

Political Orientations in the *Union Nationale des Étudiants du Maroc* (UNEM).

Nationalism, Internationalism and the Left, up to the Islamist Shift (1956–1997)

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ABSTRACT

This contribution aims to trace the development of the *Union Nationale des Étudiants du Maroc* (UNEM), the major actor in the Moroccan student movement, over its first four decades. Established in the immediate post-independence period under the auspices of the *Istiqlāl* Party, UNEM was influenced by different prevailing and polarizing orientations, namely left radicalism and political Islam. This contribution explores the specific role played by UNEM in the Moroccan political landscape and sheds light on its influential international network. Drawing on a variety of hitherto unexplored primary sources in Arabic and French, the contribution argues that control of UNEM was a crucial factor for the affirmation of both the leftist and Islamist extra-parliamentary movements in the Moroccan political arena.

KEYWORDS: Student Unionism; Morocco; Transnational Networks; Left; Islamism.

Introduction

In the historical analysis of youth activism and student movements in North Africa, student unionism stands out as a key phenomenon across the region (Abdalla 2008; Henry 2016: 877–895; Manduchi 2014; Moore, Hochschild 1968: 21–50; Temlali 2022: 153–171; Wallon 2016). As illustrated by the Egyptian case, students were an integral part of the emerging nationalist political forces (Erlich 1989). Nonetheless, promises made to develop an accessible national education system were largely disregarded in postcolonial Libya, Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco (Baldinetti 2018: 418–439; Benrabah 2007: 225–252; Chenoufi 1993: 139–210; Wyrzten 2015). This contributed to greater agitation

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of the student body. While the National Union of Algerian Students was integral to the regime, in Tunisia and Morocco, the national student unions progressively grew more independent and critical of state power. In particular, the *Union Nationale des Étudiants du Maroc* (UNEM; in Arabic: *Ittiḥād al-Waṭanī li-Ṭalabat al-Maghrib*), the longest standing Moroccan student union, became a leading source of protest and dissent from the 1960s. Notably, while drawing significant support from its extensive international network, it turned Mohammed V University in Rabat, the *Qarawiyīn* University of Fez and, later on, numerous new university institutions, into political laboratories that critiqued the shortcomings of the Moroccan university system.

Student unionism in Morocco is a scarcely researched subject. The only studies in European languages date back to the 1960s and 1970s (Moore, Hochschild 1968: 21–50; Palazzoli 1974: 399–437) and therefore only document the partial course of UNEM. In the second half of the 1990s, some works in Arabic had the merit of insightfully tracing UNEM's evolution (al-ʿAwnī 1997; Ḍarīf 1996; al-Ghazālī 1997), although they exclusively addressed an internal perspective. Despite the recent reassessment of UNEM's presence at the *Maison du Maroc* in Paris (Bouaziz, Denglos 2022), the interconnected national and international implications of Moroccan postcolonial student unionism have yet to be fully explored.

In light of recent historiographical interest in the entanglement of student (trans)national activism (Goebel 2015; Hendrickson 2022), this contribution examines UNEM's trajectory, with particular attention to the role of its sections abroad. It traces the union's leadership and ideological development through its annual congresses and major initiatives, focusing, in particular, on the positions of the French sections and their impact on the union's political life.

As in other colonial contexts, a Moroccan national student union had yet to be established when Moroccan students began participating in transnational student networks abroad. In 1927, the action of Moroccan, Algerian, and Tunisian students in France led to the creation of the *Association des Étudiants Musulmans Nord-Africains* (AEMNA) in Paris. Its objective was to promote national independence and education (Ageron 1983: 25–56). Following independence, AEMNA integrated Maghrebi student organizations operating in France and sought to reinforce national educational institutions on a common basis (Pervillé 2010: 241–250). The massive presence of Algerian, Tunisian, and

Moroccan students in France has been described by Sylvie Mazzella (2009: 13–30) as a remarkable aspect of the “mondialisation étudiante” and one that played a significant role in migration and cooperation politics between Maghreb countries and France.

Maghrebistudentsalsoactivelyparticipatedininternationalnetworks throughout the Cold War. In 1946, AEMNA members contributed to the establishment of the Communist-oriented International Union of Students (IUS) in Prague, which aimed to bring together student associations from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Similarly, Maghrebi students helped shape transnational platforms, fostering Afro-Asian solidarity within the context of, for instance, the 1956 Afro-Asian Students’ Conference in Bandung (Utama 2022: 213–239).

From a national perspective, as Susan Miller (2013: 169) points out, “UNEM as an incubator for a new generation of activists”. UNEM became a major component in the ascent in the 1960s and 1970s of the Moroccan “New Left”, which was embedded in Third Worldism and anti-capitalist networks. The Moroccan New Left emerged from the inability of leftist parties to provide a strong opposition to the regime and was stimulated by the convergence of the Marxist-Leninist movement, the student movement, and a cultural intelligentsia engaged in the international anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggle (Biondi 2026). Considering the recent interest in the history of the Arab New Left (Gervasio 2020: 148–168; Haugbølle 2017: 497–512) and radical student activism in the region (Jebari 2022: 1–24; Manduchi 2015), UNEM represents a significant phenomenon through which to reassess contemporary Moroccan political history.

New Left’s political orientation in UNEM proved, however, short-lived. Following its repression by the regime and the Union’s interdiction from 1974 to 1978, Islamist groups gained influence in universities and eventually seized control of UNEM in the mid-1990s. In reassessing the often nostalgic narrative of decline and crisis in the 1980s and 1990s (al-‘Awnī 1997: 3; Darīf 1996: 13, 40), along with that of the failed attempts to curb the rise of Islamist forces (al-‘Awnī 1997: 72), this contribution analyzes the shifting political orientation of UNEM towards Islamism in the competition with the left. It also situates this shift within the broader context of the growing appeal of political Islam in Morocco and across the region (Joffé 2012).

The study covers the development of UNEM from its establishment in the mid-1950s, within a nationalist framework, to the second half

of the 1990s, when the driving force of the radical left waned in the face of the rising Islamist ideology. Drawing on a variety of hitherto unexplored primary sources in both Arabic and French – including militants' memoirs, press articles, archival and official documents such as correspondence, bulletins, pamphlets, and proceedings produced by UNEM and its federations abroad – this contribution argues that the control of UNEM by emerging political forces originating outside official parties and composed of a new generation of young activists was crucial to the rise of both leftist and Islamist extra-parliamentary movements in the Moroccan political arena. It also contends that the overseas sections played a significant role, both foreshadowing and contrasting the shift toward reformism, which represented an intermediate stage between leftist radicalism and the emergence of political Islam within the Union.

