



## ARI Thematic Series: Critical Dialogue between Diverse Opposition Groups

*Paper 1, February 2011*

### **What Can We Learn from Coalition-Building Experiences?**

Opposition groups in the Arab world might not have anything in common, but one important goal: end the repression they live with. Leftists, liberals and Islamists have come to realise that they can be more effective working together, and several alliances have been formed in the region over the last decade to that effect. However, building alliances across political affiliations is a challenging endeavour and discussions reflected various difficulties: is the common denominator too small, the distrust between them too great, the regimes in power too good at “dividing and ruling”? The Arab Reform Initiative has brought together representatives and leading thinkers of different political opposition groups from eight Arab countries over a period of two years, to analyse the experiences and lessons learned of coalitions in Egypt, Syria, Tunisia, Lebanon, Morocco, and Yemen. Islamists’ perspectives were articulated by Heba Raouf, Rafik Abdel Salam, Radwan Ziyadeh, Abdel Ali Hamieddin, and Omar Ahrashan, and discussed by nationalists, leftists and liberals (Fathi Belhaj, Ahmad Bahaeddin Shaaban, Sa’adallah Mazraani, Hamid Bahkak, Ahmad alBooz, Lotfi Hajji). The discussions took place before the recent uprisings, i.e. before opposition groups - at least in Tunisia and in Egypt - were propelled onto the centre stage of political change. This paper is the first of a series focusing on the dialogue between disparate ideological groups in the Arab world and measuring the extent to which they can work together.

## Introduction

*Nahla Chahal*<sup>1</sup>

All over the Arab world, Islamist, liberal and leftist groups have had the idea of coming together to challenge political oppression and to voice more effectively their demands for reform. This requires them to put aside their ideological differences and focus on those areas in which they are in agreement. Their common objectives are the establishment of true democracy and guaranteed political and civil rights enabling their political participation. This requires the building of a new regime and constitution, with the separation of powers, free and transparent elections, and the limiting of executive powers. Addressing the issues of oppression and corruption leads to questioning the legitimacy of the current regime. However, these opposition groups are keen to distinguish between the current regime and the state as a public and objective institution. They are also keen to stand by the principle of peaceful and non-revolutionary change in their mission to bring about a new democratic order.

There are difficult questions that have yet to be addressed in order to reach a consensus: does everyone want to change the regime? Or do some want to participate in it? What would be the nature of the next regime? How does each group know that it is not used by another group that might monopolize power in the future? Other sources of tension are the disparity in public support for the different ideological groups, which favors the Islamists, the somewhat condescending view taken by leftists and liberals who see the Islamists as oppressive and populist, and the fact that the Islamists are treated differently by the regime to the other opposition groups. The lack of shared ideology, the memory of mutual hostility and conflict in the past and the oppression practiced in present

examples of Islamist regimes further undermine confidence in the success of this kind of political alliance. The question of how or whether to integrate the Islamists politically is particularly controversial, with some supporting the model of the complete democracy where the Islamists are entirely integrated, others in favor of a limited democracy, and others entirely opposed to allowing their participation.

Over the course of 2009, the Arab Reform Initiative held four conferences, each one addressing a particular dimension of this project. A selection of researchers from all over the Arab world, distinguished by their expertise in this area and by their political and ideological affiliation, were invited to come together to present and discuss research papers. This paper will discuss the coalition experiences in Egypt, Syria, Tunisia, Lebanon, Morocco, and Yemen.

## Difficulties in forming a coalition

*Rafik Abdel Salam*<sup>2</sup>

There are many difficult questions to be answered in order for different political groups to work together: who is to lead such a coalition, and who is to make the important decisions and define its strategy?

There are two successful examples in the Arab world that should be studied. The first is Yemen, where different political and ideological forces have overcome their considerable differences for the sake of civil political struggle. Perhaps this is due to the influence of the tribal political culture which is founded on bargaining and conciliation, in contrast to the modern experiences of other Arab countries where a culture of social and political polarization has become entrenched.

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<sup>2</sup> Scholar and deputy manager of Al Jazeera for Research, member of the Annahda Party of Tunisia

The other example is that of the 18<sup>th</sup> October coalition in Tunisia, which began modestly with a group of shared demands for the release of political prisoners and the right to form social and political organizations, and which has gradually expanded the common territory of its members.

There are two possible ways to deal with the question of leadership. The first is through the choice of one leader, trusted by all groups. This was the case for example for the 18<sup>th</sup> October coalition and its leader Ahmad Nagib Al Shabi.

In the case of the Kifaya movement in Egypt, Abdel Wahab Al Mesiri was able to bring the Muslim Brothers side by side with the nationalists and the leftists. The second way is through rotating the leadership of the alliance between the different groups so that each one has the opportunity to lead the opposition and no group is marginalized. Yemen is an excellent example of this approach.

