*Islamism in Mauritania and the narrative of political moderation**

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ABSTRACT

The rise of Islamism following the Arab Spring has renewed interest in the democratic credibility of Islamist parties and movements. Focusing on the case of Mauritania's Islamists this article analyses the validity of the moderation hypothesis and argues that for some Islamist parties, moderation, when historically situated, has always been a key trait. The case of Mauritanian Islamism is interesting because it takes place within an intellectual and geographical place that straddles both the Arab world and sub-Saharan Africa, therefore providing insights on how Islamism has become an influential ideological framework in both worlds, that are much less separate than superficially believed.

INTRODUCTION

According to some commentators (Stott & Nakhoul 2012), the Arab Spring quickly gave way to an 'Islamist Winter' (Totten 2012) or an

Arab 'Winter', as the hopes for regional democratisation faded quickly. The pessimism surrounding political change in the region is due to three factors. First of all, a number of regimes have remained authoritarian, as is the case in Algeria, Jordan, Mauritania, Sudan and the Gulf States. Second, other countries – Yemen, Libya and Syria – are engulfed in civil conflicts that render null their prospects of democracy. Finally, in countries where there are new political pluralistic institutions, the immediate beneficiaries have been Islamist parties. This has provoked international and domestic unease, leading to an authoritarian backlash, as the case of Egypt illustrates. For many analysts the rise of Islamism poses a significant problem because Islamists are still perceived as inherently anti-democratic and illiberal in addition to being incompetent once in government (M'Rad 2013). The high hopes of the Arab Spring were pinned upon the fact that the demands of the protesting crowds seemed in line with a secular, liberal and democratic political project; a sort of Arab 1989 (Kaldor 2011). Islamist electoral victories dampened such enthusiasm amidst the return of old debates about the democratic commitment and credibility of Islamists.

Discussions about Islamism and Islamist parties abound in the literature on Arab politics, and increasingly, African politics (Haynes 2006; Solomon 2013). Within this literature it is acknowledged that 'Islamists is a term used for highly diverse political actors who, in varying ways, find the blueprint for social, moral political and economic reform in the teachings of the Islamic faith' (Schwedler 2011: 349), but the focus here is on those movements that have transformed into political parties and participate in institutional politics. Much of the recent work follows a broad narrative whereby Islamist parties and movements are no longer the radical and highly ideological parties of the past, having mutated into catch-all parties at ease with the mechanisms of democracy (Hamid 2011; Wright 2011; Brown 2012; Karakaya & Yildirim 2013), while retaining illiberal conservative views on many social issues (Fuller 2004; Hamid 2014). Using the case of Islamists in Mauritania, this article attempts to challenge some of the assumptions of this narrative. While some radical Islamist parties have indeed moved from their highly ideological and anti-democratic positions of the past towards the validation of democratic mechanisms, many others do not fit the narrative of progressive moderation because it can be argued that they were 'moderate' to begin with if one takes into account the time, space and environment within which they operated. The principal narrative of the literature on moderation is that the Islamist parties of today are notably different from the past, having

evolved considerably in respect to their positions on democracy and human rights. Many studies indicate that Islamists are now genuinely committed to democratic mechanisms, are not beholden to the idea of implementing a strict version of *sharia* and, more generally, have realised the importance of defending and promoting human rights (Hill 2011). This should not suggest that they do not hold illiberal views on a number of issues ranging from women's rights to minority rights, but significant political shifts have occurred. Such shifts are perceived to be the product and, at the same time, the evidence of ideological moderation; a type of moderation that has led them to create cross-ideological coalitions, engage against authoritarian rule and even attempt to generate sympathy for their cause in Western capitals (Girod & Walters 2012). The problem with this type of narrative is that it produces a very stark temporal categorisation of Islamism that finds only partial empirical confirmation in the case of Mauritania. It is in no doubt that some Islamist parties and movements have over time changed their positions on a number of important issues, such as human rights and democracy. The 2005 study by El-Ghobashy on the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood is paradigmatic in this sense as are some studies of the Palestinian Hamas (Mishal & Sela 2001). However, what is true for them might not necessarily apply across the board to all Islamists.

With notable exceptions (Ould Mohamed 1994, 2001; Pazzanita 1997, 1999; Ould Ahmed Salem 2007; Jourde 2007a; Ojeda Garcia 2009; Foster 2011), the case of Mauritania is often understudied and its Islamist movements very rarely appear in comparative works (Thurston 2012), although Ould Ahmed Salem (2013) recently published an impressive analysis of the multi-faceted nature of Islamism in the country, in which he also tackled specifically the question of the absence of radicalism in the discourse and praxis of Islamist reformists in the country (2013: 106). There are reasons for this neglect. Mauritania is not an economic power-house, it is not strategically central to the Arab–Israeli conflict, it does not seem to have a particularly difficult post-colonial relationship with France, it is not very relevant for the EU as a trading partner and it suffers from being at the scholarly crossroad between the Arab world and African studies. This reading however would be quite superficial because the politics of Mauritania represent an interesting distillation of Arab politics as well as a synthesis of the complexity of African politics, including for instance ethnic and linguistic cleavages. In recent years, Mauritania went through a short-lived political transition to an embryonic plural political system in 2006 (Hochman 2007; Zisenwine 2007; Aghrout 2008; Ojeda Garcia

& Lopez Bargados 2012) and experienced two military coups, one in 2005 and the other in 2008 (Manning 2005; Jourde 2007b, 2008; Zounmenou 2009). As do other Arab countries, and an increasing number of African countries (Otayek & Soares 2009), it hosts all sorts of different Islamist groups and faces significant economic difficulties that undermine political stability. Finally, the war on terror has placed the country near the top of the international security agenda (Jourde 2011a; Larémont 2011). In a context where Islamism is on the rise both in the Arab world and sub-Saharan Africa, focusing on the historical development of Islamism in the country (Ould El-Bara 2004; International Crisis Group 2005) can provide useful empirical evidence to illustrate how the narrative of progressive Islamist moderation hides the fact that, when placed in its own time-specific historical and political context, such moderation, understood largely as acceptance of democratic procedures and fundamental liberal rights, was a trait of many Islamists for a rather long time.