In the Wake of Independence: Student Nationalism Takes a Left Turn

After several attempts to form a national union of Moroccan students in the early 1950s were rejected by the French colonial administration (Vermeren 2022: 170), UNEM was established in the aftermath of Moroccan independence. Marking the unification of pre-existing student associations (*Association générale des étudiants de Rabat*, *Association des étudiants marocains*, and *Union des étudiants marocains* which was based in Paris), UNEM's founding (I) Congress was held in Rabat on December 26, 1956. The Congress brought together nearly 2,000 students (Daoud 2007: 31), including freshmen from the newly established Muhammad V University in Rabat.² At its inception, UNEM had a nationalist orientation and was closely aligned with the *Istiqlāl* (Independence) Party. Accordingly, it pledged allegiance to King Muhammad V, who was invited to the preparatory meeting held in August 1956, while his son, Crown Prince Moulay Hassan, was appointed Honorary president at the I Congress (Palazzoli 1974: 399–400).

² UNEM's highest body, the Congress, was held annually and consisted of delegates elected from its sections in Morocco and abroad. The Congress had the authority to amend the statute, approve the financial statement, and elect the 23 members of the Administrative Committee. UNEM also included a seven-member Executive Committee, headed by the elected President. "L'organisation de l'U.N.E.M'", *Attalaba*, 3 (December 1967), 6.

UNEM's main goal was to realize the nationalist movement's promise of mass education, long denied by the colonial regime (De Poli 2015: 117–248). In line with this, UNEM sought to establish a popular and democratic university³ and advocated major overhaul of national education and public administration (VV. AA. 2017). According to the first article of its statute, students were considered an integral and active part of the Moroccan nation.⁴ This enabled the Union to engage with the country's social, economic, and political issues, and also reflected UNEM's commitment to mobilize a young generation of students in the nation-building process. However, UNEM's aspiration to intervene in the Moroccan public debate would soon lead to disagreements with the Makhzen. Tensions arose when UNEM challenged the authorities over their reluctance to sever ties with the former colonial power, and criticized their limited progress in national education.

UNEM enjoyed greater independence than the youth branches of various parties and unions, such as the *Jeunesse Ouvrière Marocaine* (JOM) that had been founded in 1957 as a youth branch of the *Union Marocaine du Travail* (UMT) (Menouni 1979: 175–176). Nonetheless, it was not autonomous from political influence and, over time, tended to embody emerging extra-parliamentary political currents.

In line with the *Istiqlāl* Party at its II Congress, held in Fez in 1957, UNEM called for the Arabization of school and university curricula and the removal of French professionals and troops stationed in Morocco. The need to sever ties with the former colonial administrators was further emphasized at UNEM's III Congress, held in Tetuán in 1958 (Palazzoli 1974: 401). The Congress also condemned police intervention at demonstrations supporting the Algerian cause of independence and the 1958 Iraqi Revolution, which took place within the framework of anticolonial and inter-Arab solidarity.⁵ The IV Congress, held in Agadir in August 1959, demanded action in favor of the nationalization of industry and the reorganization of the agricultural sector, praising the creation of national credit institutions.⁶ This political-economic measure was implemented by the government of Abdallah Ibrahim

³ Archives Départementales de la Seine-Saint-Denis (hereafter: ADSSD), 409J/38, Union nationale des étudiants du Maroc (UNEM), Section de Lyon, "Qu'est-ce que l'U.N.E.M.?", February 1965, 1.

⁴ "L'action national de l'U.N.E.M.", *Attalaba*, 3 (December 1967), 2.

⁵ "L'U.N.E.M. à travers ses Congrès", *Attalaba*, 3 (December 1967), 6.

⁶ Archives Nationales, Paris (hereafter ANP), 19870110/134 Fonds d'associations –

(1958–1960), the first *Istiqlāl* Prime minister who was part of the party's left wing (Monjib 1992: 137–155).

At the same time, the November 1959 rift of the *Istiqlāl* Party's left branch, which led to the creation of the *Union Nationale des Forces Populaires* (UNFP), was a major turning point for UNEM. Its more radical leftist components prevailed aligning the Union with the new party of Mehdi Ben Barka and Abdallah Ibrahim (Ben Messaoud 1972: 7). As a consequence, starting in the early 1960s, UNEM took a distinctly anti-monarchical turn (Palazzoli 1974: 399–413). It was the V Congress, held in Casablanca in July 1960, that signaled the political shift in UNEM's political orientation. The Congress called for the redistribution of former colonial lands⁷ and, with regard to higher education, addressed issues such as housing programs on the Rabat campus, the implementation of engineering programs, the recruitment of graduate students, and the provision of scholarships to study at both national and foreign universities.⁸ In terms of internal alliances, the Congress, hosted in the *Maison de l'Union* in Casablanca, reinforced its proximity to UMT and its youth branch, JOM, with which UNEM contributed to the establishment, that same year, of the *Union Marocaine de la Jeunesse* (Menouni 1979: 176).⁹

During the VI Congress, held in Azrou in July 1961 and attended by Health and Education Minister Youssef Ben Abbas at its inaugural session, delegates criticized the education system for its infrastructural limitations, the severe lack of modern educational programs that hindered the nation's prospects for development, and the ineffectiveness of mass education and Arabization initiatives.¹⁰ This led to a rift by UNEM members affiliated with the *Istiqlāl* Party, who established the *Union Générale des Étudiants Marocains* (UGEM) in 1961.

UNEF, Union nationale des étudiants de France (1928–1970), Quatrième congrès national de l'Union nationale des étudiants du Maroc, 1959, n.p.

⁷ ANP, 19870110/134 Fonds d'associations – UNEF, Cinquième congrès national de l'UNEM, 1960, n.p.

⁸ "Revendication de notre Union", *L'étudiant marocain. Organe de l'U.N.E.M.* (July 1960), 5.

⁹ "L'intervention de l'Union marocaine de la Jeunesse", *L'étudiant marocain. Organe de l'U.N.E.M.* (July 1960), 3.

¹⁰ In 1966, Education Minister Mohamed Benhima reversed the Arabization process. Citing its failure to improve educational standards and the shortage of qualified teachers of Standard Arabic, he reintroduced the French language in secondary education. Primary education was later fully Arabized under Minister Azzedine Laraki in 1980, but secondary and higher education remained bilingual (Boutier 2016: 11).