It is clear that no group can bear the burden of bringing about political change alone, whatever its size or popularity. Working together is essential. Making concessions to political partners is a thousand times better than making concessions to a corrupt and autocratic regime that ultimately offers nothing in return. It is important to emphasize that a shared political program does not exist among the opposition at the outset. The groups may each present their programs and then work towards an agreement, or they may begin with a minimum consensus and gradually expand it through dialogue.

### **The relationship between the Islamists and the secularists**

In addition to the other divisions in society, the Arab world suffers from a polarization between the Islamists and the secularists. The regimes have capitalized on this by playing the different groups off against each other. The bitter experiences of the political opposition show

that the regimes do not stop at persecuting one group but eventually target all their opponents, which is why prisons have become such a good meeting place for them. This is proof that the principles of democracy and freedom may not be partially applied. Either they apply equally to all members of society or they do not exist. All political groups should have the right to be active openly, provided they do not use or threaten to use violence. No group should feel to have greater legitimacy than any other.

Concentrating on specific issues and on democracy and freedom proves more beneficial than focusing on the Islamist-secularist divide. The Islamists and the secularists each have concerns and fears relating to the position of the other. Some of these may be valid, but others are imaginary or exaggerated. These fears may be allayed through widening the sphere of dialogue so that the two sides gain a better understanding of each other's position.

It is more important to find a political formula that will prevent the isolation of any group or any monopolization of power. The central power of the state must be reduced, and an effective civil society must be built, with the neutrality of the state established with regards to moral and cultural choices. This is the best way to avoid the trap of authoritarianism.

### **Between *shura* and democracy**

Another phenomenon of the political discourse is that some believe the concept of democracy to have a fixed essence: being inseparable from secularism and liberalism in the eyes of some secular groups, and equivalent to the Islamic concept of *shura* according to some of the Islamist groups, continuing from the ideas of Mohammad Abduh. There is no room here for a lengthy discussion of the nature of democracy except to say that there are a number of types, some liberal, some socialist, and some with an Islamic character, as seen for example in Turkey, Malaysia, Morocco, Tunisia and Iran.

The most important aspects of a democracy are the prevention of power being concentrated in the hands of one person or organization, equality between all citizens, the rule of law, the separation of powers, safeguards for the peaceful rotation of power, a free media and autonomy of civil society vis-à-vis the political society.

Dialogue between the Islamists and the secularists has shown that ideological differences can be surmounted. One of the most dangerous problems faced by the Arab world is the blocking of channels for dialogue and of the coming together of different groups. As a consequence, the mechanics of society and politics cease to function and a culture of denial, psychological barriers and mutual ignorance develops.

There has been a kind of rapprochement in Arab societies, with most Islamists accepting democracy and most leftists and liberals accepting the Arab and Islamic nature of their societies. Maybe even the secular groups feel the desire for religious and cultural identity in the face of foreign pressure and intervention. There are no easy solutions to the political and cultural divisions in our societies, except to work on bridging these divisions through intellectual dialogue and political compromises. The idea of an Islamic state and the idea of a secular state are each equally frightening to different sections of society. Decisions cannot be imposed by any group but can only be reached through all the groups working together and through a rejection of fanaticism and violence. This also requires the state to remain neutral and to recognise that these choices must be left to society: it is not for the state to impose certain ways of life or beliefs, whether in the name of religious legitimacy or secular enlightenment. Finally, while most of these states have established Islam as the religion of society and Arabic as its language, this does not mean that freedom of expression should be denied to religious and linguistic minorities.

The best solution for the region, in the face of oppression, much foreign intervention and many other problems, is political compromise and the establishment of true and competitive democracy.

## **The experience of the Kifaya movement in Egypt**

*Ahmad Bahaeddin Shaaban*<sup>3</sup>

“The Egyptian movement for change – Kifaya” is the first influential political alliance to emerge in Egypt recently. The movement represents the shared commitment of its members, who hold wide ranging and diverse ideological and political views, to democratic change. Previous temporary alliances had been formed on the Egyptian political scene, usually concerned with nationalist pan-Arab issues, such as solidarity with the Palestinians or with Iraq. Kifaya was a distinct model however, which was formed following talks between Islamist, leftist, nationalist and liberal political groups from November 2003 until September 2004. The basic principles of the movement are:

1. That each of the ideological groups represented in Kifaya has the right to exist and not to be marginalized in Egyptian politics. Mutual efforts must be made for greater cooperation and to overcome what has caused conflict between the groups in the past.
2. That none of these groups are capable, alone, of fighting for democracy in a harshly repressive regime, which keeps the public arena under constant surveillance and openly violates basic human rights.