Challenging the narrative of moderation has considerable importance at a time when Islamist political parties and figures across the Arab world and Africa (Green *et al.* 2014) have begun to participate directly in institutional politics and, in some cases, acceded to power through the ballot box (Sela 2015). Analysing how they 'got there' might therefore contribute to shed light on how they govern and behave in pluralistic settings (Boubekeur 2016). Islamism, in all its complexity and variations, is still central to political life and this article is an addition to the post-Spring literature on it, as it examines a narrative of moderation that has become a political instrument and a measuring yardstick for both supporters and critics of Islamist parties.

THE MODERATION NARRATIVE

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Islamist movements were analysed in the context of the potential democratisation of the region, leading scholars to discuss their commitment to democratic politics or absence thereof. Thus, there exist numerous studies looking at Islamist movements as potential facilitators or potential spoilers of democratisation (Mortimer 1996; Ghadbian 1997; Robinson 1997). Many of these studies questioned the democratic credibility of Islamists for a number of reasons: a widespread belief that Islam and democracy were not compatible; the perception that democracy was simply an instrument through which they would get to power to then install an authoritarian

theocracy; and the conviction that they were too illiberal on matters related to fundamental rights such as gender quality or respect for minorities (Lewis 2002; Mozaffari 2007). Other scholars focused on the views of important Islamist intellectual figures to demonstrate their anti-democratic views (Belen-Soage 2008, 2009). Those who argued against such a negative view of Islamists did so by emphasising that from a theological point of view there was no incompatibility between Islam and political pluralism and that therefore the politicisation of religion did not necessarily constitute an obstacle to democracy. Paradoxically it could in fact be of help to its instauration by undermining incumbent authoritarian ruling elites (Esposito 2002).

Throughout the 2000s, the debate on Islamism and Islamist parties changed because the wider intellectual context within which Arab politics was framed had abandoned the assumptions of democratisation (Carothers 2002; Anderson 2006; Hinnebusch 2006) to focus instead on the notion of upgraded authoritarian rule (Heydemann 2007). The various strands of Islamism feature prominently within this literature and the focus is usually on how most movements progressively changed their most radical positions to embrace, at least rhetorically, the concepts of democracy and human rights, in addition to modifying their actual behaviour by entering into cross-ideological cooperative agreements with non-Islamist opposition forces (Browers 2007; Clark 2010). This vast literature builds largely on Olivier Roy's work (1992). Roy had pointed to the failure of political Islam as an ideological project alternative to the dominant values of liberal-democracy and had suggested that Islamists would inevitably bend to its requirements.

In any case, the main narrative through which mainstream Islamist parties are examined is one of progressive moderation (Schwedler 2006) and the different ways in which such moderation occurs (Clark 2006; Schwedler 2011). The principal explanation for moderation is that increased political participation into consensual 'institutions' leads to the moderation of the demands of Islamists. As the political systems of which they are part democratise, Islamist parties moderate to such an extent that they will finally reject the label 'Islamist' and employ terms such as 'Muslim democrats' (Ghannouchi 2016). Thus, through continued interaction and cooperation with other political actors, they learn to moderate their stances on a number of issues, most notably the acceptance of democratic politics and fundamental liberal rights. Islamist thinkers who had written about the compatibility between Islam and democracy or Islam and human rights are therefore 'brought back' to the political fore to impress upon Islamist activists that

democracy is now the objective to be achieved. This is the case of scholars/political leaders such as Rachid Ghannouchi or Abdessalam Yassine (Ali Abdelkader 2011). In short, moderation is about toning down highly ideological anti-democracy rhetoric and clearly illiberal policy prescriptions in favour of pragmatic choices leading to or reinforcing pluralist institutions and political rights.

Two types of studies have emerged within this broader frame. On the one hand, we have single-case analyses dealing with the 'progressive moderation' of specific Islamist parties such as the Turkish AKP, the Moroccan PJD, the Egyptian Brotherhood or the Tunisian al-Nahda (El-Ghobashy 2005; Allani 2009; Wegner 2011; Gurses 2014). On the other, there are studies comparing the path towards moderation of Islamist parties with the one that other radical parties travelled in the past, such as the communist parties of Western Europe (Karakaya & Yildirim 2013). In this context radicalism refers to the emphasis on practices and policies that derive from strict ideological tenets that need to be enforced even against the will of the majority to the detriment of both democratic procedures and liberal rights. The broad theoretical assumption is that this type of radicalism can be moderated through electoral inclusion where democracy exists and through cross-ideological and cross-party cooperation in opposition where authoritarianism exists. It should be mentioned here that there exists an alternative explanation for moderation in the literature on Islamist parties: state repression. By preventing the political participation of Islamists through repression, the state signals that their attitude towards democracy and pluralism has to change. Repression then leads Islamists to moderate their stances if they genuinely want to take part in institutional politics (Dalacoura 2006). In some cases, such as the one for the Tunisian Islamists of al-Nahda, this seems to make superficial sense, although Cavatorta & Merone (2013) demonstrated that repression in reality simply delayed a process of moderation that had already begun within al-Nahda autonomously from state repression.