The split, which brought UNEM closer to UNFP, did not jeopardize its rise and, despite its increasingly harsh criticism of the government, UNEM received recognition as a public service association in December 1961. The VII Congress, held in Rabat in July 1962, focused on scholarships and housing for the many Moroccan students abroad.¹¹ Moreover, it addressed the ongoing constitutional process, criticizing the absence of an elected constitutional assembly. In December 1962, UNEM called for a strike in protest against the new Constitution, which it accused of having been adopted through an undemocratic process.¹²

From that point onward, UNEM activists began to face persecution. The VIII Congress, held in Casablanca in July 1963, opened just a few days before the repression that hit both UNFP and UNEM in August. Aligning with the positions of UNFP's leader, Mehdi Ben Barka, the new UNEM Secretary, Hamid Berrada, formerly in charge of information and cultural activities in the Executive Committee, denounced the ongoing Sand War, an armed dispute over the border between Morocco and Algeria, in the name of inter-Maghrebi solidarity. After being arrested and subsequently released, he went into exile. In November, Berrada also faced accusations of involvement in the 1963 UNFP complot and was sentenced to death in absentia.¹³

The death sentence issued against UNEM's President, the repression against its Executive Committee members, and the subsequent cuts to university subsidies were all intended to weaken the Moroccan student movement as a whole. In early 1964, students responded with a wave of strikes involving the universities of Fez and Rabat, educational institutions in Tangiers, and the cities of Casablanca, Oujda, and Tiznit, where secondary students mobilized in solidarity with UNEM.¹⁴ At the same time, militants from abroad occupied the Moroccan embassies in France, Germany, and Yugoslavia (Monjib 1992: 324).

The IX Congress, held in Rabat in September 1964, reaffirmed UNEM's anticolonial, anti-imperialist, and pro-peace positions. These

¹¹ ANP, 19870110/134 Fonds d'associations – UNEF, Résolutions du 7^e Congrès, 1962, 2.

¹² "Chronologie – vie politique", *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord*, 1 (1961), 412.

¹³ Bibliothèque nationale de France (hereafter: BNF), *Complot contre les étudiants marocains. Document n. 1 sur l'UNEM*, UNEM Paris, 1964, n.p. On the 1963 UNFP complot, see: Bennouna 2002.

¹⁴ BNF, *Complot contre les étudiants marocains. Document n. 1 sur l'UNEM*, UNEM Paris, 1964, n.p.

stances strengthened the Union's ties with inter-Arab and inter-African international networks of solidarity, promoting cohesion among Maghrebi students, despite the strained relations between the Moroccan and Algerian governments following the Sand War. From an internal perspective, the Congress advocated a faculty recruitment campaign and the establishment of new campus infrastructure to accommodate the growing number of university students.¹⁵

The authorities responded to UNEM's direct opposition to the regime by seeking to banish its activities and conducting new arrests. Following the Congress, the police conducted raids and shut down UNEM's headquarters in Rabat. The newly elected President, Mohamed Haloui, who had expressed solidarity with former UNEM's President Hamid Berrada, was arrested, released, and subsequently charged by a Rabat court with engaging in activities that endangered State security. In October, an investigation was opened against UNEM on the grounds that its founding bylaws did not comply with the new provisions on student unionism, which, issued on June 21, 1963, prohibited university unions from including high school students among their members.¹⁶

In 1965, a circular issued by the Ministry of Education prohibited anyone older than 16 from accessing the second cycle of higher education, thereby preventing approximately 60% of the student body from pursuing their studies and earning a baccalaureate (high school diploma) (Rollinde 2003: 122). This measure clearly aimed to limit youth opposition and decrease the number of individuals with a baccalaureate. A decade after independence, it became evident that the promise to build a nation based on mass education had failed. In March 1965, high school students called for an indefinite strike against the measure restricting access to higher education. The demonstrations spread to several cities, including Rabat, Fez, Meknes, and Kenitra, and on March 23, in Casablanca, the street movement turned into a popular uprising. Urban guerrilla warfare continued for three days with barricades in the streets and buildings set on fire, while UNEM called for the overthrow of the regime (Dahmani 2017). General Mohamed

¹⁵ ANP, 19870110/134 Fonds d'associations – UNEF, UNEM, Travaux du IXème Congrès de l'UNEM, 1964, n.p.

¹⁶ BNF, *Complot contre les étudiants marocains. Document n. 1 sur l'UNEM*, UNEM Paris, 1964, n.p.

Oufkir, at the head of the army, bloodily repressed the revolts, leaving hundreds of victims on the ground. There were 1,500 casualties according to local sources and 70 according to the authorities, while over 2,000 people faced trial for rioting (Vermeren 2016: 44–46).

The March 1965 riots had a significant impact also on Moroccan political life. Leading to a five-year state of exception that froze parliamentary activity, they broke the national pact and inaugurated a long season of protest and a harsh repression known as the “Years of Lead” (Biondi 2026: Chapter 1). During its X Congress held in Rabat in August 1965, UNEM expressed its outrage at the dismantling of the educational system and denounced the March 23 massacre.¹⁷ At this point, the police assaulted the Union headquarters to intimidate its members (Daoud 2007: 113).

In 1966, the government directly led by King Hassan II established mandatory military service. The measure sought to restrict student unionism and youth political activity, but it proved insufficient. In January, Hassan Bensmain, UNEM’s Vice-President and member of the Executive Committee for Cultural Affairs, was arrested and condemned to six months of prison for a public order offence.¹⁸ The XI Congress was held at UNEM’s headquarters in Rabat in July 1966, as the Ministry of Education had declined to provide a larger venue, as it had in the past. Executive Committee members were summoned by the police and prevented from participating in the Congress.¹⁹ Notwithstanding this the 170 delegates in attendance denounced the kidnapping and disappearance of UNFP’s leader Mehdi Ben Barka in October 1965 in Paris.²⁰

The Congress also called for the expansion of the academic system through the creation of new national universities.²¹ Besides, it addressed international issues, such as the struggle against colonialist imperialism,

¹⁷ ANP, 19870110/134 Fonds d’associations – UNEF, Xème de l’U.N.E.M. à Rabat du 21 au 26-X-1965, n.p.

¹⁸ “L’U.M.T. solidaire de la lutte des étudiants”, *L’Avant-garde. Organe de l’Union marocaine du travail*, 356 (February 5, 1966), 3.