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<sup>3</sup> *Engineer and founding member of the Kifaya movement*

3. That, following on from the first two principles, all those committed to democratic change in Egypt must unite to create the right conditions for discussing peaceful change and moving towards a new social contract that defines the basis of citizenship and guarantees the rights of all citizens to participate in the foundation of a free society that is called “justice and freedom” by Kifaya.
4. That in order to be successful, ideological differences between the groups must be left behind in favour of coming together to achieve common goals.

The founding statement of the movement, the “Statement to the people”, published on September 22, 2004 set out the following aims:

1. An end to the monopolization of power, particularly in the form of the hereditary presidential succession.
2. The primacy of the rule of law, more independence for the judiciary and respect for judicial decisions, and equality between all citizens.
3. An end to the monopolization of wealth which has fuelled corruption and social injustice and has led to a rise in unemployment and high living costs.
4. The restoration of Egypt’s position in the region and in the world, which has been lost since its signing of the Camp David agreement and its alliance with the USA.

Two factors helped Kifaya in the initial phase of its development. The first was the agreement of the official political parties to carry out their work in accordance with the limitations set out by the regime. Consequently they were no longer able to connect with the public or voice their demands for justice and reform, hence leaving a gap. The second was the appearance

of a group of highly experienced and credible groups drawn from the political, intellectual and public elites, many of whom played a role following the defeat of 1967 and in the war of 1973, and who had made efforts throughout the previous decades to support the Palestinians and the Iraqis.

Initially, the movement was very successful and enjoyed unprecedented popular appeal. The reason for this was the very special relationship and mutual trust between the founding members of the group. They had shared similar historical experiences, and their common desire to make the project succeed overcame their ideological differences. My own involvement consisted of editing the movement’s statements, almost daily. Kifaya was broad enough to include members of the Progressive Unionist Party, the Muslim Brothers, the Wafd Party, the Al-Ghad (“Tomorrow”) Party and the Nasserist Party, not to mention thousands of others that became interested in Kifaya and were attracted by its vision.

However, this situation was not destined to last. The particular trust that existed between the founding members did not extend to the groups of new members that joined and when the founding members left their positions of leadership to others, the movement began to decline. The instability of the movement’s structure was another problem.

The Kifaya experience may be summarized as showing that there is scope for work between different ideological groups for the sake of democracy but that there is a need to build an effective institutional apparatus to maintain the momentum and development of the movement.

## Comment

*Heba Raouf*<sup>4</sup>

An observation relating to the theoretical concepts used is that these kinds of coalitions are unlike political parties, which are organized, long-term structures with clear goals. Movements such as Kifaya are characterized by the spontaneity with which they emerge in filling a political vacancy, their structural flexibility, the relative obscurity of their goals due to political pragmatism rather than lack of clear vision, and the fact that they are, by nature, temporary organizations.

The Kifaya movement was unaware of the characteristics which gave it its very high degree of influence. The worst thing that it did was to try to choose symbolic figures to direct the movement, all of whom, almost without exception, came from the generation of the sixties. What guarantees the longevity of such a movement is its ability to reach across generations.

The media is extremely important in spreading the movement's message to the public. However, it is difficult to maintain media interest after the initial media frenzy. Had Kifaya realized this it might have been able to make better use of the media attention it did receive.

The fundamental success of Kifaya is that it broke a taboo of Egyptian society and created a spirit of protest. It was able to mobilize the Egyptian people, which is an ingenious achievement. What must now be answered is not how but why Kifaya should go on. Today, what do we want from Kifaya? That is the question.

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<sup>4</sup> *Associate professor of political theory, American University of Cairo, and co-founder of Islamonline*

## The Damascus Declaration for Democratic Change in Syria

*Radwan Ziyadeh*<sup>5</sup>

The Damascus Declaration was announced in October 2004, the culmination of more than ten months of arduous negotiations between the nationalist, Kurdish, Communist and Islamist signatories. It represented an exceptional effort to overcome ideological differences and promote dialogue. Its aim was the creation of a united opposition that could confront the ruling regime more effectively and pressure it to make democratic reforms. The concept of democracy is at the heart of the alliance, as is a belief in political freedom, separation of powers, equal and guaranteed rights for all citizens and peaceful struggle as the means to achieve this goal. The Damascus Declaration brought together various political forces and several society and cultural personalities.

