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The Crane-Rogers Foundation
4545 42nd Street N.W., Suite 311
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FRANCE

Kay Dilday is an Institute Fellow studying relationships of the French and North African immigrants in France – and North Africa.

The Two Moroccos

By K.A. Dilday

JUNE 2007

CASABLANCA—Nadia Yassine arrived at her 2005 trial in Rabat, Morocco, veiled as always, her mouth covered by a white gag emblazoned with a red cross. She held high a sign reading, "Don't touch the Liberty of Press and Freedom." The photo, distributed around the world, announced that the 30-year battle between the Moroccan monarchy and the Islamist group Al Adl Wal Ihsane (called Justice and Spirituality in English) had moved on to the next generation.

Nadia Yassine's foe is Mohammed VI, king of Morocco since 1999 when his father, Hassan II, died. Feared and loved, Hassan II ruled for 38 of Morocco's 51 years of independence and for better or worse, he constructed contemporary Morocco. Mohammed VI is determined to create a modern Morocco. He wants to move on from the country's identity as a post-independence state that defined itself in opposition to its former colonizer and redefine it as an economically and socially progressive Muslim nation. As this new, modern Morocco takes shape, Nadia Yassine must figure out how to recast Justice and Spirituality, the powerful movement her father built two decades ago as a moral counter to Hassan II's brutal regime. Both Ms. Yassine and King Mohammed VI must contend with the conundrum of Morocco. It is two countries, one rich, cosmopolitan and enamored of Western culture; the other, poor, poorly educated, conservative and devoutly Muslim. Often what seduces one Morocco does not sit well with the other.

Because of the country's geographical proximity to Europe, for most of the 20th century, Moroccans had traveled frequently to European countries, living easily, at least in the physical sense, between two radically different cultures. Since 1995, the Schengen agreement among European nations has prevented Moroccans from traveling to Europe without a visa and visas to Europe usually require proof of significant assets. Rich Moroccans still attend university in Europe or America after studying at private international secondary schools in Morocco. They return to Morocco with the coveted foreign degree and a taste for Western culture. Consequently the small upper class and the vast lower class live radically different lifestyles, not only in terms of wealth, but in values. In many ways, Morocco is a conservative Muslim country, but women in rich neighborhoods wear the latest revealing European fashions and go about with uncovered heads. In poor neighborhoods, the public attire for women is a *foulard* and a shapeless *djellaba*, the loose-fitting garment Moroccans wear to cover their clothes.

I was shocked by the starkness of the contrast between the two worlds when I went to La Bodega, a restaurant-club behind the central market in the heart of Casablanca. I'd been told that it was a gathering spot for "Casa-trash," but I wasn't prepared for the incongruity of watching bi-continental youth dance on chairs while scantily clad women gyrated in rap videos on

Children at the Festival Azzemour just outside of Casablanca. The organizers of the festival hope to bring tourism to this economically depressed town.



screens about their heads. Such scenes are common in the West but in Morocco, where even an exposed clavicle attracts too much of the wrong kind of attention, I was scared. "Let's eat quickly," I told my companion. "This is the kind of place someone will drive up to with a bomb."

The men who bombed Jewish targets in central Casablanca in 2003, came from Sidi Hacem, a slum on the outskirts of Casablanca. When I rode through it, I saw many *hijabs* and *djellabahs*, and aimless young men. These neighborhoods are often home to migrants from rural villages who move to the cities seeking work that is scarce in the city, but even scarcer in the countryside. In these neighborhoods Justice and Spirituality is at its best, running literacy programs, distributing food and clothing, and providing a different religious path to counter the one advocated by violent jihadists who recruit among the young and aimless. A young man who lives in such an area on the edge of Casa's bustling train station says that Al Adl Wal Ihsane is always there, knocking on his door inviting him to a meeting.

Places like La Bodega have always been a part of Moroccan life, but once they were the secret world of the elite, cloaked from the masses who live in places like Sidi Hacem. In fact, the 1970 coup attempt against Hassan II may have failed because the cadets who burst into his private party were so shocked at seeing not only the king in shorts, but women and men lounging around the pool in bathing suits, and drink-

ing alcohol, that they began shooting wildly, killing their coup leader by mistake. Since Mohammed VI took office and loosened restrictions, Western "decadence," long a part of private, rich Morocco is becoming a more visible part of daily life, yet it has not, as promised, been accompanied by a trickling down of Western affluence.