¹⁹ International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam (IISH), *al-Ittiḥād al-Waṭanī li-Ṭalabat al-Maghrib. al-Mu’tamar al-waṭanī al-ḥādī ‘ashar* [National Union of Moroccan Students. Eleventh National Congress], Rabat, 1966, 2.

²⁰ On the Ben Barka affaire, see: Daoud, Monjib 2000.

²¹ IISH, *al-Ittiḥād al-Waṭanī li-Ṭalabat al-Maghrib. al-Mu’tamar al-waṭanī al-ḥādī ‘ashar* [National Union of Moroccan Students. Eleventh National Congress], Rabat, 1966, 25.

and voiced support for the North Vietnamese government.²² The XII Congress, originally scheduled for July 1967 in Rabat, was forbidden by the authorities and preceded by various waves of arrests earlier that year. Solidarity for UNEM was expressed by UMT and JOM, which continued to provide support until the student union turned to a more radical orientation.²³

The Rise and Fall of a Revolutionary Orientation

In the second half of the 1960s, despite the repression against the student movement, UNEM experienced a strong increase in membership, reaching 3,000 members within its Moroccan sections (Palazzoli 1974: 403). The discontent of a new generation of educated youth strengthened student unionization while the abandonment of any prospect of collaboration with the regime laid the groundwork for UNEM's radicalization. In this context, regional friction emerged between militants from *Qarawiyyin* University in Fez, which would soon adopt a Marxist-Leninist orientation, and the UNFP-related Faculty of Letters in Rabat.

During the second half of the 1960s, UNFP grew closer to the *Istiqlāl* Party and formed an official opposition bloc that sought to restore the parliamentary system and inaugurate a new era of reform. Following the formalization of *al-Kutla al-Waṭaniyya* (National Bloc) on July 22, 1970, UNEM members in Fez accused UNFP of having created a merely electoral alliance to collude with the monarchical system of power (Bouaziz 1981: 125). Some UNFP members, disappointed by the *Kutla* and already affiliated with UNEM, came into conflict with the party leadership (Vermeren 2016: 47). At the XII Congress, held in 1968, the line of UNFP and the *Parti de la Libération et du Socialisme* (PLS) would prevail for the last time, electing President Abdellatif Menouni.

The XIII UNEM Congress, scheduled for July 1969 at the Faculty of Sciences of the University of Rabat, was disbanded by the authorities; however, it was able to resume its works in Casablanca on August 9–11

²² "Après le XIème Congrès des étudiants", *L'Avant-garde. Organe de l'Union marocaine du travail*, 384 (27 August 1966), 4.

²³ "Le J.O.M. solidaire des étudiants", *L'Avant-garde. Organe de l'Union marocaine du travail*, 409 (25 February 1967), 1; "Les travailleurs solidaires des étudiants", *L'Avant-garde. Organe de l'Union marocaine du travail*, 408 (16 February 1967), 4.

with over 300 delegates.²⁴ On this occasion, the New Left's revolutionary line, inspired by Marxism-Leninism, gained prominence over political parties (Bouaziz 1981: 130). The Fez group gained control of the UNEM Executive Committee, with the appointment of Abdellatif Darkaoui, while the election of Mohammed Lakhsassi as president resulted in the departure of various members from the PLS area (Vermeren 2016: 51).

The Congress presented a minimum list of demands addressing both the domestic and international issues, including greater political freedom, agrarian and economic reforms, the fight against imperialism, and an increased support for Palestine.²⁵ In an interview, newly-elected President Mohamed Lakhsassi defined UNEM as the "vanguard of progressive forces", calling for the unity of the popular masses in the Arab world. Lakhsassi acknowledged the growing radicalization of students in light of the infrastructural and organizational limitations of universities, the outdated study programs, the lack of support to economically disadvantaged students, as well as the shortage of faculty members.²⁶

Embodying a clear opposition to monarchical power, regarded as the main cause of the regression of Morocco's social system, UNEM became a laboratory for youth radicalization and for the development of the Moroccan Marxist-Leninist movement. This stance led to a break with the UNFP and a generational split with its party cadres, who were accused of supporting, from the opposition, a political system dominated by monarchical authoritarianism (El Ayadi 1999: 201–204).

In the face of UNEM's radical turn, the Makhzen did not take long to react again with an iron fist. While new waves of arrests took place, the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy at Rabat University purged programs of authors such as Marx. A further deterrent to the circulation of destabilizing ideas was the closure of the *Institut de sociologie* in Rabat (Ben Messaoud 1970: 48–55).

Despite UNFP's attempts to maintain UNEM under its control,²⁷ the XIV Congress held in 1971 witnessed the consolidation of the Union's radical component. As recalled by UNEM's new President,

²⁴ "13ème Congrès. L'UNEM s'est redéfinie", *Lamalif*, 32 (1969), 20.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ "Mohamed Lakhsassi: cette année sera celle de la radicalisation", *Lamalif*, 32 (1969), 21.

²⁷ Private Archive Abdelghani Boustia (hereafter PAAB), Union nationale des forces populaires, Section des étudiants de Paris, Pour une 14^e congrès de sauvegarde et de renforcement de l'action unitaire, Paris, 15 December 1970, n.p.

Taieb Bennani, the first half of the year was marked by continuous mobilization. Boycotts and strikes were organized to denounce the repression of the New Left, demand improvements in university infrastructure and technical education, and call for the reopening of the *Institut de sociologie*.²⁸

At the XV Congress, held on August 11, 1972, members of the Marxist-Leninist movement officially gained leadership of UNEM. In a context in which political parties were acknowledged as “completely incapable of taking any action to improve the conditions of the masses” due to their “unstable, reformist, and wait-and-see nature”, (Ben Messaoud 1972: 7) militants from the *Front uni des étudiants progressistes* list secured a majority of the vote, leading to the dismissal of the incumbent Executive Committee and the President-in-office.²⁹

UNEM elected Abdelaziz Menebhi, a member of the Marxist-Leninist *Ilā al-Amām* branch, as its new president. The Congress called for the release of political prisoners and the creation of a new Constituent Assembly for the development of a democratic, popular, and anti-imperialist project. Proposals were also presented to relaunch an agrarian reform which would have included the redistribution of former colonized lands and the socialization of the means of production (Ben Messaoud 1972: 7).³⁰

Following its takeover by the Marxist-Leninist movement, on January 24, 1973, UNEM was outlawed, and the members of its Executive Committee were arrested. Dozens of UNEM militants were arbitrarily jailed and severely tortured while awaiting indictment and trial. On September 2, 1973, a court in Casablanca announced the first verdict and many UNEM members were given long-term sentences. Abdellatif Darkaoui, who was in charge of external relations for the UNEM Executive Committee, received a fifteen-year sentence, while President Abdelaziz Menebhi and Vice-President Abdelwahed Belkebir were sentenced in absentia to life imprisonment for conspiring against national security.³¹ Although declared to be on the run, they were

²⁸ “Le président de l’U.N.E.M. précise les perspectives de l’actuelle année universitaire”, *Lamalif*, 51 (November 1971), 10–11.