There are two important points worth taking into consideration when accepting the path towards moderation of Islamist parties as the principal narrative of political Islam. First, it should be highlighted that the supposed path towards moderation implies its original absence. While this might be true for some movements and parties, it might not be the case for many others, as their supposed conversion to the politics of moderation never occurred because it was already built in when they were first set up, particularly if one considers that the meaning of both democracy and human rights – key features of moderation – has been

constantly evolving over time. Thus, the accountable and democratic political system they might have had in mind in the past is in conflict with its contemporary understanding, but this is also true for many other political formations of different ideological persuasions across the globe, in so far as essentially contested concepts such as democracy have to be examined in time-specific historical contexts. In short, the concept and practice of moderation has to be historically located. A deeper examination of Islamist movements might reveal that 'moderation' was always one of their founding traits when such a historical perspective is taken into account. Where their original 'moderation' comes from may vary from movement to movement and has to do with factors such as leadership, social basis or institutional context. What is crucial to highlight though is that accountability of rulers and respect for pluralism – key aspects of moderation – need not be 'imported' values or practices learnt through inclusion, but might be inherent to the rhetoric and practice of the movement. Second, the current understanding of moderation implies acceptance of 'foreign' norms by indigenous Islamist actors that without their 'contamination' with the global, modern and democratic world would not be able to adhere to democratic principles and basic human rights. This is a Western-centric view, which excludes the possibility that genuine democratic aspirations can be developed indigenously. This is clearly not the case, as heated debates on how to rule in Muslim societies have taken place for a very long time among intellectuals and political leaders (Browers 2006, 2009). Thus, it cannot be excluded that from the start, some Islamist movements might have wished to marry Islamism with democracy as conceptualised at the time. This is very much the case, for instance, of scholars and activists such as Malek Bennabi (Walsh 2007) or Rachid Ghannouchi (Tamimi 2001).

THE MULTIPLE FACETS OF ISLAMISM IN MAURITANIA

Like other countries in both the Arab world and Africa, Mauritania has had a tumultuous political history, fluctuating between periods of authoritarianism – often – and periods of partial liberalisation – rarely (Clausen 2001; Mint Ainina 2001). In 2012, the country was classified as having a 'restrictive hegemonic authoritarianism' (Szmolka 2011: 21). Specifically, the military is the main decision-maker (Marty 2002; N'Diaye 2006). However, Mauritania also experienced its own Spring starting in early 2011 in the form of widespread protests against the

regime. Formally, Mauritania has a French-style semi-presidential system, but, given the power of the military, the reality of Mauritania, following the theory of the African 'big man' (Van de Walle 2003), is that its system is much closer to a pure presidential one where presidents enjoy vast executive powers because they are generally members of the military or enjoy their army's support.

The country has only known two years of difficult and contested liberalisation: from 2006 until 2008 (Jourde 2008). In March 2007 free and fair presidential elections, at least according to the European Union (EU), took place and Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi was elected (MOE UE 2007). This period of political liberalisation, although rife with difficulties, allowed the country to enjoy a degree of economic support from the EU, while the Mauritanian military promised to also support these liberalising efforts, which ultimately permitted the country to hold pluralistic elections and find itself in a process of an admittedly volatile transition to democracy (Zisenwine 2007). Despite its promise to stay out of politics, in August 2008 the army once again intervened in the political process to depose Abdallahi. The new *putschiste* President Ould Abdel Aziz blamed the inability of the elected government for the coup, suggesting that under President Abdallahi there were both institutional chaos due to party fragmentation and widespread ineffectiveness in tackling the country's social and economic problems due to corruption and governmental infighting. In some ways the army's reading was correct. For example, the coalition of independents (the National Pact for Development and Democracy) that was supposed to support Abdellahi in Parliament broke up quite rapidly and the president ended up losing its parliamentary majority (Bensaad 2008). Once in power, Ould Abdel Aziz organised new presidential elections for July 2009, but the electoral process was a sham. In the wake of the Arab Spring the regime faced reasonably strong popular opposition.

It is within this context that Islamism has developed in the country. As in the rest of the Arab world and increasingly in Africa, in Mauritania Islamists feature prominently on the public scene where they have been a constant presence over the last four decades with the Brotherhood tendency representing the majority and the Wahabi/ Salafist tendency being minoritarian (see Table I). The complexity of the Islamist landscape in the country is an important aspect of the discussion on moderation in so far as over the last two decades the violence and ideological extremism of groups such as the GSPC-AQIM helped non-violent Islamists project an image of adherence to democratic procedures, respect for pluralism and individual rights. In short,