There were two main factors behind the success of the Damascus Declaration:

The first factor was that the political parties that signed the Declaration had much shared political experience. In addition to nine well known opposition personalities, the Damascus Declaration was signed by three political groups. One was the National Democratic Rally, an opposition group, which was founded in 1979 consisting of five political parties: the Democratic Arab Socialist Union, the Syrian Democratic People's Party, the Workers' Revolutionary Party, the Movement of Arab Socialists and the Arab Socialists' Democratic Ba'ath Party. The other two groups included the Kurdish alliance and the Kurdish Front, as well as the Committees for Civil Society. The Declaration was later joined by other parties

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<sup>5</sup> *Founder of the Damascus Centre for Human Rights Studies*

and groups including the Muslim Brothers of Syria, the Democratic Organization, the Democratic Future Party and the Party for Communist Action. These parties all shared a long history of opposition to the Syrian regime. In particular, they had been brought closer together by their experience of the Damascus Spring of 2000. This was a period of relative political freedom initiated by President Bashar al Assad when he succeeded his father that year, intended to improve the image of the Syrian regime abroad and to enable limited reforms. This allowed a social movement to develop, expressing its desire for true reform and with open political activity by opponents of the regime. The arrests of many Syrian intellectuals and activists in September 2001 marked the end of the Damascus Spring and hopes that it would lead to greater political freedom. However, the movement did have a lasting effect in uniting opposition groups and intellectuals and in establishing democracy as a central concept in the thinking of this elite.

Two very important papers demonstrate this evolution. The first was published by the Syrian Muslim Brothers in May 2001, entitled the "Honourable statement for political action". In this paper, the Muslim Brothers pledged their commitment to democratic political activity, renunciation of violence and equality of all citizens. This marks a clear transformation in the political thinking of the most prominent Syrian Islamist movement, which had committed acts of violence during the 1980s. Similarly, the political programme announced by the Democratic People's Party (formerly the Syrian Communist Party) referred to the failure of the authoritarian state and the need for a democratic constitutional state, asserting that democracy is the final and universal contemporary political order. This was a unique moment in Syria's political history as the concept of democracy became firmly entrenched in the Syrian political consciousness for the first time. The events of the Damascus Spring greatly helped in this development and

in the eventual announcement of the Damascus Declaration. The internet was also instrumental in enabling forums for dialogue.

The second factor which helped the Damascus Declaration to succeed was the series of disastrous political errors made by the Syrian regime during the previous years, which had repercussions both in the region and internationally. Following the events of September 11th, the Syrian opposition movement was subjected to harsh repression. The Bush administration was tough on the Syrian regime because of its links with Palestinian organizations such as Hamas and Jihad al Islami and its relations with Lebanon. US-Syrian relations deteriorated further following the US invasion of Iraq and the Security Council Resolution 1559. The assassination of Rafik Hariri also increased international pressure on Syria. The Syrian opposition movement responded by publishing the Damascus-Beirut Declaration which called for the recognition of the full sovereignty and independence of Lebanon. This resulted in more arrests, the closing of the Atassi conference, the only forum that had remained from the Damascus Spring, and in members of the opposition being placed under surveillance. Opposition activists were also prohibited from leaving the country. Consequently, the opposition tried to forge a new path for political activity by building broad based political alliances that could pressure the government more effectively. This led to the idea of the Damascus Declaration for Democratic Change, a movement which would signal that the weakness of the opposition was due to the tyranny of the ruling regime and its crushing of their demands for reform.

There were however problems in the formation of the Damascus Declaration. The process of dialogue and discussions beforehand was extremely long and complex because those coordinating the Declaration wanted to involve a maximum number of groups but had nothing

to bargain with in exchange for their support. Since its publication the Declaration has been criticized, which has led to a certain amount of fragmentation amongst its signatories and undermined its credibility. Certain points are in need of discussion and clarification, especially those relating to the Arabist content of the Declaration, emphasizing Syria's Arab identity and political role.

Another problem was that the Declaration's leadership did not have a clearly defined long-term strategy of phases and goals for the process of reform, particularly for the time after articulating their demand for complete change. For example the Damascus Declaration succeeded in holding a broad national meeting in Syria. But it did not have any ideas or substitute arrangements for what should happen in the event that the leaders of the Declaration would be arrested by the regime. And that is what happened.

## **The 18<sup>th</sup> October Coalition for Rights and Freedoms in Tunisia**

*Fathi Belhaj*<sup>6</sup>

The Tunisian regime, having allowed relative political freedom from 1987-1990, then reverted to the harsh oppression of its political opponents. Meetings among the different opposition groups did not lead to any kind of organized activity until the 18<sup>th</sup> October Coalition for Rights and Freedoms was formed. The regime's strike against the Islamist Nahdah movement, in the name of "fighting radicalism," was initially supported by some of the Tunisian leftist factions and by European policy makers who feared a repeat of the Algerian experience. However, this strategy soon became ineffective for a number of

reasons. From the mid 1990s there were a great number of protest movements, some of which, such as hunger strikes by prominent Tunisian personalities, helped to win over foreign support for the Tunisian opposition. The experience of other countries also had an influence. The other countries of the Maghreb had witnessed positive developments, with Algeria maintaining relative freedom of expression despite its critical state, and Morocco witnessing something resembling the rotation of power and the licensed political activity of a party with an Islamist background. Meanwhile the experience of Turkey convinced some Tunisian secularists that they should seek to integrate the Islamists. In addition to these factors, the invitation of the Israeli Prime Minister Sharon by the Tunisian regime caused a public outcry and further weakened the regime in its strategy of crushing the Islamist movement.

