

# Women in Morocco: political and religious power

## Women in Morocco: political and religious power

[Meriem El Haitami](#) [1] 31 January 2013

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Whilst women are struggling to gain access to parliament in Morocco, in the religious field they are gaining ground as a legitimate authority. Whether female religious authorities will contribute to the empowerment of Moroccan women in the long-term remains to be seen.

The recent [political upheavals](#) [8] in the Arab world have led to dramatic changes in governance due to the great discontent of people with their authoritarian regimes. In the [Middle East](#) [9] and [North Africa](#) [10], massive populations have chosen Islamic parties as a substitute for the old corrupt systems.

Morocco did [not avoid](#) [11] the turmoil of the Arab spring. A number of angry protests took place in major cities led by the [February 20](#) [12] Social Movement which demanded the right to social equality and democracy and showed discontent with the prevailing corruption. King Mohammed VI swiftly responded by drafting a modified constitution promising more democracy and greater protection of human rights, and by bringing forward parliamentary elections to November 2011. In these elections, the moderate Islamist Party Justice and Development (PJD) accomplished an overwhelming [victory](#) [13], beating the incumbent Istiqlal party which has historic ties to the monarchy.

This revolutionary change in Morocco was marked by women's significant [presence](#) [14] in the struggle for democracy; with their different religious and political orientations, women marched alongside the men and demanded change. Yet the legacy of this appears as yet unclear. The government's attempts to reflect the image of a modern and moderate Islamic party through a respect for women's rights has shown a new will, yet challenges remain.

### Women's political participation in Islamist politics

In Morocco, the Islamist movement includes groups which operate within the political system, like the PJD, and others which operate outside of it, such as the Justice and Charity Islamist group. These two groups do not share the same political agenda. While Justice and Charity is an opposition movement which advocates the transformation of Morocco into an Islamic state, the PJD is officially accepted and endorses the state's political legitimacy. Both groups advocate gender equality and social justice within an Islamic paradigm and allow women opportunities for political participation and leadership.

Nadia Yassine, of Justice and Charity, exhibits the integral role women play within the group. She is not only the spokesperson of the group before Western media, she also founded and directs the women's section which attempts to revive the active role of women in society based on Islamic

teachings. In a number of her talks and writings, [Nadia Yassine](#) [15] depicts Islam as a liberating force which guarantees equality for women, and advocates the importance of re-interpreting Islamic tradition and engaging women in this process.

The [modified Moroccan constitution](#) [16] recognizes gender equality and equal political representation for women. This is something that the government has committed to deliver through women's increased participation in politics, not only as active citizens, but also as parliamentary representatives. For the first time in the history of Morocco, a veiled political figure, Bassima Hakkaoui, has taken over the Ministry of Solidarity, Women, Family, and Social Development. This move is emblematic of the new opportunities created for women by the Arab Spring: the state would simply not have allowed a veiled woman to enter parliament had it not been put under pressure to be democratic.

Yet in spite of these advances, women's inclusion has been scant elsewhere in parliament. Prime Minister Abdelilah Benkirane's ministerial cabinet included only one female minister, Bassima Hakkaoui, as opposed to the former government which included a total of seven women ministers from 2007 to 2011. This has caused unease amongst secular-liberal activists who view this as a decrease in women's political representation.

In an interview, Iman El-Yaacoubi, a member of the PJD, [defended](#) [17] this poor representation by saying that the party "democratically elects its ministers". She also said that "the women of the party participate in these procedures and the appointment of one female minister from our ranks was a democratic choice made by all the members of the party, regardless of gender." She added that "for years our party has had the most female representation in parliament which shows the explicit trust the party has in women, but choosing the ministers has to take into account the ministries the party won and not their gender."

More effort should clearly have been made to strengthen female political representation. Having just one female minister is an indicator of the new government's failure to implement the democratic measures that the new constitution promised. It also undermines the credibility of the changes women can bring to the political scene.

### **Women and religious authority**

Whilst women are struggling to gain access to parliament in Morocco, in the religious field they are increasingly gaining ground as a legitimate authority. Whereas female Islamist activists are politically oriented and use Islam as a political tool to reach power, at another level women religious leaders carve out space for leadership within religious institutions - their work is a form of social activism channeled through the talks they give in mosques, as well as other social and academic activities they engage in.

The role of these female religious leaders is not unproblematic and not without controversy. State-sponsored women scholars are to a great extent a response to the work of Islamist activists. In other words, the state has long endorsed religious reforms to curb the momentum of political Islam. A view prevalent among members of the public is that such measures are an attempt to endorse the authority of the state to control the dynamics of religion in Morocco and to curb voices of individuals or groups that operate outside of the official religious discourse.