T ABLE I.
Islamist movements and parties

NAME	LEGAL STATUS		IDEOLOGY			NATURE				RELATION WITH GOVERNMENT		TYPE OF ACTION		
	LEGAL	ILLEGAL	MB	W/S	PREACHERS	MOV	ASO	TER	PAR	OPPOSITION	SUPPORT	REACTIVE	NON-VIOLENT	COOPERATIVE
Jamaat Islamiyya		X	X			X					X (82–84, HAIDALLAH)	Y	Y	Y
Jihad of Mauritania Organisation		X		X		X				X		N	N	N
Mauritanian Islamist Movement-Hasim (1)		X	X			X				X		Y	Y	Y
UMMA		X	X			X				X		N	Y	Y
Party of Democratic Convergence (PDC)	X (SINCE 2010)		X						X	X		Y	Y	Y
Jamaat al-Dawa wa Tabligh	X (SINCE 1991)				X		X						Y	
National Regrouping for Reform and Development, Tawassoul	X (O7)		X						X	X	X (08, Abdallahi)	Y	Y	Y
AQMI		X		X				X		X		Y	N	N
Al-Hizb Al-Islami	X (SINCE 1991)			X		X				X		Y	Y	

Source: Authors
Y_ Yes; N = No
MB: Muslim Brotherhood; W/S: Wahabiste/Salafiste; MOV = Movement; ASO = Association; TER = Group Terrorist; PAR = Party

moderation is not only historically contingent, but also relative to the discourse and practices of other actors operating in the same environment.

The empirical evidence for the arguments made here regarding the narrative of moderation is already largely available in the literature on Mauritanian Islamism, but it is here updated and treated in a novel manner in order to reflect more broadly on the conceptual and political limits of subscribing to the dominant understanding of the moderation of Islamism.

The resurgence of Islamist politics outside the control of the state dates back to the 1970s and the development of Islamist activism follows similar lines to the ones found in the rest of the region: it is connected to rising personal religiosity, increasing social welfare provision through Islamist charities, re-affirmation of Arab identity and dissatisfaction with state-sponsored modernising policies (Hames 1994; International Crisis Group 2005; Jourde 2011a, b). The first organised Islamist movement in the country, the *Jamaat Islamiyya*, was established in 1974 as a social movement influenced by the thinking of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and therefore dedicated mostly to providing religious education and exercising its influence on religious affairs (Ould Ahmed Salem 2007). With respect to its political attitudes, the movement opposed the Mauritanian military and was favourable to the implementation of *sharia* law, its key demand. Despite its opposition to the ruling regime, the movement never espoused violence to overthrow it and preferred to focus on its social and educational activism. The choice of non-violence might have to do with the desire to avoid repression, but might also indicate an adherence to an agenda for political change based on integration into the political and institutional system of the country. In any case the movement was never legalised. It is interesting, however, to note that this group supported President Haidallah, who came to power in 1980. He implemented *sharia* law in the country and partially Islamised the state (Ould Ahmed Salem 2007). The decision to support President Haidallah simply because of his decision to make *sharia* the sole source of legislation was not acceptable to some within the movement because it overlooked the fact that Haidallah was a member of the military establishment and therefore not only an authoritarian leader, but one who was also responsible for the poor state of the country. This criticism towards Haidallah and towards the leadership of the movement led to the creation of a break-away group called *Hasim* (Harakat al Siyasiyya al Islamiyya fi Muritaniyya, the Mauritanian Islamist Movement) and indicates that accountable if not democratic governance was already important for

many Islamist activists in the early 1980s (Jourde 2007a: 103; Ould Ahmed Salem 2013: 184). *Hasim* remained an illegal organisation, which continued its educational work outside political institutions without espousing political violence (Thurston 2012: 6). The establishment of *Hasim* is a crucial step in the development of Islamist politics in Mauritania because one of its leaders was Mohamed Jemil Ould Mansour, who would later be the founder of Tawassoul, the most important Islamist political party in today's Mauritania.

If we were to attempt to trace the idea of progressive political moderation in the case of many early Mauritanian Islamists, it would be difficult to say how they might have changed over time. The two examples above contradict the assumption of political transformation and progressive moderation, pointing instead to the demands and stances of both the *Jamaat* and *Hasim* as being similar since the mid-1970s. *Hasim* in particular seemed to be quite aware of the necessity to achieve political goals such as the implementation of *sharia* through pluralistic decision-making mechanisms rather than through compromise with an authoritarian regime (International Crisis Group 2005). This discussion over means and ends within the *Jamaat* is what led to an internal split and the creation of *Hasim*.

It is important to underline that such discussions regarded only a very small number of activists and intellectuals, making it very difficult to associate diverging views about democratic procedures, compromises with the authoritarian regime or the institutional and legal transformations Mauritania might have needed with large movements. In many ways there were no large Islamist movements at the time and the Islamist camp was divided due to competing ideological influences (Ould Ahmed Salem 2013: 7). Nevertheless debates among Islamists at the time influenced subsequent developments. The trend towards demanding political participation and representation resurfaced in 1991 when the Mauritanian regime partially opened up the political system. The introduction of multi-party politics was one instrument through which many authoritarian regimes attempted to renew their legitimacy both locally and internationally; Mauritania was no different. The president created a regime's political party that became the dominant actor and also legalised a few other parties to give the impression of an impending transition to democracy, which never materialised (Bonte & Guillaume 1994; Dupraz & Gaouad 1996; Pazzanita 1996). Many believed that the opening up of the system was genuine. *Hasim*, for instance, at the time created a political party to participate in elections, but the party was refused legalisation. Another prominent Islamist and

preacher involved in education, Mohamed Ould Sidi Yahya, wanted to unify the different Islamist groups and associations in a political party that could also compete in the multi-party elections that were going to be held. Sidi Yahya therefore worked to federate Islamists of different political and social persuasions and created the *Umma* party. The intention was to seek legalisation, but the regime refused. It follows that this federative experiment ended quickly because the illegal status of the party encouraged many of its members and leaders to retreat into social activism (Ould Cheikh 1994; Pazzanita 1999). As Jourde (2007a: 109) states, 'they [Islamist leaders] always played by the rules of the game and they were not radicals, as the regime portrayed them'. A similar point is made by Ould Ahmed Salem (2007: 50) who argues that 'Mauritanian religious leaders have been often law-abiding'. Seeking legalisation for the setting up of an Islamist party was a way for what could effectively be called 'proto-movements'[1] to challenge the rigidity of tribal structures and overcome considerable social divisions in the name of a wider and shared identity.