### **The hunger strikes and the formation of the 18<sup>th</sup> October Coalition**

From the 1970s there was open hostility between the Islamists and the left, at times manifested in actual violence in the universities. The regime was able to exploit this to its advantage and to isolate the Islamists. It was the most radical of the leftist parties, the Communist Workers' Party, which finally broke this barrier that had long divided the two groups. A month before the World Summit on the Information Society held in Tunis, eight people representing different political and ideological groups, including the Communist Workers' Party and the Islamists, went on an open hunger strike on October 18, 2005, with the goal of alerting Arab and international public opinion to the lack of true democracy in Tunisia. Though the regime tried to suppress the publicity by strictly controlling the media, the strike meant that the conference, instead of being an opportunity for the regime to restore its reputation, became a historical opportunity for the opposition to voice its demands. The

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<sup>6</sup> *Journalist*



hunger strike paved the way for the forming of a coalition known as the 18<sup>th</sup> October Coalition for Rights and Freedoms, consisting of twenty-four people representing the most important political and ideological groups and committed to the struggle for democracy and dialogue between the groups. Specifically, the leftist, secularists and liberals wanted written clarifications and guarantees from the Islamists on a number of issues, and the Islamists responded by providing assurances that they were working for a democratic society. There was one leftist group that did not join the coalition because it refused to accommodate the Islamists.

### **Achievements and challenges**

Were the members of the Coalition able to subordinate ideological differences to their political aim? Or was their coming together merely the product of very particular circumstances? The movement certainly had some very notable achievements: it managed to place the demand for democratic reform at the top of the public agenda in Tunisia and for all those interested in Tunisian affairs; it ended the isolation of the Nahdah movement and the division between the Islamist and leftist groups (although this has led to divisions between the moderate and *takfiri* elements within the Islamist movement); and despite the regime's insistence that there were no political problems and its failure to recognize the coalition, the release of all the imprisoned members of the Nahdah movement was a consequence of the coalition's activity.

The 18<sup>th</sup> October Coalition faces a number of difficulties, though:

1. From a legal perspective, its activity is unlicensed, meaning that it is in danger of having its meetings banned and its activities placed under surveillance.
2. The difficulty of overcoming ideological differences in order to work

together. The Communist Workers' Party is under pressure from a wing that refuses to engage with political Islam, and the Nahdah movement faces similar pressure from members who say that its entry into the 18th October Coalition is a departure from its true values.

3. There is internal disagreement as to how much the coalition should collude with Western countries in its work.
4. There is also disagreement as to how the coalition should organize itself politically. For example before the elections of 2009, some felt that the coalition should be represented in the elections, while others felt that it should boycott the elections entirely.

In conclusion, it does not appear that the coalition will emerge into a political alliance, which would require complete agreement on a political program. The Party for Communist Action explains its cooperation with the Islamists as being purely tactical. Nevertheless the coalition has performed a highly significant role in its breaking down of communication barriers between the different political groups and in pressuring the regime for dialogue and democratic reform.

### **Comment**

#### *Lotfi Hajji*<sup>7</sup>

The deterioration of the political context in Tunisia and the subsequent emergence of the 18<sup>th</sup> October Coalition cannot be understood without appreciating the villainy of the regime's oppression. In particular, many members of the Nahdah movement were arrested and tortured, sometimes to death. This

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<sup>7</sup> *Journalist, founding member of the 18<sup>th</sup> October coalition and one of the eight activists that took part in the hunger strikes*

oppression is the key to understanding the breakdown of the organizational structure of the parties. In this context the hunger strikes represented a scream by the Tunisians for international recognition of their situation.

While some political groups were participating in legislative and presidential elections, these elections were not genuinely competitive. The demands of the 18<sup>th</sup> October Coalition were for the bare minimum of democracy and basic rights because there was no genuine political life in existence. The different opposition groups found that their true enemy was not their ideological opponents, but the autocracy of the regime.

The coalition does not represent a united front as there are many issues on which its members are divided. However it represents a significant step in that it has enabled dialogue between different groups in order to agree upon the fundamental points that constitute the basis of citizenship. Such a dialogue was previously impossible.

