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Islam, National Identity and Social Cohesion : The Case of Morocco

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Why does the secularisation theory, which argues that religion ceases to be significant in societies that have undertaken a process of modernization and democratization, fail to explain why religion remains predominant or even gains salience in some states despite a modernization and industrialization process? This thesis takes Morocco as a case study to provide a theoretical explanation: countries where religion defines national identity and is perceived as a guarantee for social and cultural cohesion, are unlikely to secularize.

The first chapter of the thesis provides the theoretical framework around which the major arguments of the thesis are conceptualized. It exposes the major ideas put forward by Charles Taylor, Rajeev Bhargava and Mohammed Abed El Jabri about religion-state relationship and secularisation and then explains the functionalist view of religion as a source of solidarity and social cohesion in society.

The second chapter deals with the formation of national identity around the religious referent at the eve of the independence from the French protectorate in 1956. The chapter first gives a historical background of the socio-political landscape prior to and during colonialism in order to first, expose the tensions that divided different political and social actors about religious legitimacy in the country, second, explain how French colonialism's divide-and-rule strategy exacerbated religious and nationalist resentment, especially through the 1930 Berber decree that aimed at dividing Arabs and Berbers, and third, show how the nationalist movement constructed its struggle for independence based on religious unity and the preservation of the Islamic national identity.

The third chapter is concerned with the way Monarchy aimed at decontextualizing political Islam in order to continuously reaffirm itself as the sole and unique religious actor in the country. Monarchy's moderate Islam was used as a strategy to counter the leftist opposition that emerged right after the independence, and the threat of Islamic fundamentalism that emerged since the sixties and which culminated with the terrorist attacks in Casablanca in 2003. The chapter first gives a historical and ideological background of the emergence of Moroccan Islamism with its different forms and then exposes the major strategies put in place by the Moroccan government to counter this threat and preserve its legitimacy. The aim of the chapter is to argue that Monarchy aimed at monopolizing the religious sphere in order to, first, strengthen its legitimacy and, second, jeopardize the power of radicalism and fundamentalism, perceived in the Moroccan consciousness as a threat to political and social stability.

Finally, the fourth chapter Islam aims at explaining how religion is strongly entrenched in the Moroccan public sphere. First, it is question of the Islamic notion of « Ria'ya » (protection) which extends the concepts of moral duty and responsibility for an individual beyond himself and confers to each Muslim the duty of following the Islamic instructions when managing his own life, his entourage's life and the conduct of public affairs, which leads to an inevitable and continuous influence of religion both in the public and the private spheres. Second, the chapter explains how Islam has been instrumentalised in Moroccan foreign relations, especially with regards to the Palestinian cause, in order to build the image of a Muslim country that actively contributes to the well-being of the Islamic Ummah (community) as a whole. Finally, it is question of Islamic feminism, through which several Moroccan female thinkers have fought in order to enhance women condition in Morocco by preconizing the return to the original liberating message of Islam and the abandon of the historical tradition of partriarchal society in Morocco.