proven through its political experience that Islamists have got within their frame of reference the sufficient knowledge that makes them compatible with democracy. The PJD for instance has proved through its conduct and electoral performance to be more democratic than liberal and secular parties, which uphold democracy as their bedrock. The party is known for “its internal transparency [...], effective grassroots outreach [and] perhaps most importantly, internal democracy” [5]. While these organizational qualities are lacking in leftist and liberal parties, the PJD seems to be a good model for Moroccan party politics.

In fact, this process is the outcome of the intellectual Ijtihad (diligence) the founding leaders of the party have undertaken considerably to visualize clearly the challenges and the prospects of cohabitating with the regime. The significance of their writings, especially the early works that have been written shortly after their split, lies in the fact that it justifies closely the decision of participation with arguments from the Islamic jurisprudence. Besides, the arguments advanced by Mohammed Yatim in his article “Views on the Doctrine of Participation and Boycott”, the prolific intellectual, and founding member of the PJD, Saad Eddine El-Othmani provided a modern reading to the legacy of the theologian Ibn Taymiyyah. In his book *Political Participation in Ibn Taymiyyah's Jurisprudence*, El-Othmani contemplated over the thoughts and the views of Ibn Taymiyyah in a way that can persuade the opponents of participation to give up their ideological dogmatism. The author insists that Ibn Taymiyyah was an exponent of a peaceful participation in politics, and an adamant critic to revolt, especially the ungrounded one [6]. His ideas also, as have been confirmed by El-Othmani are likely to be an incentive to Moroccan youth to embrace an illuminated religiosity, which goes hand in hand with the inspirations of their contemporary times [6].

Through his reading for Ibn Taymiyyah' writings, El-Othmani resonated enthusiastically with the political wisdom laid down in these works, and developed as a result, a set of principles he sees very essential for a lucrative political action. The first principle stipulates that political action is knowledge-based, and any decision a Muslim takes be it participation or opposition should be grounded and purposeful [6]. Based on this idea, El-Othmani seems to address a direct criticism to the opposition camp, because their decision to stay away from decision-making process shows an uninformed political vision that does not consider flexibility and tolerance of difference as parts of the managerial procedures of how to interact with contemporary politics.

The second principle, which illustrates how El Othmani has formulated the new thinking of the PJD from the Islamic heritage, stipulates that political action is basically an area of diligence and of different political opinions [6]. With the growing multiculturalism of Morocco, and its openness to world' ideas, it is no longer valid to constrain the political operation within fixed doctrinal confines. These socio-political circumstances should push Islamists to think about ways to prove the contemporaneity of Islam and its compatibility with the changes taking place in the world. This involves redefining their political concepts in a way that can promote cooperation and acceptance of the other. However, this does not imply that the PJD is laying down theoretical conceptions for separating religion from politics, because the whole endeavor behind their political participation is to get closer to God [4].

As for the third principle, El Othmani confirms that the purpose behind their political participation is to seek possible interests based on the capacities available and the circumstances of the political scene [6]. This involvement entails also a moral incentive for politicians to strive to change the status quo for better, by adopting diligence as a priority for their political operation [6]. In this vein, withdrawing from official politics with the pretense that working in unfavorable conditions is a compliancy with corruption, is indeed a nihilist decision that deprives Muslims from their capacity of intervention as capable political agents [6]. Thus, the claim of the radicalists loses its strength of persuasion for it does not take into consideration the repercussions of opposition on the political future of the Islamists. Radical opposition would only alienate Islamists, deepen their insignificance in the political scene, and portray them as actors who prefer to condemn from afar rather than taking the risk of responsibility, and its outcomes.

## CONCLUSION

In general, the main conclusion we can draw from the intellectual and ideological revisions led by Saaeddine El Othmani and Mohammed Yatim is that Moroccan politics can no longer be perceived with the same old mentality of the past. New variables have taken over, and any political projects should fit into the circumstances caused by these changes. Likewise, any attempt to go against the tide would only postpone the process of reform in the country and make its political scene ideologically fragmented. Therefore, the PJD decided to give up dogmatism and embrace ideological moderation, depending on enlightened reading to the Islamic scriptural texts. Indeed, these revisions have granted the moderate Islamists an incremental access to the institutions of the state, and made their conduct and performance competitive to other liberal and secular political parties. The implications of the long process of moderation the Islamists

of the PJD have undergone have certainly a landmark influence on the Moroccan party politics and on the process of democratization as whole.

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