Having witnessed the capacity of Sidi Yahya and the Islamists to come to an agreement and establish party structures, the regime decided against legalisation for fear of an Algerian scenario and initiated a strong repressive campaign. What is important to underline here is once again the demands for participation and representation coming from the majority of the Islamist camp, however small, indicating that Islamists had come to terms with the idea of political pluralism and democratic procedures. In Mauritania, large swathes of political Islam have repeatedly demanded inclusion in the political system and therefore might qualify for the adjective 'moderate' since the beginning of their activism. Of course, demands for inclusion do not equate with moderation because the fear of many is that inclusion of Islamists could lead to their domination of the political system, which would eventually end with the instauration of a religion-based authoritarian regime. In short, the problem was, and still is, about what Islamists would do once in power (Netterstrøm 2015). This fear is certainly legitimate, but, as Brumberg (2002) convincingly argued, it is quite pointless to second-guess Islamists *a priori*. While permission to create a political party might not be an indicator of subscription to democratic ideals, it is indicative of the willingness to participate in institutional politics. This in turn has a constraining effect on how the party might then behave because it signals acceptance, however passive, of the rules of the game, which then become difficult to overthrow without losing credibility. In any case, the repression following the establishment of *Umma* was

carried out in the name of anti-extremism. This came, paradoxically and unsurprisingly, from a regime that did not want to cede power and therefore had an interest in representing Islamists as extremist and radical when in fact *Umma* simply took up the demands that movements like *Hasim* had made in previous decades. In many ways, the repression of radicalism and extremism was nothing but the attempt to eliminate political opposition, whether extremist or not (Jourde 2007b).

Following the failure of *Umma* due to state repression, some members joined a different political party while others went on to create civil associations such as *Jamaat al-Dawa wa Tabligh*. The *Jamaat al-Dawa wa Tabligh* was legalised in 1991 and therefore offered the opportunity to militants to remain somewhat faithful to their Islamist engagement without raising suspicions from the authorities because the association was keen to distance itself from political life. As Ould Ahmed Salem (2007: 52) argues, 'Mauritania's Islamism redeployed in favour of *dawa*'. In some ways, charitable and educational activities became the only way through which Islamism could operate, indicating that the authorities were willing to tolerate social Islam, but not the political one (Peter & Ortega 2012).

The retreat into society lasted until 2003 when Cheikh Ould Horma and Ould Mansour set up the Party of Democratic Convergence (PDC), whose objective was again to provide political representation for Mauritanian Islamists. The opportunity to set up this new party came about because of the institutional weakness of President Ould Taya (Bensaad 2008). The PDC was established along the traditional lines of Muslim Brotherhood's reformism, which implied that it accepted and encouraged the procedures of democracy, a valence issue for the party. The PDC also made it clear that it rejected violence to change the political system. Despite these assurances, the PDC was not legalised and therefore could not run a candidate in the presidential elections and decided instead to support former president Haidallah. However the sitting president undermined Haidallah's bid because it had him arrested and only released him from jail the day before the contest (Bonte 2003). After the elections, the PDC had a change of heart about supporting Haidallah because he did not perform well, scoring a modest 18·7% (Ojeda Garcia 2009), although it should be highlighted that the opposition argued that widespread electoral fraud had taken place. The PDC leadership did not focus much on vote rigging, preferring to re-evaluate the amount of support they had in society. Their support for Haidallah did not help the candidate achieve a respectable score. While this was largely down to the

authoritarian nature of the electoral process, the party also began to question why their calls to vote for Haidallah seemed to fall on deaf ears. Thus, following the elections, the party surprisingly switched its support to the parties representing the usually discriminated against black Mauritanian community. Having won the presidential race with 67% of the votes and therefore strengthened his position, President Ould Taya initiated a new wave of repression against the political opposition (Ould Mohamedou 2007). While all opponents of the regime were targeted, the Islamists were singled out for the harshest repression in an already repressive context that had begun in the aftermath of 9/11. The policy of denial of official recognition for Islamist parties continued, their newspapers and magazines were shut down and many militants were imprisoned. The leadership of the PDC decided to lay low and 'weather the repression' (Thurston 2012). After 2005, the repression diminished and PDC leader Ould Mansour began to work on another political project: the creation of Tawassoul, an Islamist party capable of challenging the regime. In order to tap into the less-politicised religious constituencies, he built an alliance with Ould Dedew, who is considered the 'spiritual patron of Tawassoul'. Ould Dedew is a scholar and a Muslim Brotherhood activist who enjoys a significant degree of popularity among religious Mauritanians. Ould Dedew has for quite some time defended the idea that democracy and Islam are absolutely compatible.[2] The timing of this new political project coincided with a second attempt at political democratisation in the country. In August 2005 President Ould Taya was overthrown in a military coup and the junta replacing him promised to hand power to a civilian, democratically elected government. The promise was kept and a new constitutional text was introduced by referendum in June 2006. In November of the same year both local and legislative elections were held. The legislative elections were quite important because they saw the participation of Islamist candidates, although they ran as independents because no Islamist party had been legalised at this time (MOE UE 2007). Islamists decided to take part in the electoral process because they believed that the transition was genuine. The all-important presidential elections were held in March 2007 and Abdallahi, who was sponsored by the military, won the contest. He received 24·79% of votes in the first round with his nearest opponent Ould Daddah, leader of the socialist Coalition of Democratic Forces, taking 20·68%. In the run-off Abdallahi obtained 52·85% of the votes, defeating Ould Daddah. It is interesting to note that the Islamists did not field a candidate in the presidential elections, preferring instead to support the socialist