### **The relationship between the Communist Party and Hezbollah in Lebanon**

*Sa'ad Allah Mazra'ani*<sup>8</sup>

Initially, the relationship developing between the Communist Party and Hezbollah in the early 1980s was a tentative one. This was due to Iranian influence on Hezbollah's activities and the perception that Hezbollah was acting on behalf of foreign, rather than national interests. There were even some clashes between the two groups, but soon they began to cooperate with each other, and between 1982 and 1986 both

parties were committed to resisting the Israeli occupation. However, the Communist Party suffered as a result of the fall of the Soviet Union. In addition the Syrian authorities treated it as a militia group that needed to be crushed rather than as a resistance group like Hezbollah deserving support. Consequently its role in the resistance diminished before finally stopping entirely in 1993. As its leadership was keen to resume the party's role in the resistance, it made contact with Hezbollah who accepted their support. This marked a new relationship based on the shared goal of resisting the Israeli occupier and the American "War on terror", which began in Afghanistan in 2001 and continued with the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The Communists did not only participate in resisting the Israeli hostility in 2006 on account of the party's political principles but also out of solidarity with Hezbollah.

Since then, two political coalitions have appeared on the Lebanese political scene, the 14<sup>th</sup> March and 8<sup>th</sup> March alliances. The Communist Party has not joined either. However it is closer to the 8<sup>th</sup> March alliance of which Hezbollah is a member. The 14<sup>th</sup> March alliance is pro-Western, propagates right-wing economic policies, and its government proved to be weak in the face of the Israeli incursion. Prior to the elections of 2009, Hezbollah and the Communist Party effected some negotiations but in the end Hezbollah decided not to see them through, and the Communist Party put forward independent candidates. In the eyes of Hezbollah, the Communist Party goes too far in its comprehensive program for political and socio-economic reform. This includes its claim for the elimination of the confessional regime in order to end sectarianism, which it believes is a threat to Lebanon's stability and sovereignty. Hezbollah and the 8<sup>th</sup> March alliance do not have clear positions on these issues, meaning that ultimately they decided against closer cooperation with the Communists.

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<sup>8</sup> *Member of the leadership of the Communist party, Lebanon*

## The experience of Morocco

*Hamid Bahkak*<sup>9</sup>

Morocco has, like other Arab countries, an Islamist movement comprising a range of ideological and political positions. The two largest and most influential groups are the Party of Justice and Development and the Association for Justice and Beneficence, both of which reject violence and consider Islam to provide a complete social and political framework.

### The Party for Justice and Development

In 1992 an Islamist group called the Movement for Reform and Renewal made a request for legal recognition as a party, which was refused by the regime. However, its members were allowed to join the Popular Democratic and Constitutional Movement under the leadership of Doctor Abdel Karim al Khatib. This party gained 14 seats in the legislative elections of 1997 and changed its name to the Party for Justice and Development the following year. For two years it formed part of Abdel Rahman Al Youssefi's coalition government until a disagreement with the government about the national plan to integrate women in development. In 2002 the party gained 42 seats in the legislative elections. The party has a considerable social and political presence but is still opposed by some groups. The regime for its part refuses on principle to license a religious party, as stated in the Law of Parties of 2005. The Party for National Renewal and the Party of the Ummah were both refused a licence and the Al Badil Al Hadari Party was banned due to its alleged links with a jihadist network. The Party for Justice and Development, on the other hand, was treated as an extension of the Popular Democratic and Constitutional Movement, and its religious

frame of reference is viewed in the same way as that of the Christian Democratic Parties in Europe. However, the party is strictly under surveillance and faced a hostile media campaign after the terrorist attacks in Casablanca. The party has been resourceful and highly pragmatic in the face of these setbacks, showing willingness to modify its political discourse and reduce its rate of candidacy for example. It has also maintained a strict, functional division between the party and the Movement for Unity and Reform so as to avoid any overlap between political and missionary activity.

Following the terrorist acts of May 16, 2003 in Casablanca, which killed 42 people, the expression "exterminators" emerged. It referred to those who believed the Islamists should be refused any type of political participation because they represented a danger to freedom and democracy. Those holding this view believed that the Party for Justice and Development should take responsibility for these acts and be dissolved, as had happened in Tunisia and Algeria. The regime has refused to do this, instead following a policy of cautiously integrating the Islamists. This has the effect of isolating the radical Islamist groups and of conferring religious legitimacy upon the regime. It also means that the Islamists gain political experience in the real world, since ideological slogans are one thing and their implementation quite another.

