

# Morocco: Islamist Electoral Legitimacy Four Years after the Arab Spring

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On 4 September 2015, Moroccans went to the polls to elect not only their municipal councillors but also, for the first time, the members of the reformed regional councils. Beyond their local significance, these elections reflected the polarized partisan scenario that defines the post-Arab Spring. Running against the Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD), which has led the coalition government since 2011, the Authenticity and Modernity Party (PAM) consolidated its leadership at the regional level at a time when regions have taken on greater prominence as a result of the renewed impetus given to the advanced regionalization project. Although governing has not eroded support for the PJD, which received one and a half million votes, making it the country's leading political force, the PAM is strongly positioned to benefit from the process of gradual decentralization of the state.

## **PJD: Urban leadership**

According to a classic hypothesis, once an Islamist party assumes the task of governing and loses its *virginity*, much of its appeal and ability to mobilize should disappear. However, the PJD was the most-voted force in the regional elections and came in third at the local level. In any case, it has consolidated its leadership in major urban centres and holds the mayoralties of cities such as Rabat, Casablanca, Marrakesh and Tangier.

The PJD drew half a million more voters than in the legislative elections of 2011, despite several circumstances that could have worked against it. Initially scheduled for 2012, the elections were pushed back three years in a gesture seen by some PJD leaders as an attempt to mitigate the “Arab Spring effect” and take advantage of a hypothetical decline in support for the party. Likewise, throughout the term and, also, during the election year, the PJD came under fire from various sources. The most ideologically distant sectors accused it of pursuing a religious agenda, pointing to the complaint filed against Jennifer López, accused of undermining modesty and Moroccan values, as proof of the attempt to impose a moralizing social model. Moreover, different groups rebelled against what they considered to be a limited capacity for dialogue. In addition to protests by unemployed university graduates and Amazigh associations, trade unions called various strikes to express their opposition to the pension reform promoted by the party. At the same time, another narrative was incorporated into public life. In contrast to that which emphasized the party's relatively good economic management and passage of organic laws, this new narrative pointed to the limits of the reforms, the party's narrow margin for action in the highly ideologically heterogeneous coalition government, and the continued application of the same logics of action.

## *The PJD: the elements of legitimization*

Indeed, the September elections can be viewed as an overall referendum on the PJD and a prelude to the 2016 elections. Beyond considerations regarding its work at the head of the coalition governmental, the (good) showing underscores the effectiveness of the party's pragmatic strategy, based on avoiding conflict with the monarchy whilst, at the

Party	Seats/Members elect	Percentage
Authenticity and Modernity Party (PAM)	6,655	21.12%
Istiqlal Party (PI)	5,106	16.22%
Justice and Development Party (PJD)	5,021	15.94%
National Rally of Independents (RNI)	4,408	13.99%
Popular Movement (MP)	3,007	9.54%

same time, differentiating itself from its competitors. To mitigate the potentially adverse effects of the opposition's transition to the task of legislating and governing and to capitalize on the system's "real traces of democracy,"<sup>1</sup> the PJD bases its actions on two core ideas:

- Fluid and direct communication with *the people*. Benkirane's role here is essential, as shown by his participation in the electoral campaign. His populist style of communicating, his use of colloquial Arabic and plain and powerful language, connects with part of the electorate, who feel directly addressed and represented.
- The need to retain its voters' trust. In addition to including references to religion and identity, the party emphasizes good governance, transparency and honesty. Given the impossibility of criticizing the political system as a whole and pointing out its shortcomings, the party seeks to present itself as a role model and example of honesty and internal democracy.

#### *The PAM: the other big winner*

Despite placing second in the September elections, the subsequent negotiations afforded the PAM a predominant position in the renewed regional architecture. Thus, the party holds the presidency of five of the twelve regional councils, chosen for the first time by vote and given expanded jurisdiction and budgetary powers under the organic law on regions passed in July 2015.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, this latest boost to the *advanced regionalization* project, which has become one of the central features of Mohammed VI's reign, invests the regional council presidents with executive power and gives the regional bodies a prominent role in the design, implementation and monitoring of economic, social and cultural development programmes.

Party	Seats/Members elect	Percentage
Justice and Development Party (PJD)	174	25.66%
Authenticity and Modernity Party (PAM)	132	19.47%
Istiqlal Party (PI)	119	17.55%

The PAM is therefore advantageously positioned in the decentralization process and thus able to pursue its original regional focus, "one of its distinctive ideological traits."<sup>3</sup> From this renewed position of strength, it is able to better play the main role for which it was founded in 2008: to offer an alternative, opposition and counterbalance to Islamism.

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The post-election landscape therefore confirms the dual nature of the Moroccan party system. On the one hand, the PAM, which defines itself as centre-left, is consolidating its presence in rural regions and the country's north through a network of well-connected and influential local notables.

<sup>1</sup> DESRUES, Thierry and HERNANDO DE LARRAMENDI, Miguel (coords.). *Mohamed VI. Política y cambio social en Marruecos*. Córdoba: Almuzara, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> The full text of the law is available at [http://81.192.52.100/BO/FR/2016/BO\\_6440\\_Fr.pdf](http://81.192.52.100/BO/FR/2016/BO_6440_Fr.pdf) (in French).

<sup>3</sup> SUÁREZ COLLADO, Ángela. "MARRUECOS/ La inesperada desbalcanización de la vida política. Elecciones comunales en la ciudad de Alhucemas." *Observatorio Electoral TEIM-OPEMAM*, 20 August 2009.

On the other, the PJD has reaffirmed its leadership in urban areas and confirmed itself as a party with a consistent ideological base and national reach.