candidate Ould Daddah or the black candidate of the descendants of former slaves (*haratines*), Ould Boulkheir.

Two conflicting reasons can be given for the reluctance of the Islamists to field a candidate. First, mindful of the Algerian scenario of the early 1990s, they were afraid that a good score on the part of an Islamist candidate would trigger a repressive reaction on the part of the military, thus ending this second attempt at democratisation (Brown 2012). Second, the Islamist-sponsored candidate in the 2003 elections had not performed very well (Ould Ahmed Salem 2009: 57) and at the legislative elections of 2006 only a handful of Islamist independents gained seats (Aghrout 2008). Thus, in order to avoid a potentially embarrassing low vote, the Islamist leadership decided to support Ould Daddah in an attempt to become part of the winning coalition. These two explanations are in opposition to each other in so far as the first one is built on the over-estimation of the Islamist vote while the second one underestimates it, but both can be deemed the product of strategic and pragmatic thinking. What is important is that the decision not to field a candidate in the presidential elections was not due to an ideological opposition to the procedures of democracy, but to strategic considerations that all parties and movements made at specific points in time through a very rational calculation of costs and benefits. Again, this attitude problematises the concept of moderation that the literature uses to analyse the political development and the policy changes that Islamists go through, because it indicates that there has been no real moderation in so far as this behaviour was consistent with their long-standing attitude towards participatory politics. The participation in cross-ideological coalitions and the support for a socialist candidate also suggest a commitment to democratic procedures that is not simply self-serving. As Ould Mansour has more recently repeated, the 'choice to support democracy is strategic and not tactical',[3] indicating strongly that it comes from a tradition of commitment to pluralistic politics.

Following on from his election Abdellahi decided to continue on the path of democratisation and legalised Tawassoul (Ould Hamed 2008) with the 'blessing' of Ould Dedew who, as mentioned earlier, had always insisted on the necessity to combine democracy and Islam. The possibility to operate legally for the first time allowed the party to better sharpen its political positions with respect to the state of the country. Generally speaking, the party and its leader Ould Mansour stayed away from heavily influenced religious rhetoric and demands, preferring instead to concentrate on presenting the party as a defender

of democracy and human rights, proposing for instance a bill against slavery.[4] The stance against slavery in Mauritania on the part of an Islamist party is very important, as it contributes to dispel the myth – both domestically and internationally – that slavery in the country is inextricably bound up with Islam. The priorities of Tawassoul in the period 2007/2008 were the consolidation of national unity in order to fully allow Mauritania to exit its authoritarian period while maintaining national solidarity between different social groups as well as strengthening democratic mechanisms.[5] As Ould Mansour stated very clearly, 'Islam should be seen as a factor that brings people together and the party is therefore against the slavery state.'[6] In order to achieve these objectives the party was willing to join the government, although this did not ultimately occur apart from a very brief period at the end of the Abdellahi presidency in May 2008. Despite his liberalising reforms, the Abdallahi presidency was tainted with corruption and marred by its inability to deal with Mauritania's economic problems. The entry of both Islamists and socialists in his government in May 2008 further alienated an already disgruntled military, which Abdellahi had tried to marginalise. Following a tried and tested tradition, the military intervened once again in the political life of the country and carried out a military coup in August 2008 and some Islamist leaders entered into the national unity government that was formed in the aftermath – Mokhtar Ould Mohamed Moussa became Minister of Islamic Affairs and Education, for instance.

The new leader, General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, promised new presidential elections under pressure from the international community. The contest took place in July 2009. During the 11 months that elapsed between the military coup and the new elections, Tawassoul complained at first forcefully about the military coup and then attempted to come to terms with the new strong man once it became clear that Abdel Aziz was indeed going to call for new presidential elections for which the party could field a candidate (AVOMM 2009). The initial strong opposition to the military coup occurred for two main reasons. First, the party and its leader had for a long time campaigned for political participation and were therefore extremely wary of a military coup that seemed to turn back the clock to the days of repression and unaccountability. Second, and quite pragmatically, the party had just been invited in government by Abdellahi and was hoping to build on that in order to raise its profile and obtain what it thought were the overdue political benefits of office. The same reasons can explain why the party changed its position somewhat once Abdel Aziz called

for new elections: they wanted to participate and they wanted to govern. Thus, in July 2009 the presidential race took place and for the first time Tawassoul fielded a candidate and the long-time Islamist leader Ould Mansour stood for president.