²⁹ “La répression au Maroc”, *Souffles. Revue culturelle arabe du Maghreb*, 2 (October 1973), 7.

³⁰ The initial redistribution of colonial lands began in 1966. On the Moroccan process of agrarian reforms, see: Bessaoud 2016: 115–137; Swearingen 1987.

³¹ PAAB, Maroc. 22 ans de répression, *al-Ikhtiyār al-thawrī fī al-Maghrib* [The

being held under arbitrary custody and would reappear in prison the following year, facing another trial in 1976.³²

A Sprawling Transnational Network: Mobilization from Abroad

Since its foundation, UNEM has placed significant emphasis on the anticolonial struggle for independence, as well as on student transnational activism aimed at promoting democracy in postcolonial regimes.³³ In 1959, UNEM, *Union Générale des Étudiants de Tunisie* (UGET), and *Union Générale des Étudiants Musulmans Algériens* (UGEMA) jointly established the *Confédération des Étudiants du Maghreb* (CEM) in Tunis. Operating within the broader Afro-Asian movement, CEM held its II Congress in Rabat in December 1960, reinforcing the international coordination of the Maghrebi unions. CEM's activities included supporting the Algerian and Palestinian causes, promoting inter-African student solidarity, and establishing a parallel North African student confederation aimed at uniting the North African student movement under Maghrebi leadership.³⁴

Through the CEM framework, UNEM participated in the aforementioned IUS platform, fostering international student collaboration.³⁵ In March 1967, during the IUS IX Congress held in Ulan Bator, UNEM was elected to the IUS General Secretariat.³⁶ Thus, in the 1960s, UNEM was fully integrated into the international student movement, advancing and organizing antimilitary, antiracist, and pro-peace protests against US imperialism and the Vietnam War. At the same time, UNEM was the focus of international solidarity campaigns in response to the Moroccan regime's repression. At the same time, the repression did not prevent UNEM from welcoming representatives of

Revolutionary Choice in Morocco], 24 (March 1978), 44.

³² "Disparition de Aziz Menebhi", *Souffles. Revue culturelle arabe du Maghreb*, 2 (October 1973), 14.

³³ "L'activité internationale de l'U.N.E.M.", *Attalaba*, 3 (December 1967), 5.

³⁴ ANP, 19870110/134 Fonds d'associations – UNEF, 2ème congrès de la Confédération des étudiants du Maghreb, Rabat 24-27 décembre 1960, Rapport morale, 1–10.

³⁵ "Union internationale des étudiants", *L'étudiant marocain. Organe de l'U.N.E.M.* (July 1960), 2.

³⁶ "Solidarité avec les peuples en lutte contre l'imperialisme", *Attalaba*, 3 (December 1967), 5; "L'activité internationale de l'U.N.E.M.", *Attalaba*, 3 (December 1967), 5.

international student unions to its meetings and from continuing to express support, through statements and congressional resolutions, for the struggles of students and popular movements in the Global South.³⁷

Abroad, UNEM reached the remarkable number of 17,000 members, a figure that reflects the considerable scale of the Moroccan student diaspora.³⁸ During the latter half of the 1960s, UNEM strengthened its network in France, where Anis Balafrej, son of progressive nationalist leader Ahmed, was active. Moreover, the “French May” of 1968 involved many Moroccan students living in the country. Over the years, UNEM had also established branches in Algeria, Egypt, and Syria, as well as in Belgium, Germany, Poland, Spain, Sweden, the UK, and Yugoslavia. However, the vast majority of its abroad members were concentrated in France, where sections were opened in Amiens, Besançon, Caen, Clermont-Ferrand, Grenoble, Marseille, Lyon, Nice, Orléans, Paris, and Toulouse, among other cities. In the French capital, the *Maison du Maroc* at the *Cité Internationale Universitaire* served both as a residence for Moroccan students and as a hub for UNEM activities (Bouaziz, Denglos 2022).

One of the main activities of UNEM’s overseas sections in the early 1970s was documenting, publicizing, and mobilizing against the repression of students in Morocco. For instance, UNEM-Paris published a pamphlet detailing the early 1972 waves of arrests, which occurred from Marrakesh to Rabat and Beni Mellal, while also collecting messages of international solidarity for UNEM from IUS and numerous Algerian, Moroccan, and Tunisian organizations.³⁹ Contextually, a day of solidarity with Moroccan students was held by the section on March 23, 1972 and the section demanded the lifting of the ban on UNEM when it was enforced in 1973.⁴⁰

³⁷ IISH, *al-Ittihad al-Waṭani li-Ṭalabat al-Maghrib. al-Mu'tamar al-waṭani al-hādī 'ashar* [National Union of Moroccan Students. Eleventh National Congress], Rabat, 1966, 3–4.

³⁸ “L’UNEM et le nouveau contexte”, *Lamalif*, 102 (1978), 9.

³⁹ BNF, *Le Maroc de la répression et des procès politiques*, Paris, U.N.E.M., 1972.

⁴⁰ La Contemporaine. Bibliothèque, archives, musée des mondes contemporains in Nanterre (hereafter, LC), ARCH/0301/2, Fédération de l’Europe occidentale des Étudiants progressistes marocains, UNEM, Section de Paris, Pour la levée de l’interdiction de notre union, 24 January 1975.