### **Moroccan diplomacy at full capacity: the 'Sahrawi question' as the cornerstone**

The photograph of Mohammed VI being received by the French President at the Élysée Palace in February 2015 symbolized the country's reconciliation with France, marking the end of a period of profound disagreements that had begun a year before. However, the image of a proactive and cooperative Morocco projected by the resumption of judicial and security agreements was short-lived.

On 10 December, the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) annulled the agreement for the liberalization of agricultural and fishery products between Morocco and the EU "in so far as [the corresponding Council Decision] approves the application of the agreement to the territory of Western Sahara." Although economically the sentence did not deliver too harsh a blow, in terms of its political significance it did. The CJEU listed the arguments used by the Front Polisario, which it recognized as a legal entity, and referred to both the disputed sovereignty of Western Sahara and a possible violation of fundamental rights of the Sahrawi population.<sup>4</sup> In terms of the symbolism of winning or losing, Morocco's angry reaction, suspending "all contact with European institutions"<sup>5</sup> at the start of the year, was indicative of the offence perceived by Rabat.

The call for calm by the High Representative for European Foreign Policy, Federica Mogherini, and the explicit support of Morocco's theses by several European countries (France, Spain, Germany and Belgium) were of little help. From the Moroccan point of view, any dispute involving Western Sahara, whose international recognition as part of the Alawite country is the "ultimate goal" of its external action, jeop-

ardizes the harmonization of its roles as "good student of the international community" and "territorial champion," causing it to emphasize the latter role to such an extent as to become "a spoiler at the international level."<sup>6</sup>

### **The PJD bases its actions on two core ideas: fluid and direct communication with *the people* need to retain its voters' trust**

The same logic was again apparent after UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon used the term "occupied" in reference to the Sahara on his visit to the region and to the refugee camps in Tindouf in March 2016, sparking a deep crisis between the UN and Rabat, which expelled MINURSO's civilian staff from Laayoune.<sup>7</sup> The political response was followed by a popular one: thousands of people from all over Morocco took to the streets of the capital to show their opposition to Ban Ki-moon's words and their support for the national authorities. By involving its population, Morocco aims to transcend the logic of a conflict promoted by the elite and to project instead a bottom-up image, in which it is civil society itself that claims sovereignty over the territory.

#### *The Mohammed VI Foundation: reconnection with Africa and religious leadership*

In April 2016, Casablanca hosted HUB Africa, a forum for promoting investment and entrepreneurship on the continent. In May, Mohammed VI paid official visits to Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau and Gabon, reinforcing his image as the "African king."<sup>8</sup> In July, the Mohammed VI Foundation for African Ulemas was created to "raise awareness of, spread

<sup>4</sup> The full text of the sentence is available at: <http://curia.europa.eu/juris/document/document.jsf?text=&docid=172870&pageIndex=0&doclang=FR&mode=lst&dir=&occ=first&part=1&cid=164110>.

<sup>5</sup> According to declarations by Mustapha El Khalfi, Minister of Communication and government spokesperson, following the Government Council meeting on 25 February 2016; see: "Le Maroc suspend tout contact avec les institutions européennes." *Aujourd'hui Le Maroc*, 25 February 2016. Available at <http://aujourd'hui.ma/actualite/le-maroc-suspend-tout-contact-avec-les-institutions-europeennes>

<sup>6</sup> FERNÁNDEZ-MOLINA, I. Moroccan foreign policy under Mohammed VI, 1999-2014. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Ltd, 2016, pp. 47-48.

<sup>7</sup> UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara.

<sup>8</sup> Part of the press has begun to call him this. See, for example: SOUDAN, François. "Mohammed VI, African King." *Jeune Afrique*, June 2015. Available at: [www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/235744/politique/mohamed-vi-african-king/](http://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/235744/politique/mohamed-vi-african-king/).

and consolidate the values of tolerant Islam.”<sup>9</sup> In addition to furthering the common goal of reconnecting Morocco with the African region, the initiative explicitly introduced a religious dimension into the country’s foreign policy.

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Its strategic interest goes beyond actively promoting the country’s thesis with regard to the Sahara. By championing “tolerant,” “modern” Islam, Morocco aims to secure a special role as a partner at a time when the international agenda is marked by radicalism. Thus, the Alawite country is helping to train Tunisian, Malian and even French imams, allowing it to add a new layer to its external image: that of its commitment to fighting terrorism with education.

Moreover, this position dovetails with the desire to cultivate ties with the expatriate Moroccan community. The promotion of a message “in perfect consonance” with the “national elections,” to quote Mohammed VI in his Feast of the Throne address, aims to prevent Islamist associations critical of the monarchy from occupying this space. The King is able to reaffirm and project his religious authority whilst at the same time promoting a spiritual discourse separate from politics.

#### *Morocco and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC): in search of the status quo*

The participation of the Royal Armed Forces (RAF) in the Saudi-led Operation Decisive Storm (in Yemen) is another component of the strategic partnership between Morocco and the GCC. Other threads have also been woven into the relationship, which has intensified since the (by now, post-) Arab Spring. Thus, Riyadh and other Gulf capitals lend their diplomatic support to Rabat on the “Sahrawi question” and have begun to top the list of investors in the Alawite country.

These actions aim to ensure the Sunni monarchies’ political and economic stability in a geopolitical context marked by the growing influence of Iran. To this end, they must be understood as part of a broader strategy to preserve the regional *status quo*.

<sup>9</sup> For more comprehensive information about the Foundation’s objectives and organization, see its official website at: [www.habous.gov.ma/fr/fondation-mohammed-vi-des-oul%C3%A9mas-africains](http://www.habous.gov.ma/fr/fondation-mohammed-vi-des-oul%C3%A9mas-africains)