The elections did not go very well for the party, as Ould Mansour obtained only 4·76% of the votes (Ojeda Garcia 2012). Abdel Aziz won the race outright with 52·58% of the votes. After some hesitation, in the aftermath of the presidential elections of 2009 Tawassoul decided to formally join the opposition coalition with Daddahs' party and Boulkheir's APP. This indicates both the degree of pragmatism of the party and its traditional moderate stances, in so far as the party had no real problem in joining a coalition with political parties of different ideological persuasions (Jourde 2011b: 12), again confirming choices that had been made before. It could even be said that Tawassoul displayed a cynical degree of political opportunism in once again joining the opposition only after its opening to Abdel Aziz had been rejected, but this in fact further confirms that the party and its leaders tend not to behave very differently from other parties, because they attempt to obtain as many benefits as they can from the political system by changing strategy when necessary. One of the accusations often made against Islamist parties in general is that their high level of ideological commitment prevents them from making rational and pragmatic political decisions (Ben Mansour 2002) and that therefore ideological moderation is necessary to attain political rationality. The evidence from Tawassoul and its predecessors indicates that ideological commitment to Islamism does not necessarily clash with pragmatism and rationality.

There are two reasons that should be highlighted when explaining this pragmatic approach of Tawassoul. First, ideology might not matter as much to political actors as it matters to political analysts (Cavatorta 2007). In the case of Tawassoul, striking alliances or negotiating with the regime is not really about ideological commitments, but about the political objectives that can be attained. Thus, at specific moments in time the cleavage that emerges as the most important one is not ideology, but whether one is against the policies of the president or in favour. Second, in Mauritania, the informal role of tribal linkages (Marchesin 1992b62; Marty 2002) at times becomes more significant than ideological commitment and this is true also for Islamist parties although, theoretically, they dismiss the relevance of tribal links in favour of a broader Muslim identity (Jourde 2011a: 3). However, in the everyday practices of 'politicking' these tribal linkages do matter

even for Tawassoul, as indicated by the attempts Abdel Aziz made to woo sectors of the party by playing on his tribal connections with some of its leaders (Boukhars 2016). Eventually this attempt failed, but for a time Tawassoul was torn on this issue of joining Abdel Aziz despite its commitment to remain in opposition. In the wake of the Arab Spring, Tawassoul paradoxically radicalised its moderate demands. Following events elsewhere in the region, Tawassoul and a number of other opposition political parties joined in the Democratic Coordination of the Opposition (COD). The alliance, through the boycott of the November 2013 elections, sit-ins and street demonstrations, aimed at obtaining the same results other pro-democracy movements attained in Tunisia and Egypt, namely the departure of the president and a real process of political change (Lum 2011; Mohamed 2012; Mamadi 2012). In this respect it is no surprise that the party condemned the military coup against Mursi in Egypt.[7] Despite this more militant stance against the president, Tawassoul ran candidates in the 2013 legislative elections. Some opposition parties boycotted the elections in protest and Tawassoul was able to gain 16 seats (out of 146) coming in second place after the UPR (75 seats of a total of 146).[8] The party is thus the largest opposition force in Mauritania, a position from which it can build on for the future. The choice to participate in the elections despite the boycott of other opposition forces with which Tawassoul had collaborated is another demonstration of the rational strategising and commitment to the mechanisms of democracy of the party, irrespective of the authoritarian constraints in place.

   The party has made it clear where it stands regarding its position on the necessity to set up an accountable political system. First of all, there is heavy emphasis on the consolidation of national unity in order to avoid social and political chaos if the regime folds. Second, this national unity can only be achieved if there is a shared acknowledgment of the right to ethnic and cultural diversity. Tawassoul is aware of the ethnic and social complexity of the country and therefore it aims at appeasing all groups by stating that it is in favour of the recognition of important group rights. For instance, in March 2012, the party strongly condemned the repression against the slavery abolitionist movement IRA.[9] Third, the party re-emphasised the necessity to protect individual freedoms and human rights, including the right to private property. Finally, but no less significantly, the party re-stated its commitment to the proper implementation of the Constitution and to democratic mechanisms and procedures to allow peaceful changes in power. In order to further provide evidence of its commitment to democratic

change, Tawassoul has often reiterated its support for demonstrators and movements in opposition to ruling elites across the region from Tunisia to Syria.[10] Irrespective of the outcome of the Arab Spring in Mauritania, Tawassoul has continued to stick to its peaceful methods of political activity and its consistent moderation over time challenges the notion that it moderated through inclusion.

CONCLUSION

Mauritania has a heterogeneous Islamist landscape, which includes political parties with a tradition of moderation, religious associations providing social welfare and smaller groups involved in political violence. This is in line with the divisions within the Islamist camp that exist elsewhere in the Arab world and in sub-Saharan Africa, where the significance of Islamism is on the increase, in part due to the growing connections with the Arab world. What is interesting about Mauritanian Islamism is that a significant number of activists follow a tradition of political and social engagement based from the early stages on demands for political accountability, rejection of violence and recognition of social pluralism. Such an attitude is present today in Tawassoul, but characterised its predecessors as well and speaks both to the history-bound conceptualisation of moderation and its relativity vis-à-vis other Islamist actors with which it competed and still competes with. There might be different reasons as to what explains it, but it is crucial to highlight that the features said to embody political moderation have been present from the beginning of its activism, undermining the claim that Islamist movements necessarily have to go through inclusion to become moderate, as the current literature seems to hold. Obviously, one could be sceptical of the moderation that Tawassoul and its predecessors displayed in so far as they operated in an authoritarian context and were never 'proven' in a genuinely pluralistic society. Such scepticism is however unfounded for a number of reasons. First, as Brumberg (2002) argued, deciding the democratic credentials of a movement or lack thereof *a priori* is misguided because they have to be judged by what it does and says at given moments. One yardstick to measure this is to compare and contrast with what other movements inspired by a similar ideological outlook do and say. In this respect the de-radicalisation process that took place in Mauritania to moderate jihadi Salafists is illustrative of how religious sources and scholars shape the debate about moderation. Thus, a long-time moderate like Ould Dedew became an integral part of a