During the ban in Morocco, UNEM conducted most of its political activities from abroad, where intensified activism helped compensate for the deadlock faced by Moroccan student unionism. UNEM's sections abroad were organized within the *Fédération du Moyen-Orient*, the *Fédération de l'Europe de l'Est*⁴¹ and the *Fédération de l'Europe Occidentale de l'UNEM* (FEO-UNEM). In particular, the *Fédération de France de l'UNEM* (FF-UNEM) was at the core of FEO-UNEM. The FF-UNEM's Federal Office shared its headquarters at the *Paris Maison du Maroc* with the UNEM-Paris section, where also its bulletin was published.⁴²

FF-UNEM conducted extensive protest campaigns against repression and disseminated information concerning the political trials underway in Morocco. It denounced the 15-year sentences imposed on UNEM's President Abdelaziz Menebhi and Vice-President Abdelwahed Belkebir during the Casablanca trial held in August 1976, providing them with legal assistance, and coordinating with Amnesty International, which maintained an international observer at the trial.⁴³ At the same time, FF-UNEM sections mocked the regime through cartoons and satirical jabs that ridiculed the country's tourism promotion campaigns, which stood in stark contrast to the severe restrictions on freedom of expression (Heckman 2021: 199-203).

While another demonstration calling for the lifting of the ban on UNEM was held in Paris on January 24, 1976,⁴⁴ the FEO-UNEM Federal Council, which was convened in Antony (Île-de-France) from December 28, 1976, to January 1, 1977, emphasized its commitment to restoring, within the bounds of legality, an organization that would be militant, unified, mass-based, and autonomous. Moreover, the Federal Council called for the unity of Maghrebi and Arab nations and highlighted the need to integrate Western Sahara into Morocco.⁴⁵ A unitary position on Western Sahara was eventually reached following

⁴¹ On the presence of Moroccan students in Eastern Europe from the 1960s, see: Mellakh 2016: 39–56.

⁴² ADSSD, 409J/38, Union nationale des étudiants marocains (UNEM), Section de Lyon, Statut de la Fédération de l'Europe occidentale de l'UNEM, n.p.

⁴³ ADSSD, 409J/38, UNEM, Process de l'UNEM. 9–12 août 1976, September 1976, 1.

⁴⁴ ADSSD, 409J/38, UNEM, Plateforme d'orientation générale de la Fédération de l'Europe de l'Ouest de l'UNEM, année 1976–1977, 10.

⁴⁵ ADSSD, 409J/38, UNEM, Plateforme d'orientation générale de la Fédération de l'Europe de l'Ouest de l'UNEM, année 1976–1977, Paris, 1–9.

intense confrontations within FEO-UNEM, which were prompted in response to significant changes in the region.

The Green March, which symbolically marked the beginning of the Moroccan occupation of the Western Sahara in November 1975, caused a significant rift within the Moroccan Marxist-Leninist movement, which had already been weakened by repression. Within it, only *Ilā al-amām* remained committed to the principle of self-determination for the Saharawi population and, consequently, opposed the unilateral annexation of Western Sahara (Biondi 2026: Chapter 3). The shift in favor of Moroccan annexation of Western Sahara was evident among FF-UNEM sections. For instance, after 1975, the Besançon section of UNEM altered its position on Saharawi self-determination and independence claiming that annexation to Morocco would have been beneficial for the Saharawi population rather than Spanish colonial rule, which, however, was already giving way.⁴⁶

More directly, in a joint statement from their Grenoble section, the newly formed *Parti du Progrès et du Socialisme* (PPS, founded in 1974 after the dissolution of the *Parti de la Libération et du Socialisme*), the *Union Socialiste des Forces Populaires* (USFP, established in 1975 following a split from UNFP), and UNEM affirmed the legitimacy of Morocco's claim to territorial integrity, its efforts to regain the Western Sahara, and its goal of ending Spanish colonial rule in the region.⁴⁷ This statement signaled UNEM's new alignment with the legal Moroccan left parties and their belief that the annexation of Western Sahara represented the fulfillment of the national liberation struggle (Gaudio 1978: 403).

The University as a Battlefield: Leftists, Islamists, and the Siege of UNEM

In Morocco, long-term imprisonment of its members led to the suffocation of the New Left's revolutionary forces.⁴⁸ This also affected the student movement. Despite the formation of informal groups

⁴⁶ ADSSD, 409J/38, UNEM, Section de Besançon, *Bulletin*, 3 (March 1976), 11.

⁴⁷ ADSSD, 409J/38, UNEM, Les mass media in France et le problème du Sahara occidental (February 1975), n.p.

⁴⁸ "De nombreux étudiants al'raient été arrêtés au cours des derniers semaines", *Le Monde* (2 July 1977), 4.

representing a new generation of Marxist-Leninist students, such as *al-Ḥaraka al-Qa'dī* (Grassroots Movement) and the France-based *Étudiants progressistes marocains*, representatives of the USFP and PPS were prepared to bring the movement back into legality and reclaim the leadership of UNEM. PPS representatives participated in the newly established *Conseil de coordination national inter-facultés* when, in 1976-77, they responded positively to the Ministry of Education's proposal to hold student elections under the administrative supervision of the faculties.⁴⁹ After five years of interdiction, this served as the premise for UNEM to resume its activities, which occurred in November 1978.⁵⁰

The new orientation resulted, however, in a fracture between FEO-UNEM Federal Office, where resistance to the growing influence of leftist parties within the Union remained particularly strong, and the Moroccan sections (UNEM-Maroc).⁵¹ As a consequence, FEO-UNEM delegates were barred from attending the XVI Congress in 1979.⁵² At this Congress, a new majority was formed by the USFP, together with representatives from the PPS and several Marxist-Leninist members who supported the annexation of Western Sahara. Their 166 delegates prevailed over those of *al-Ḥaraka al-Qa'dī*, which nevertheless managed to elect 100 delegates. The Congress adopted a resolution in which UNEM declared its support for the "Moroccanization" of Western Sahara and the preservation of national sovereignty.⁵³ Thus, the Marxist-Leninist *Ilā al-Amām* line advocating self-determination for Western Sahara was officially abandoned by the Union (Ilā al-Amām 2018: 244).

Despite the rapprochement over positions of national unity, repression against UNEM did not cease. On January 24, 1980, a strike organized to demand the release of political prisoners led to a new wave of arrests among UNEM members, as well as a renewed, albeit temporary, ban on the association (Ben Messaoud 1980: 6). When

⁴⁹ "L'UNEM à la croisée des chemins", *Lamalif*, 130 (1981), 16.

⁵⁰ "L'UNEM et le nouveau contexte", *Lamalif*, 102 (1979), 9.

⁵¹ LC, ARCH/0301/2, Fédération de l'Europe occidentale des Étudiants progressistes marocains, Communiqué de 112 délégués de 25 sections de l'Europe occidentale concernant l'opération scissionniste entreprise par le Bureau fédéral de l'U.N.E.M. contre le mouvement des étudiants marocains en Europe occidentale et contre l'Union nationale des étudiants du Maroc, 1^o January 1978, n.p.