The poor in Morocco are upset at their continued poverty while booming business development is clearly visible in the numerous construction sites across the country. The underclass were optimistic about the new king who came to power in 1999, promising that he would be "king for the poor." Mohammed VI lived his early life in the manner of a rich Moroccan. He spent his 20s in Europe, where he obtained two graduate degrees, socialized with Westerners and, by all reports, was a fixture on the club circuit. He came to power with liberal democratic ideas about the spreading of wealth and he also tried to make amends for past repressions and transgressions. Mohammed VI fired his father's notorious hatchet man, interior minister Driss Basri; he lifted restrictions on dissidents like Yassine and invited back others who, in fear, had gone into exile; he liberated the palace harem, many of whom were descended from slaves. And in a watershed change, in 2004 he maneuvered a reform of the Moudawana, the family law code.

In theory the change transformed Morocco's fusty gender dynamics in one fell swoop. In practice, the

transition is slow. When Mohammed VI first tried to reform the code in 2000, Islamist groups successfully fought off the changes. Moroccan law is a mixture of French, Spanish and sharia law. As the Moudawana was said to be derived from Koranic dictates, Islamists were very protective of it. Nadia Yassine had stated publicly that the Moudawana was not a sacred text and could and should be altered, yet she led Justice and Spirituality's charge against the reforms, arguing that the changes were instigated by Western meddlers. With other Islamist groups, including the political party, Party for Justice and Development (PJD), Justice and Spirituality marched against the reforms in a hastily organized event that nonetheless drew hundreds of thousands of people and affirmed the Islamists' reach. Faced with their show of power Mohammed VI tabled the reforms. But after the terrorist attacks in 2003, the Islamists were weakened and the king seized the moment to force the reforms through.

King Mohammed VI was careful to base the reforms on Koranic readings. The revised Moudawana drew international praise for Morocco and didn't overly rile Islamists. Nadia Yassine's critique of the Moudawana's reform is different now: "I was the first to publicly declare that the code was not sacred," she told me. When talking to me about the Moudawana and the changes for women, Nadia Yassine focused on

depicting the reformed code as a paper tiger. "So the legal age for marriage is now 18 instead of 15. A 15-year-old girl in the countryside has three choices. She can become a maid, a prostitute or get married." With so few other attractive options, marriage may be the only appealing choice. She questioned also the honesty of the judicial process. It's a common belief in Morocco that judges are easily bribed and even if they are not, Driss Ksikes, an editor at the Arabic-language magazine *Nichane*, told me that judges do not seem to be applying the Moudawana's new laws with any vigor.

Nonetheless Mohammed VI enjoys the praise he has won internationally for reforming the Moudawana and otherwise departing from his father's brutal autocratic rule. But as in neighboring North African countries, Egypt and Algeria, human rights and liberalization in Morocco fall prey to the government's desire to squelch Islamists and preserve power. In the last few years, judges have punished numerous independent newspapers and magazines with large fines for reporting on the monarchy's private life. Yet the publications are permitted to write about the king's financial holdings and business affairs, something that would have been unthinkable in the past. "He's not secretive like his father," Brahim Amine, a 30-year-old Casablancon said when he saw the article I was reading, about the king's financial holdings. "This king is much more open. I like him." Yet courts



have imposed large fines on several publications for “writing on sensitive topics to Moroccans” or “attacking sacred Moroccan institutions.” Mr. Ksikes was recently prosecuted for writing an article with jokes about religion, politics and sex. Nadia Yassine is a co-defendant with the editor of the weekly newspaper, *al-Ousbouia al-Jadida*, on the charge of attacking sacred Moroccan institutions. She told the paper’s reporter that a republic would be the best political system for Morocco. But she turned her trial into a media circus. Consequently the judge hastily postponed the trial, and then postponed it again and again. The Mazakhen (the king and his immediate cabinet) fear giving her the public forum but does not want to seem as if it has backed off the charges. During the last decade, Nadia Yassine has pushed the movement in a more confrontational direction. It publicly agitates for rights of speech and judicial freedom.

Nadia’s father, Sheikh Abdesselam Yassine, originally envisioned the movement as politically active. Throughout the 60s he was a member of the Sufi group, *Quadirya Boutchichia*, while working at the Ministry of Education. According to his official biography, in 1968 he was dismissed from his senior position at the ministry for challenging corrupt superiors. Other reports say he had become increasingly focused on his religious activity and less interested in showing up for work. Regardless, after 1968 he devoted his time to the *Quadirya Boutchichia*. When its founder died in 1972, Yassine wanted the group to become more politically active. He lost a power struggle with Boutchichia’s sons and founded his own magazine and a movement that eventually became Justice and

Spirituality. But under the repressive regime of Hassan II, political activism was a risky activity. Sheikh Yassine’s 1974 open letter to Hassan II suggesting the ruler be chosen by a panel of *oulema* (Muslim holy men) instead of by heredity, earned Sheikh Yassine three years of confinement in a psychiatric hospital.

