

Islamism, Democratization and Disillusionment: Morocco's Legislative

Elections of 2007

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Summary

The legislative elections held in Morocco in September 2007 attracted significant outside attention. This was due to two factors: firstly, because Morocco had gained a reputation as one of the most politically liberal states in the Arab World and secondly because an Islamist political party, the Party of Justice and Development (PJD), was widely expected to win the elections. The subsequent failure of the PJD to win the elections therefore provoked surprise. The largely well-run and transparent nature of the election indicated that the regime had not intervened to prevent a PJD victory. Instead the party had suffered from an overarching disillusionment with the whole electoral and representative process in Morocco revealed in the extremely low turnout and high number of spoiled ballots at the election. The concentration of all meaningful political power in the hands of the Monarchy has undermined belief in elected institutions even if those institutions are now fairly elected. This state of affairs threatens to lead to growing popular unrest in the Morocco as it struggles to deal with local effects of the global economic crisis. Morocco therefore represents a case where progressively transparently elected institutions do not equate to meaningful democratisation.

Introduction

The national legislative elections held in Morocco on September 7 2007 attracted an unusually high level interest from an outside world not usually very concerned with the domestic politics of the North African Kingdom. The first point of interest was the fact of

elections taking place in an Arab state. Increasing attention had focused over the proceeding few years on the perceived need for democracy in the Arab world. The fact that legislative elections in Morocco had become increasingly regular and progressively less fettered by the authorities over recent years promised that the 2007 vote would be a further significant step further along the road to political liberalisation and even democratisation in one of the Arab world's most politically liberal states. As an indication of the continued progress Morocco was making in this regard, for the first time a team of international observers was allowed to follow the elections. Morocco's apparent progress was thrown into further relief since amidst the gloom produced by the violence in Iraq, stalemate in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and with Lebanon threatening to slide back into civil conflict, Morocco seemed to be one of the few glimmers of light for not just democratization but also political stability in the Arab world beyond the mixed blessings of the bonanza brought by rising international oil prices in the Gulf region.

A second reason for international attention being paid to Morocco's elections was the prospect of a good performance by an Islamist party in the elections: the Party of Justice and Development (PJD) was widely predicted to not only perform strongly in the elections but also potentially win them. The significant alarm that such a prospect might have provoked in many other states was tempered in Morocco by the consensual, gradualist and peaceful approach that the PJD had adopted since it had entered politics a decade earlier. Indeed, the party was seen as providing a useful model for Islamist parties elsewhere in the region. The United States, in particular, had begun over recent years to pay close attention to Morocco and the PJD in this regard.¹ There was considerable interest as to whether Morocco would be the first country in the Arab world to experience a peaceful transition to an Islamist dominated government and avoid the painful examples of the Palestinian authority following the election

¹ Sharp, Jeremy M. 'U.S. Democracy Promotion Policy in the Middle East: The Islamist Dilemma' Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report for Congress. 15 June 2006, 11-18. <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33486.pdf>

of a Hamas government in 2006 and, perhaps even more pertinently, neighbouring Algeria where an Islamist party had swept the polls in 1991.

‘Morocco Will be Islamist’

The issue attracting most interest was, inevitably, the performance of the Islamist PJD. Formally allowed into the political system in 1996 as part of a broader move towards political liberalisation in Morocco during the 1990s, the PJD had contested the two previous parliamentary elections of 1997 and 2002. Very aware of the fact that the party had been allowed into the system on the sufferance of the Moroccan regime which could clampdown on it and eject it from the legal political arena at any time, the leaders of the PJD adopted a softly-softly approach, eschewing radical rhetoric and putting only limited numbers of candidates up for election.² The party explicitly acknowledged the example of the experience of neighbouring Algeria in the 1990s when a sweeping set of victories for the newly created Islamic Salvation Front – or FIS (*Front Islamique du Salut*) – had led to the cancellation of the elections, the dissolution of the party, an army crackdown and a decade of bloody civil strife. As Abdelillah Benkirane, a senior figure in the PJD acknowledged in the run-up to the previous elections in 2002, “The Algerian scenario is the fear of all Moroccans.”³

In spite of this caution, the PJD performed well where it put up candidates in elections. It became the third largest party in the parliament following the 2002 elections in spite of fielding candidates in only 60% of the electoral districts. The strength of the party’s performance in 2002 inevitably led to speculation as to whether it would have become the largest party if it had put up candidates in all of the districts.

² The party put up candidates in only 43% of electoral districts in the legislative elections of 1997 and 61% in those of 2002. For details of the PJD’s entrance into the political system and its participation in the elections of 1997 and 2002 see Michael J. Willis, ‘Between *Alternance* and the *Makhzen*: At-Tawhid wa Al-Islah’s Entry into Moroccan Politics’ *The Journal of North African Studies* 4, No. 3 (Autumn 1999) and Michael J. Willis, ‘Morocco’s Islamists and the Legislative Elections of 2002: The Strange Case of the Party that did not Want to Win’ *Mediterranean Politics*, 9, No. 1, (Winter 2004)

³ Thierry Oberlé, ‘L’opposition islamiste perce au Parlement’, *Le Figaro* 30 September 2002