⁵² PAAB, Parti de l'avant-garde démocratique socialiste (PADS), Étudiants, jeunes, et répression au Maroc, 1993, 4.

⁵³ "L'UNEM et le nouveau contexte", *Lamalif*, 102 (1978), 10.

UNEM resumed its activities, it revealed divisions among political currents deeper than ever before, both within Morocco and abroad.

The XVII Congress, held at the Mohammedia School of Engineers in Rabat from August 22 to September 6, 1981, confirmed UNEM's fragmentation and marked a point of no return for what had been a left radical force (al-ʿAwnī 1997: 3–7). As a socialist orientation prevailed with 41 members of the Administrative Committee and most of the Executive Committee, tensions between its socialist and radical left wings led numerous delegates to withdraw resulting in a paralysis of the Congress's activities (Ḍarīf 1996: 74).⁵⁴ Following the failure of the Congress, a reorganization and a change of statute were recognized as necessary for the Union to navigate this impasse. Consequently, transitional committees emerged in many university centers, including Marrakesh, Meknes, Oujda, Casablanca, and Fez; however, they failed to achieve UNEM's refoundation and reunification.⁵⁵

Between the late 1970s and the early 1980s, the student population almost doubled. The steady incremental growth of the university student body continued into the second half of the decade, reaching 139,573 students in 1986–1987 (Santucci 1986: 780). Despite the establishment of new public universities,⁵⁶ the structural problems of the educational system worsened further (Ibn Abdeljalil 1987: 43–51). In this context, a new university reform project, grounded in a World Bank plan, was approved, severely undermining university funding.⁵⁷ This occurred approximately ten years after the first university reform had attempted to reorganize the sector without student participation, as UNEM was banned at the time (Daoud 1980: 8–22; Essegrouchni 1986: 16–18).

Weakened by internal competition and constrained by the new university governance system, UNEM experienced political demobilization throughout the 1980s.⁵⁸ In 1985, UNEM's Executive

⁵⁴ "La résurrection de l'UNEM", *Lamalif*, 108 (1979), 10.

⁵⁵ PAAB, Parti de l'avant-garde démocratique socialiste (PADS), *Étudiants, jeunes, et répression au Maroc*, 1993, 7.

⁵⁶ From the second half of the 1970s onwards, new university institutions were established in the cities of Casablanca, Fez, Marrakesh, Oujda, Mohammadia, El Jadida, Agadir, Kenitra, Meknes and Tangier-Tetuán, in addition to the two preexisting national universities, Muhammad V in Rabat and Qarawiyyīn in Fez.

⁵⁷ World Bank Group, Washington, D.C. "Announcement of Morocco to Launch First Phase of an Education Reform Program on March 24, 1986", *Bank News Release*, no. 61 (1986), 1.

⁵⁸ "L'UNEM à la croisée des chemins", *Lamalif*, 130 (1981), 15.

Committee was still unable to convene its Extraordinary Congress (Santucci 1985: 259). As campuses became increasingly militarized, university strikes grew ever rarer.⁵⁹ Amid exams boycotts⁶⁰ and confrontation with the police on campuses,⁶¹ UNEM took a significant turn with the rise of political Islam within Moroccan student unionism.

The first violent confrontation between Islamist forces and the trade-unionist left dates back to the mid-1970s, when *al-Shabība al-Islāmiyya*, an Islamist movement founded in 1969 (Tozy 1999: 230–232) and authorized in the fall of 1971 (Zeghal 2008: 161), assassinated trade union activist, former UNEM member, and USPF founder Omar Benjelloun on December 18, 1975. By mobilizing students and youth, *al-Shabība al-Islāmiyya* sought to weaken the left's cultural hegemony (Tozy 1999: 231; Zeghal 2008: 162). During UNEM's interdiction, attempts by *al-Shabība al-Islāmiyya* militants to occupy universities and schools resulted in minor skirmishes with the *Syndicat national des lycéens*, which attracted high school students with leftist orientation (Rollinde 2003: 169–70). Although initially supported by the regime to oppose the New Left on university campuses, the movement did not survive the fallout from Benjelloun's assassination. *Al-Shabība al-Islāmiyya* was outlawed in 1976, after its founder Abdelkrim Muti fled abroad (Wegner 2011: 22). Nevertheless, with the advent of the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and the global revitalization of political Islam, Moroccan Islamism entered a new phase.

In the 1980s, the *Jāmi'at al-'Adl wa-l-Iḥsan* (Justice and Charity Group) led by Shaykh Abdesslam Yassine, emerged. The group attracted students in order to penetrate university networks and institutions (Munson 1993: 191). By 1984–85, supporters of the Islamic group were officially able to assert their presence within UNEM (Park, Boum 2016: 118). The entry of an Islamist nucleus into UNEM, and, more generally, the emergence of an Islamist-led student movement, took place with the tacit consent of the authorities, serving an anti-leftist purpose (VV. AA. 2017: 102; Wegner 2011: 19). At the same time, the strengthening of

⁵⁹ "Tafāqam azmat al-jāmi'a wa-l-rudūd al-ḥukūmiyya" [The University Crisis Worsens: The Governmental Responses], *Anwāl*, 23 (30 December 1981), 4.

⁶⁰ "Répression dans le mouvement étudiant", *Maroc répression. Bulletin de l'association de soutien aux comités de lutte contre la répression au Maroc*, 100 (1989), 11.

⁶¹ LC, ARCH/0301/2, Association de soutien aux comités de lutte contre la répression au Maroc, Étudiants progressistes marocains, À propos de la lutte estudiantine à l'Université Mohamed I de Oujda, Paris, 21 December 1987, 10.

Islamic studies at the expense of the humanities – also linked to efforts to contain the New Left – fostered the Islamization of Moroccan youth.

By 1991, *Jāmi‘at al-‘Adl wa-l-Iḥsan* was present on university campuses with its own student groups (Ḍarīf 1996: 149). In February 1992, the student branch of the *Organisation du Renouveau Etudiantin au Maroc* (OREMA) (Ḍarīf 1996: 83) was established by members of the *Ḥaraka al-Iṣlāḥ wa-l-Tajdīd* (*Mouvement réforme et renouveau*), which had developed out of *al-Shabība al-Islamiyya*. A third Islamist group, *Ṭalabat al-Mithāq* (Students of the Charter), emerged in 1993 with the aim of uniting the Islamic student front (Ḍarīf 1996: 163–171; Monjib 2018: 30–33).