### The Association for Justice and Beneficence

The Association for Justice and Beneficence is the second most important Islamist group in Morocco. It was founded in the 1980s by Abdessalam Yassine and is very much centered around his charismatic personality. In 1974 he sent a letter to the King advising him as to the best way out of the political crisis the country was undergoing at the time. As a result he was sent to a mental hospital for three years. The association works outside the framework of

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<sup>9</sup> *Researcher at the Centre des études et recherches en sciences sociales (CERSS)*

political participation through education and spiritual activities and has a significant presence in the universities. It believes that true political participation within the Moroccan system would force the association to compromise its true nature. This has arguably been the case with the Moroccan left, particularly the Party of Socialist Unity for the Popular Forces, which paid a high political price after its experience in government. As no group is capable of bringing about change alone, the Association rather advocates for the different Moroccan political opposition groups to work together on a program of reform.

This idea has been received warily though, for a number of reasons: some view it as a political maneuver to end the isolation of the movement; many on the left are dubious about the vague religious reference of the association; the continuing hostility of the regime towards the association means that other groups do not want to invite negative attention by joining forces with it; the great public support behind the group makes the other political groups seem weak by comparison; and the association's criticism of the entire regime rather than just the government alienates those political groups that are currently participating in the political process and its institutions.

### **Prospects for an alliance between Islamists and leftists**

The parties of the left have a number of reservations with regards to making an alliance with the Islamists. In general they view the Islamists as their competitors, used by the regime to keep them in check. They are suspicious of the Islamists' agenda since they generally believe that religion is a matter for the individual and fear that once in power the Islamists may impose their moral and religious programs on all society. For the Islamists that accept democracy, it implies the organization of elections and the rotation of power, applying the Islamic principle of *shura*. For the leftists

though, democracy is a secular principle which cannot coexist with religious thought. Another reason for separation between the two groups is that in both groups the interests of the sect prevail over those of the nation. The internal divisions within each of the two groups are another obstacle for an alliance. Differences within political groups are solved not through dialogue but through the splitting off of new parties, which now number thirty-three. Alliances have not been successful with the exception of significant cooperation on the issues of Palestine and Iraq.

## **Comments**

### **1. The Moroccan Islamists and the left, between enmity and coexistence**

*Ahmad alBooz*<sup>10</sup>

The relationship between the Islamists and the leftists in Morocco has been through three phases:

1. The first phase was characterized by mutual hostility. The Islamists appeared to be colluding with the regime against the leftists. This was a phenomenon in many Arab countries, with perhaps Tunisia being the only exception where the leftists collaborated with the regime against the Islamists.
2. The second phase was one of peaceful co-existence, due to several reasons: the emergence of an Islamist "left"; the desire of Islamist organizations to be active in the open; new ideological references among the left influenced by the French secular model; and the opening up of Moroccan political life from the early 1990s, when the King

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<sup>10</sup> *Media Professor, member of the Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP)*

began to be more interested in making the opposition participate in the country's affairs. This cooperation manifested itself through dialogues in the press and other spaces and through calls from both sides for frank talks.

3. In the third phase, the leftists and the Islamists have worked together in certain areas, as shown for example by the Party for Justice and Development's initial support for the government of the socialist Abdel Rahman Al Youssefi, the leftists allowing the Islamist parties to use their headquarters for their conferences when they were banned from using public halls, and the participation of leftists in the committee campaigning for the release of suspected but entirely unproven jihadists.

Whether the two groups can further their cooperation seems unlikely given the internal divisions within each group and the remaining mutual suspicion. In addition, calls for alliances between them tend to be made as a consequence of circumstances rather than due to political convictions.

## 2. The Islamists and the left in need of dialogue

*Omar Ahrshan*<sup>11</sup>

The leftist and Islamist groups are not homogenous. As both sides lack ideological consistency, some have called for a reclassification of Moroccan political actors. On the left, a distinction can be drawn between the "governmental left" and the "non-governmental left", terms which emerged when Abdel Rahman Al Youssefi was appointed as Prime Minister and leftist parties entered

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<sup>11</sup> *Scholar and member of the Association for Justice and Beneficence*

government for the first time since 1959. The formation of this government divided the left but was also a positive turning point for its relations with the Islamists.

In the social sphere, which is a priority of both groups, there has been greater cooperation between the two sides in recent years. There have also been calls for an alliance between the Party for Justice and Development and the Socialist Union. This desire has been strengthened as a result of the appearance of the state-sponsored Authenticity and Modernity Party. Cooperation has also been encouraged by the struggle for human rights and reform in Morocco, the activity of trade unions and continuing issues of the *ummah*, for example Iraq and Palestine. The only hope for true reform to be realized is if these groups are able to overcome their differences and work together.