In its most recent measures, the Moroccan Ministry of Islamic Affairs has endorsed women's presence and authority in the religious sphere through the training of female religious preachers (*murshidat*) and scholars (*'alimat*). 50 *murshidat* are trained every year to contribute to strengthening the country's 'spiritual security'. The concept of spiritual security emerged in the context of the 2003 [terrorist attacks](#) [18] which took place in Casablanca. The tragic magnitude of this event urged Moroccan authorities to reconsider the state's religious policy, and redefine 'Moroccan Islam', based on four components: The Ash'ari doctrine - a major theological school within Sunni Islam founded by Abu Al-Hasan Al-Ash'ari in 936 AD; the Maliki School of Jurisprudence - one of the four mainstream schools of jurisprudence within Sunni Islam practiced by Muslims in North Africa, West Africa and other parts of the Arab world; endorsing the king's status as the commander of the faithful; and adopting Sufism as the official discourse of Morocco to monitor the transmission

of the religious discourse and thus shift toward a more moderate religious expression.

Since 2003, women have been participating in the Hassaniya Ramadan lecture series, presided over by King Mohammed VI in his royal palace every Ramadan, and attended by members of the government and high-ranking officials and scholars from all over the world. In 2004, local councils opened their doors to 36 women scholars for the first time since independence. Women have been assigned significant responsibilities within the supreme religious council as well as local religious councils, and their responsibilities include offering spiritual counseling and religious instruction to women and girls.

Women are demonstrating a growing interest in religion by attending talks in mosques and study circles in Quranic Institutes (*Dar al-Qur'an*) and university campuses. Gatherings of family and friends also present an opportunity for women to conduct their religious activity. Women have long been active in the domain of religion both in private and public spaces and within informal and more official structures. The novelty of the phenomenon of integrating women within the religious sphere does not therefore separate women's engagement with religion from its socio-historical context, rather it helps identify new ways for women to (re)position themselves, express their religiosity and redefine religious authority.

The Danish Institute for International Studies' most recent [report](#) [19] on Islamic women's activism in the Arab world presents much of the criticism related to the *murshidat* training program. It includes the argument that the *murshidat* program does not represent something new as there have [always](#) [20] been female mosque preachers (*wa'idhat*) who fulfill their preaching tasks in affiliation with local mosques and local religious councils. This, it is posited, renders the program a non-genuine effort which imposes the state's interpretation of 'Moroccan Islam' and legitimizes the authority of the king as the commander of the faithful. This training program is also viewed as a means to polish Morocco's image before Western media, and to reflect the image of a modern and democratic country which endorses women's participation in all spheres and which has succeeded in fighting against terrorism.

Unsurprisingly, the first group of the *murshidat* to graduate comprised a number of candidates who are now affiliated with the PJD and Justice and Charity, and whose current work requires that they commit to the state's policy in relation to religious affairs. This, the report claims, exposes the double purpose the *murshidat* serves for a King wanting to placate both the West and the rapidly growing Islamic movement.

Despite the limitations which undoubtedly throw into question the legitimacy of these female religious authorities, they may yet hold the potential of contributing to the social welfare of communities both in urban and rural settings. Female participants carve out space for leadership, reshuffle public and religious spaces, and negotiate the dynamics of social structures. These women embrace the state's definition of Moroccan Islam, but their real impact lies in their grass-roots work. Through their participation in the religious domain, they define a new model of activism which aims at contributing to social reform by spreading religious values through the different activities they carry out in mosques and other settings. These female religious authorities articulate the importance of reviving Islamic thought and reconsidering religious texts in order to promote new roles for women.

The new religious authorities have already succeeded in attracting a broad following across different social classes, as opposed to women's rights groups who have a more limited outreach. Although these women's rights groups have undoubtedly had an [influential impact](#) [21] on the socio-political changes in Morocco, including the battle to reform family laws, which led to introducing the [modified family code](#) [22] in 2004, female religious authorities seem to be having a more influential role in promoting the rights of Muslim women. They are proving more accepted by the masses because they are seen to represent the voice of moderate Moroccan Islam, and have easier access to different settings because of their official status.

The long-term impact these female religious authorities have on the wider community and the extent to which they contribute to the empowerment of Moroccan women remains to be seen. Meanwhile, we cannot lose sight of political power: we also need more women in Parliament.

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