government's initiative to lead 'the intellectual combat to challenge the mind-set that legitimizes violence and terrorism. This government-led initiative helped dissuade an appreciable number of those who had lost their moral compass from supporting violent radicalization' (Boukhars 2016). Some of these meetings have tried to obtain the support of jihadi-Salafists for fatwas condemning fundamentalism and religion-based violence. 'These state-sponsored measures have had the blessing and backing of Tawassoul' (Ojeda García 2017). Second, repression and authoritarianism often fuel radicalisation as Hafez (2003) demonstrated in his work on Algeria. This did not occur in the case of Tawassoul, which remained true to its origins throughout even highly repressive times. Finally, second-guessing the way in which a political movement will behave when circumstances change is precisely what has prevented 'testing' Islamism in a pluralistic context.

The case of a large sector of Mauritanian Islamism challenges the narrative of progressive moderation because demands for accountability and pluralism – key indicators of moderation – characterise Tawassoul and its predecessors since the mid-1970s. What emerges instead is a picture where the regime has in fact been 'radical' in its refusal to engage with Islamism and where the vast majority of Islamist political formations simply demand participation and representation. The Mauritanian case confirms the validity of the complexity of political Islam. Islamism cannot be thought of as an inclusive category where all movements from across the region can fit un-problematically because in reality they have very different ideological references, different methods of action and ultimately different political objectives. Once this complexity is accepted as a starting point, the focus on progressive moderation appears partially misplaced. The analysis of Mauritania reveals that the different expressions of political Islam in the country, with the exception of franchise terrorist groups, have maintained similar characteristics and broadly attempted to achieve similar objectives since the late 1970s. First, all movements more or less clearly conceive of politics as an arena that believers have to be active in, because it allows for the transformation of society, which has to be produced through the institutions of the state and through the democratic process. Second, the commitment to peaceful political and social activism has remained constant despite the harsh regime's repression that occurred for long periods of time over the last four decades. Finally, the ultimate objective has always been the genuine possibility of competing for office and representing the political instances of the Islamist constituency.

There are three elements emerging from this analysis that can be generalised. First, much is made today of how moderation has led Islamists to accept democracy, but the Mauritanian case demonstrates that the leaders of political Islam in the country, Ould Mansour above all, have been adopting this position for decades and never really shied away from it. What evolved is certainly the 'content' that one gives to democracy today, including the extent of individual liberal rights over which Islamists have very conservative views, but this evolution concerns every political party and not only the Islamists. The West's very own conception of what democracy is and which liberal elements should be constitutive of it has evolved since the 1960s – we can think of the 'evolution' of the ways in which political parties in established democracies think of gay rights or the rights of unmarried couples, for example. Second, the moderation of Mauritanian Islamists is likely to be found in other contexts as well in so far as the label of extremism that many Islamist movements have had in the past is more the product of the political positions of the authoritarian regimes in place and the international community than the actual reality. Finally, the analysis of the behaviour of Islamist movements suggests that many Islamist parties are not so different from non-religious ones. The balance they attempt to strike between their ideological tenets and the political pragmatism that is required in the everyday practices of politics and politicking is a typical trait of parties everywhere. This has implications for Islamist movements across sub-Saharan Africa as well, where their proliferation is increasingly characterising state-society relations and where the relevance of religion seems to be on the increase, at times outside traditional canons (Soares 2007). There are thus multiple factors that influence the way in which they operate, from the prominence of tribal linkages to the desire to enjoy the spoils of office, and from the necessity to maintain a degree of ideological coherence to the compromises that might have to be made to advance their cause.

In conclusion, the category of political moderation that is so in vogue today should be problematised with a view to address the shortcomings of an intellectual narrative about the 'bad guys' becoming over time 'good', having realised the error of their ways. That narrative is at times more the work of simplistic fiction than reality.

NOTES

1. We are grateful to one of the referees for suggesting the use of the label 'proto-movements' to describe the Islamist networks of the 1970s until the 1990s.

2. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SwK3AYS4Wy8. Accessed 18.11.2014.

3. See the 9 June 2016 declaration available at: http://lecalame.info/?q=node/4100. Accessed 7.2.2017.

4. See http://www.ocvidh.org/article.php?sid=1723&thold=0. Accessed 10.6.2012.

5. See party's statements at http://www.tewassoul.org/indexfr.php?ArtID=632&alles=1&nurmainleft=0&nurmainright=0. Accessed 10.6.2012.

6. See http://tewassoul.org/in2.html-7810-1-0-0-0-0-1. Accessed 18.11.2014.

7. See declaration at: http://tewassoul.org/in2.html-6926-1-0-0-0-0-1. Accessed 22.11.2014.

8. The election results are available at: http://www.electionguide.org/elections/id/2392/

9. See for instance http://tewassoul.org/in2.html-4290-1-0-0-0-0-1. Accessed 12.4.2012.

10. See BBC Monitoring International reports at http://www.accessmylibrary.com/article-1G1-256360069/mauritanian-tawassoul-party-freezes.html. Accessed 13.5.2012.

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