## 3. Rapprochement for the municipal elections?

*Abdel Ali Hamieddin*<sup>12</sup>

Hopes that Youssefi's government would herald a new era of democracy have been disappointed: the parties in government accepted the appointment of Idris Jatto, a businessman who did not belong to any party, and the elections of 2007 and 2009 were not truly fair and competitive. The regime has succeeded in giving the superficial appearance of a democracy, while maintaining a monopoly of power through the organization of its institutions. Although the phase of conflict between the left and the Islamists is over there is still no direct political coordination between them, and further efforts must be made to

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<sup>12</sup> *Professor of political science and member of the secretariat general for the party of Justice and Development*

bridge the divide for the sake of democratic reform.

The Party for Justice and Development is a civil political party with an Islamic frame of reference, which believes in democracy. Its priority is public affairs, and it is concerned with questions of politics rather than questions of religion. The regime has been able to polarize elements of the opposition, in an attempt to obfuscate what is truly happening in Morocco, which is a demand for change.

The history of elections in Morocco shows that the state has consistently interfered with their results, while maintaining the appearance of being neutral and democratic.

An analysis of the municipal elections of 2009 reveals:

1. These elections were run according to dubious electoral rules and lacked transparency. The regime was “unable” to abolish the current election laws and ensure the automatic recording of voters’ ID cards as demanded by the opposition. The elections were also characterized by representational inequalities, as 18% of councillors represented 55% of Moroccans, those living in urban centres, with the remaining 45% of Moroccans living in rural areas being represented by 82% of councillors. Ballot boxes were only used in the 92 largest constituencies, i.e. those with more than 35,000 voters. In the remaining 15,000 electoral districts, voters were very much more susceptible to bribes and tribal influence. The government also refused to raise the election threshold for parties from 6% to 10%, as popularly demanded.
2. The victory of the new Authenticity and Modernity Party, formed in 2008 by Fouad Ali El Himma, was controversial and has prompted real fears that this party represents a danger to the

democratic future of Morocco. The party is an alliance of two groups, one an emanation of the state and the other a politically opportunistic faction from the left. The party rejects the characterization as a state party. However there are clear indicators that this is the case. For example the regime remained silent when, in the run-up to the elections, the party exerted great pressure in the name of the King to break up alliances formed by the Party for Justice and Development with other parties.

3. Some rapprochement was made between the Party for Justice and Development and the Socialist Union. Although alliances between the Islamists and the leftists in Morocco are not new, relations between the two parties were tense following calls by a member of the Socialist Party for the dissolution of the Party for Justice and Development after the terrorist acts of May 2003 in Casablanca. However, both sides have expressed willingness for a new phase of cooperation in the struggle for democracy.

The interference of the state in these elections has damaged the little confidence people still had in politics. There is no way to build a true democracy in this country without reviewing the distribution of power and challenging the autocracy of the regime while strengthening the power of the elected institutions. The electoral system is also in need of reform. Perhaps the rapprochement between the Socialist Union and the Party for Justice and Development could be the beginning of a strategic alliance paving the way for a true democratic transformation.

**Why attempts to form political coalitions have failed and some suggestions**

### *Ahmad Bahaeddin Shaaban*

Despite numerous attempts to form coalitions, none have been successful in the long term. The positive aspects of these coalitions tend to regress quickly. Analysts tend to blame the authoritarian nature of the regime and its security apparatus for this phenomenon. This is correct; however it does not explain the peaceful acceptance by the opposition of this situation. There must be organic reasons linked to the structure of these groups that prevent the coalitions from “taking off” and truly confronting oppression.

Most of the parties and factions that have participated in these groups, apart from the Muslim Brothers, have been characterized by structural weaknesses. They have no real presence in the street to transform agreements between the groups into a force of real influence. This means that no attempt at forming a coalition is really able to move beyond the level of the “press conference” or “founding statement”. Other factors contributing to this failure are:

1. the great discrepancy in the balance of power in favor of the Islamists, provoking the consternation of the other parties;
2. an absence of trust between the groups and of serious political will to succeed;
3. a lack of well defined priorities;
4. discrepancy in defining strategic goals and,
5. finally, the tendency among some groups to pay closer attention to their image on the Egyptian street and in the media than to the aims of the coalition.

Serious dialogue should take place between all the groups on the subject of their programmes and priorities and on each one’s vision for working together. These groups must leave their comfort zones behind and move into the sphere of social and political confrontation, showing solidarity with the popular protest movements. Efforts should be made to lay down programmes for dialogue on the points of difference and to eradicate the confusion that exists around them, such as the democratic transformation, women’s rights, concerns of minorities, cultural and intellectual freedoms, and citizenship.

In brief, the sphere of dialogue should be widened so that the concepts of cooperation, partnership and coalition are not restricted to a small minority but extended to other groups and parties. Neutral spaces such as the one offered here can serve to expand the scope of this dialogue.