But his daughter Nadia, has refocused Justice and Spirituality in the style her father originally envisioned for it. When Nadia founded the women’s division in the early 1990s and became a prominent member of the group, protesting against judicial corruption and press repression became one of the group’s hallmark activities. Even while she was away in Europe, members of Justice and Spirituality used her signature tactics in May, on the anniversary of the day they say the government began persecuting them in earnest. Justice and Spirituality had scheduled a press conference at the *Club des Avocats* in Morocco’s capital Rabat.

Tucked away in a wealthy tree-lined neighborhood that is home to most of the country’s embassies is the club, and on this day, hordes of police and other special forces. “The conference is canceled,” they told me as I approached. As other press gathered, a police officer dressed in an expensive beige suit politely asked to see my card and recorded my name. And then *Al Adl Wal Ihsane* arrived, a phalanx of men dressed in suits and dark glasses marching purposefully toward the entrance. It became a shouting match, chests pressed against one another. The police refused to let them enter. The spokesman, Fathallah Aarsalane, roared out his address to the press as Justice and Spirituality

Face off: Justice and Spirituality versus Moroccan security forces





The long, long bus ride to Marrakech. No air conditioning and many stops at towns like this. A few moments later a peasant came to sell his goat.

marched down the road, pushed further and further away by the police. Al Jazeera was on hand to film. Justice and Spirituality always gives good television.

In the days of Hassan II it is unlikely that a demonstration would have gotten that far. He employed informers and was ruthless in retribution. People who spoke against him were tortured, their children failed exams at university or dissidents might simply disappear. It was a powerful deterrent. The former house of Mohammed Oufkir, Hassan's military chief and one-time close ally still sits empty as a warning, 30 years after Hassan imprisoned his family. Hassan believed that Oufkir was behind a coup attempt in 1971. Oufkir mysteriously died in custody and his family spent 20 years in a desert prison. The Oufkir family home still sits in the middle of a posh quarter of Rabat, crumbling and overgrown with weeds.

The "years of lead," as in bullets, began after the failed coup. The king took over military operations and brutally crushed the left. But Hassan II was as wily as he was ruthless. At the same time that he silenced the left, he encouraged Islamist factions as Morocco's main social counterforce. Now, however, Morocco fears Islamist fervor more than revolutionary Marxist intellectuals. Hassan's policies during

the 70s and 80s gave Islamists space and traction and King Mohammed VI faces the prospect that the major Islamist political party, the Party for Justice and Development, may gain the majority in parliament in the September elections.

The PJD is considered a party of moderate Islamists although they favor sharia law. Justice and Spirituality's relationship with them is complicated. Justice and Spirituality took a hard-line stance about the government long ago; until the country becomes a republic, they refuse to participate in the political process. Because the PJD wants to work within the system and fields candidates in elections, to Moroccans interested in immediate change, they present the most attractive alternative. In the 2002 parliamentary elections the PJD surprised the government by winning nearly all of the elections in which it fielded candidates. In the September election it plans to stand a candidate in almost every district. An American democracy group released a poll in 2005 predicting the PJD would win the majority in Parliament. The Mazkhen has since put out opposing polls predicting far fewer victories, results that are disputed by the PJD. Regardless, the party's popularity is an embarrassment for Mohammed VI, who has lured foreign investment and tourism by promising that the 2003 attacks in Casablanca



Fathallah Aarsalane, the official spokesman and one of Ms. Yassine's rivals for the leadership of Justice and Spirituality, speaks to the press in Rabat.

were an anomaly, and that Morocco is a progressive Muslim country, more like Turkey than Iran.

For Justice and Spirituality, the rise of the PJD means they may no longer be the most powerful Islamist organization in Morocco. No one disputes that Justice and Spirituality has the most adherents. The movement refuses to disclose the number but journalists have estimated the Morocco membership at about 150,000. Their popularity stems in large part from their focus on social work. In keeping with the Sufi philosophy that formed Sheikh Yassine's views, Justice and Spirituality emphasizes good works and a personal relationship and experience of god. It works among the urban poor of Morocco's major cities concentrating on work, education, literacy and social development. With its focus on spirituality and its position of strict non-violence, it offers an alternative to the violent movements that are so compelling to unhappy, uneducated residents. In a country where many people live in extreme poverty with no work and no form of activity, Justice and Spirituality provide what the government does not.

The women's division that Nadia Nassine co-founded is very successful. Women make up 50 percent of Justice and Spirituality's membership. Women in Morocco have a shockingly high illiteracy rate. The national average is 60 percent and in rural areas it is often as high as 80 percent. The literacy and other social development programs Justice and Spirituality offers are much valued by these women as is Nadia Yassine's portrayal of the modern Muslim women. Her confident, sophisticated yet devout public persona resonates especially as the new freedoms leave

some women searching for their place.