Islamists became the dominant force in several university centers, including Marrakesh, Meknes, Agadir, and Kenitra, often clashing with leftist students. In November 1991, a leftist student was killed in Oujda by a member of the *Jāmi‘at al-‘Adl wa-l-Iḥsān*, and seven people died during clashes between Islamists and leftists at Mohammed Ben Abdellah University in Fez (Park, Boum 2016: xviii). This episode led to nearly 50 arrests and prison sentences for the members of both factions (Rollinde 2003: 296). In February 1993, an attack by Islamist students claimed the life of another leftist UNEM activist.⁶²

The emergence of political Islam in student activism positioned UNEM at the center of a conflict between Islamist and leftist forces vying for control of the national Moroccan student Union. Amid the left’s crisis of representation, the *Jāmi‘at al-‘Adl wa-l-Iḥsan* was able to mobilize student support and leverage it to reclaim influence within UNEM. In 1991, students from the *Jāmi‘at al-‘Adl wa-l-Iḥsan* were included in UNEM’s National Transitional Council. Established in Fez, it, however, failed to relaunch the union on a pluralistic basis (al-‘Awnī 1997: 36; Ḍarīf 1996: 82–83).

Factionalism and the impossibility of dialectical confrontation were predominant at UNEM’s last national meeting, held in Kenitra in November 1995 (Ḍarīf 1996: 83). It, nevertheless, foreshadowed the definitively takeover of the Union by members of the *Jāmi‘at al-‘Adl wa-l-Iḥsan* the following year. The new Islamic orientation also extended abroad to the *Maison du Maroc* in Paris, once a left revolutionary stronghold of UNEM. Favored by Islamic-oriented presidencies of the *Maison* in the early 1990s, the entry of Islamist students and the

⁶² PAAB, Parti de l’avant-garde démocratique socialiste (PADS), Étudiants, jeunes, et répression au Maroc, 1993, 23.

assumption of positions within the *Maison's* organizational body resulted in a tense cohabitation with leftist representatives (Bouaziz, Denglos 2022: 255–264).

In the second half of the 1990s, the Islamist takeover of UNEM was accompanied by an increasingly pervasive dynamic of institutional control over the higher education system. In 1997, nine new university chancellors were appointed, five of whom came directly from the Ministries of Interior and Information. On January 20, 1997, a circular issued jointly by the Ministries of Interior, Information, and Higher Education sought to restrict access to university campuses for non-registered students, increased police presence and surveillance, and impose authorization requirements for organizing on-campus events (al-Ghazālī 1997: 163–164). In the face of a substantial depoliticization of the student body and the downsizing of student unionism, UNEM lost much of its historical political influence. Nevertheless, this did not undermine UNEM's Islamist orientation, which it has maintained throughout the 2000s and continues to uphold to the present day (UNEM 2025).

Conclusion

At the heart of the Moroccan student unionism for over forty years (1956–1997) and beyond, UNEM encompassed a wide spectrum of often conflicting political orientations, while the authorities sought to control, repress, and depoliticize it. As this study has shown, UNEM's initial nationalist orientation was quickly reversed due to widespread dissatisfaction with the Moroccan regime's inability to sever ties with the elitist French colonial educational system. The lack of commitment to establishing a free and open university, coupled with unfulfilled promises to create employment opportunities for graduates, contributed to the Union's radicalization.

As such, UNEM became the arena for the development of the Moroccan New Left at the expense of the UNFP. Foreshadowed by an increasingly critical stance toward the country's government, a Marxist-Leninist orientation was consolidated at the 1972 Congress with the election of President Abdelaziz Menebhi. More broadly, this dynamic reflected the rise of the Arab New Left as a transnational and influential ideology in the region. For example, in a parallel case, at the XVIII Congress of the *Union Générale des Étudiants de Tunisie*, held in Korba in August 1971, the Tunisian New Left secured a majority

over representatives of the *Parti socialiste destourien*, triggering waves of arrests and violence that culminated on February 5, 1972, in “Black Saturday” (Jebari 2022: 119–120).

Similarly, UNEM and its leadership were subjected to extensive waves of arbitrary arrests, mock trials, and persecutions characteristic of the Years of Lead, culminating in its banning from 1974 to 1978. During this period, UNEM’s sections abroad vocally protested against the repression, highlighting the high degree of internationalization of the Moroccan student movement and its integration into broader transnational solidarity networks. With more members abroad than in Morocco, activities conducted overseas came to represent the entire student union. Notably, the French sections anticipated emerging tendencies within the union, such as the (re)affirmation of the “legal” political left, as well as the conflicts with the resilient wing of the radical left.

UNEM’s return to legality was facilitated by the new dominant orientation of the PPS and USFP, which marked the definitive abandonment of the *Ilā al-Amām* Marxist-Leninist faction on the issue of self-determination for Western Sahara. However, these parties were only able to reestablish a fragile leadership over the Union. In 1981, the XVII Congress officially confirmed UNEM’s fragmentation and its inability to relaunch the organization on a unitary basis. This phase also coincided with a narrowing of UNEM’s internationalist outlook, as its foreign sections were no longer involved in the Union’s internal affairs. Consequently, the union progressively lost the international dimension that had characterized it from the outset.

UNEM’s inability to manage the dialectic among its various currents paved the way for the penetration of political Islam into student unionism. Islamist groups expanded rapidly during the 1980s, clashing with leftist forces on campus, until UNEM transformed into an Islamist-oriented organization by the mid-1990s. Despite the ideological polarity of these movements, leftist and Islamist extra-parliamentary forces recognized youth, and consequently the national student union, as a strategic asset, each seeking to monopolize it during different decades. Islamism’s appeal to a new generation of students mirrored the consolidation of the Islamist movement in the Moroccan public and political sphere, a dynamic shaped by the global rise of political Islam as a renewed framework of identity in Arab-Muslim countries from the 1980s onward.

After initially tolerating it, the regime began to fear the strength of Islamist mobilization and sought to contain it more decisively from the 1990s onward, also imposing tighter direct control over universities. Nevertheless, Islamism continued to shape UNEM's political orientation for decades. Although its capacity to mobilize and exert influence over the university student body no longer matches that of the Union's heyday in the 1960s and 1970s, its predominance still persists to this day.

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