

In their most euphoric moments, activists who collectively constituted the “Arab Spring” anticipated the rise of *true* democracy in the region. Just a year removed, a broad sense of disillusionment amongst reformists set in on the heels of “failed” efforts to democratize across the region. Simultaneously, other pro-democracy activists across the region celebrated “genuine reforms” in spite of seemingly stalled democratization. What should we, Western analysts, make of these contradictory responses?

This paper explores the possibility that democratic activists in the Middle East and North Africa mobilize different conceptions of democracy than those that we, as Western analysts, typically encounter. Rather than assume continuity across linguistic, religious, and political contexts, I suggest we study how people positioned at the peripheries of the democratic world apprehend and embody democracy. In examining how “democracy” affords marginal actors a foil to situate their actions and politics, we also identify the limits of—and tensions buried in—Western articulations of democracy.

As such, this paper takes a set of Moroccan *islamiyun*—alternatively referred to as “Islamists,” “radicals,” or “fundamentalists”—as its primary interlocutors and asks, what does “democracy” mean? What actions does this group of Moroccan *islamiyun* associate with democracy? Do they consistently connect it to any concepts or traditions (e.g. human rights, Islam)? How do articulations of democracy by Moroccan *islamiyun* encounter and challenge the hegemony of liberal conceptions?

Rather than engage the full range of *islamiyun* active in Moroccan politics, this paper focuses on a very specific set of actors: elite in the Party of Justice and Development (PJD) and its parent organization, the *Mouvement Unité et Réforme* (MUR). Alongside *an-Nahda* in Tunisia and both *al-hurriya wa al-‘adalaah* and *an-nour* in Egypt, the Moroccan PJD is an “Islamist”

party with a track record of electoral success when given the opportunity to compete. In contrast with parties of *islamiyun* across the Arab world, the PJD has competed in relatively free and fair elections since 1997; as a consequence, the PJD has expanded its share of seats in the Moroccan Parliament in every election. As such, elite in the PJD have a longstanding commitment to “playing the game” in the Moroccan arena; this coupled with the regime’s decision to privilege the PJD as the sole *islamiyun* active in formal Moroccan politics, affords PJD elite a unique position vis a vis the idea and practice of democracy.

The PJD’s active participation in Moroccan politics from 1997 onwards also figured prominently into their response to the outbreak of protests in the winter of 2011—coinciding with uprisings around the Arab world. In short, PJD elite typically held an ambivalent relationship with Moroccan protests movements—especially the *Mouvement du 20 Février*, the most efficacious protest movement in Morocco: the PJD elite simultaneously supported the regime and used the groundswell of support for change to call for reform on specific issues. This paper, then, locates the PJD elite in the Moroccan political context and juxtaposes their views of democracy with those of Western analysts—a useful comparison insofar as it is one the PJD elite consistently suggest.¹

Over the course of nineteen months in Morocco—beginning in September 2009 and concluding in August 2011—I was able to conduct interviews with 42 members of the PJD and held “focus groups” with an additional 10 adherents of the PJD. Out of these 52 people, a full 22 were “elite” in the sense that they either served as an MP for the party (11 of my interviewees—six of whom currently hold ministerial posts in the national government) or held a position of national leadership for either the PJD or MUR (11 interviewees). My interviews were grounded in

¹ Several interviewees brought up prominent figures in the Western canon, including Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Locke (e.g. interview with Dr. Abuali Hamieddine, Rabat, February 3, 2011).

“ordinary language interviewing,” which makes three assumptions: first, that “every day words reflect the accumulated wisdom or shared culture of a community;” second, that the meaning of a word is established by its patterns of usage, and; third, that “a word can be used in a variety of different, and sometimes contradictory, ways.”² The attention this approach pays to the ways the meanings of words change made ordinary language interviewing the most appropriate method to procure information about how *islamiyun* imagine and enact democracy.

The PJD elite, perhaps as a function of their position of privilege in Moroccan politics, tend to articulate visions of democracy broadly consonant with those of Western analysts, though with two important caveats. First, the PJD elite is not a homogenous group: several interviewees suggested there was a split in the party at the national level, with the Moroccan Prime Minister (Abdelilah Benkirane) leading one wing and the other headed by Mustafa Ramid (Minister of Justice and Liberties in the current government). While the majority of PJD elite—and lay members—side with Benkirane, I was able to interview a handful of people who work as internal opposition. The elite who constitute the internal opposition often depart from the liberal articulations of democracy expressed by their counterparts and, also parted ways in their active participation in the protests arranged by the *Mouvement du 20 Février*.

Secondly, regardless of their position on intra-party politics, virtually every member of the PJD elite I interviewed departed from Western—and especially liberal—articulations of democracy with regards to what we might, broadly speaking, dub foreign policy. Specifically, PJD elite witness “democracy” as having implications for a state’s domestic *and* foreign policies—elections, freedoms, and rights for a state’s domestic population are inadequate to the establishment of *true* democracy. Thus, interviewees cited French colonial interventions in

² Schaffer, Frederic. 2006. “Ordinary Language Interviewing.” In *Interpretation and Method: Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretive Turn*, eds. Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, pp. 150-160. New York, NY: M.E. Sharpe. Please see pages 151 and 153, respectively.

Morocco, American neo-colonialism in Iraq, Afghanistan, and even NATO involvement in Libya as anti-democratic behavior. Moreover, a state's failure to uphold non-citizens' rights also figured into the discourse of democracy espoused by PJD elite: for example, shortly after the assassination of Osama Bin Laden, a PJD MP remonstrated the US for its lapses in terms of Bin Laden's rights to a fair trial and proper burial and, she contended, that this constituted a lapse in American democracy.³

The linking of democracy to colonial and post-colonial enterprises may be unsurprising and perhaps even banal, but it usefully flushes out post-structuralist criticisms of liberal and minimalist articulations of democracy and, in the spirit of postcolonial theory, highlights the invisibility of the colony in Western discussions of democracy. Specifically, on the one hand, a criticism suggested by Chantal Mouffe (2000) and examined in detail by Keenan (2003) of "democracy"—which Keenan dubs "Rousseau's paradox"—is that in order for a democratic polity to emerge there must be a citizenry. The production of that citizenry is a necessarily autocratic endeavor: however the *demos* is identified, it cannot be by popular consensus. In other words, whether the *demos* is identified by a ruler, a constitution, or the conditions for "democratic deliberation,"⁴ there is necessarily a device that violently—and without consent—removes people from the domain of the *demos*. PJD elite articulations of democracy identify the sites of democracy's Others: Morocco as a French colony, Iraq and Afghanistan as post-colonies, and even the corpse of an erstwhile fugitive. Thus, while it may be that PJD elite's discussions of democracy are hemmed in by their commitments to being "loyal opposition" in the Moroccan political arena, their vision of democracy holds a radical critique of Western articulations of democracy.

³ Interview with Dr. Jamila Moussali, Rabat, May 3, 2011.

⁴ Both Mouffe (2000) and Keenan (2003) formulate this criticism of theorists of "deliberative democracy"—especially in the works of its leading figures, Habermas (e.g. 1994) and Benhabib (e.g. 1996).