At lectures in Europe and the United States Nadia Yassine is styled as the movement's spokesperson and she serves as its unofficial ambassador. Yet her position is ill-defined. Because of the large Moroccan Diaspora, Justice and Spirituality counts followers in numerous countries. Just outside Paris, Ms. Yassine welcomed me at the home of members of the French branch, where she dined with male and female Europe-based followers of Moroccan, Jordanian and Tunisian descent who hung on her words, which ranged from charming stories about seeing her photo alongside one of a terrorist, to the primacy of the Internet as a communication tool. The movement also has large branches in the Netherlands and Spain. In the United States, Justice and Spirituality's outpost in Pennsylvania has a publishing wing that disseminates the Sheikh's and Ms. Yassine's works in English.

Yet even as she is the most visible member of Justice and Spirituality during the Sheikh's decline, it isn't clear that the men in the movement are willing to accept her as a leader. Ms. Yassine can't offer an official title for her position (although many others in the movement have one) saying she is, "one of the spokespeople, but not the official one," that she founded the women's division some 15 years ago, and is part of its five-person board. Malika Zeghal, a French-Tunisian academic who studies Moroccan Islamist movements says that it would be difficult for the men in an Islamist movement to accept her officially in the role of spokesperson or any other major role outside of the women's division, yet she is routinely identified as the movement's spokesperson for audiences abroad.

Nadia Yassine is caught between these two Moroccos. Moroccan citizenship is irrevocable and Moroccans who welcome her eagerly when she travels abroad have very little relationship to the rural and uneducated masses at home who have more traditional ideas about a woman's place. With Sheikh Yassine's imminent death, an internecine power struggle has already begun for the leadership of Justice and Spirituality. What chance does Ms. Yassine have of winning when men are so wary of seeing her in a leadership position which she doesn't even have an official title? Like King Mohammed VI, Nadia Yassine is struggling with the old and new Morocco. The old, devout Morocco gives both Nadia Yassine and Mohammed VI their legitimacy. The king traces his line to the Prophet Mohammed which is the main basis for his rule. He is not only king, but "commander of the faithful." But it is the faithful who are the most resistant to his reforms. It is old Morocco's need to retain their customs, antiquated as they may seem, that may in the end cause them both to fail. □

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Kay is studying the relationships of the French and North African immigrants in France and in North Africa. A former editor for The *New York Times* Op-Ed page, Kay holds a master's degree in comparative international politics and theory from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, a bachelor's degree in English literature from Tufts University, and has done graduate work at the Universiteit van Amsterdam in the Netherlands and the *Cours de Civilisation de la Sorbonne*.

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A John O. Crane Memorial Fellow, Suzy will be writing about politics and religion in Turkey. A former editor at the *New York Observer*, her work has also appeared in *Salon*, the *New York Times Book Review*, the *Nation*, and other publications. She graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 1999.

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As a Phillips Talbot Fellow, Derek will explore the impact of global trade and economic growth on Indians living in poverty. He has served for the past year as a volunteer for Swaraj Peeth, an institute in New Delhi dedicated to nonviolent conflict resolution and Mahatma Gandhi's thought. Previously he was a Fulbright scholar in India at the Gandhi Peace Foundation. He has coordinated foreign policy research at George Washington University's Institute for Communitarian Policy Studies and worked as a political organizer in New Hampshire. Derek graduated with a degree in religion from Columbia University.

Nicholas Schmidle • PAKISTAN • February 2006 - 2008

Nick is a freelance writer interested in the intersection of culture, religion, and politics in Asia. He's in Pakistan as an ICWA fellow, examining issues of ethnic, sectarian, and national identity. Previously, he reported from Central Asia and Iran. His work has been published in the *Washington Post*, the *Weekly Standard*, *Foreign Policy*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and elsewhere. He holds a master's degree in International Affairs from American University.

Raphael Soifer • BRAZIL • April 2007-2009

An actor, director, playwright, musician and theatre educator, Raphi Soifer is a Donors' Fellow studying, as a participant and observer, the relationship between the arts and social change in communities throughout Brazil. He has worked as a performer and director in the United States and Brazil, and has taught performance to prisoners and underprivileged youth through People's Palace Projects in Rio de Janeiro and Community Works in San Francisco. He holds a bachelor's degree in Theatre Studies and Anthropology from Yale University.

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Phone: (202) 364-4068
Fax: (202) 364-0498
E-mail: icwa@icwa.org
Web site: www.icwa.org

Executive Director:
Steven Butler

Bookkeeper/Program Assistant: Jim Guy

Publications Manager:
Ellen Kozak

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