The view that the party was potentially the most popular in the country was strengthened in the aftermath of the 2002 elections as the party showed itself to have not only momentum but a drive and organisation noticeably absent amongst Morocco's other political parties that functioned largely through clientalism.⁴ The performance of the party's deputies in the parliament, who were of a much high calibre and educational level than those of the other parties, also impressed with PJD members having the best rates of attendance at parliamentary sessions and asking the most questions of ministers.⁵

Broader factors within and beyond Morocco also seemed to strengthen the PJD. Within Morocco itself, the rise in symbols of popular piety such as the wearing of the Islamic headscarf and the beard and attendance at mosque, although complex phenomena, indicated a growing potential audience for Islamist ideas amongst the population. Beyond Morocco, the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the continuing bloodshed in Palestine strengthened sentiments of Islamic solidarity which the PJD was best placed to exploit - many PJD voters in 2002 having cited this factor in determining their vote.⁶

The growing belief that a PJD victory in the elections scheduled for 2007 was inevitable thus began to gain ground – surviving the difficult period following the series of suicide bombings in Casablanca in May 2003 which many of the PJD's political and ideological opponents tried to blame on the broader influence of the party's Islamist ideas.⁷ A year before the elections, in 2006, two French journalists even published a book entitled 'When Morocco will be Islamist.'⁸ More devastating still was the publication of two opinion polls carried out by an American NGO, the International Republican Institute (IRI) which credited the PJD

⁴ Michael J. Willis, 'Political Parties in the Maghreb: The Illusion of Significance' *The Journal of North African Studies* 7, No. 2, (2002), 14-16

⁵ Eva Wegner, 'Morocco: PJD Works at Being New and Different', *Arab Reform Bulletin*, 4, No. 3 April 2006. <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/arb/?fa=show&article=20921>

⁶ Willis, 'Morocco's Islamists', 68

⁷ Michael J. Willis, 'Justice and Development or Justice and Spirituality?: The Challenge of Morocco's Nonviolent Islamist Movements' in *The Maghrib in the New Century: Identity, Religion and Politics* eds. Bruce Maddy-Weitzman and Daniel Zisenwine, (Gainesville:,University of Florida Press, 2007), 162

⁸ Nicolas Beau and Catherine Graciet, *Quand Le Maroc Sera Islamiste* (Paris: La Découverte, 2006)

with attracting between 45-50% of the vote in a future election. The polls – which were meant to be private but which were leaked in the Moroccan press - created a shock wave in the political system.⁹ Many opponents of the PJD and figures in the regime poured scorn on the veracity of the polling. The PJD, aware of the alarm that such a prospect could cause, similarly played down the significance of the polls.¹⁰

At the same time, however, the PJD asserted that it was clearly the best supported party in Morocco with senior figures in the party stating that they expected to win 25-30% of the vote and 60-70 seats in the parliament.¹¹ Despite being well down on the IRI forecasts, the PJD's own predictions would still place the party ahead of the other parties in Morocco's fragmented political map which had resulted in no individual party achieving more than 15% of the vote in the two previous elections.

The stage thus seemed set for a PJD victory and, in the run up to the vote, two questions seemed to of importance. Firstly, there was the question as to whether the Moroccan regime in the shape of the Royal Palace would allow the PJD to be shown as the largest party in the elections or whether it would be tempted to revert to ballot rigging practices of past elections. Secondly, there was the issue of whether the King would be prepared to offer the PJD ministries in a post election government if the PJD did perform as well as was expected. The Palace had originally allowed the party into the political system as a means of undercutting support for more radical Islamist sentiment that had appeared to be on the increase in Morocco in the early 1990s. Although the PJD had fully accepted official stipulations that it reject violence, endorse constitutional practices and, most importantly, accept the legitimacy of the Moroccan Monarchy in return for being allowed to contest

⁹ See A. Jamaï, F. Iraqi and M. Rhandi, 'Demain les Islamistes?', *Le Journal Hebdomadaire*, 247, 18 March 2006.

¹⁰ For a fuller analysis of the IRI poll and its leaking see A.M.Spiegel, 'The Pollbearer: A Letter from Rabat', *The American Interest* 2, No.5, (May/June 2007).

¹¹ Sami Ghorbal, 'Confidences de...Abdelilah Benkirane', *Jeune Afrique* No. 2434 2-8 September 2007; Omar Dahbi, 'El Othmani estime que le PJD aura entre 60 et 70 députés' *Aujourd'hui Le Maroc* 24 August 2007

elections, many in official circles harboured doubts about the party.¹² They feared that if the party were ever to achieve any sort of political power, it would reveal a far more radical side to its nature. There were also concerns that the election of a parliament dominated by an Islamist party would be greeted with alarm abroad – especially in France - which could adversely affect Morocco’s trade relations and lucrative tourist industry.¹³

On the question of official temptations to rig the ballot, the rigging of the elections posed numerous risks for the Moroccan regime that could outweigh the possible benefits of such a move. The presence of international observers, led by the US democracy promotion NGO the National Democratic Institute (NDI), made it likely that any large-scale concerted attempt to falsify the voting would be detected and would seriously undermine Morocco’s image abroad and damage the country’s growing reputation for political liberalism both inside and beyond its borders.

On the second question of PJD participation in a post-election government, it promised to be interesting to see if the King would be willing to appoint not just PJD ministers but, given the likelihood of the party emerging as the largest in the parliament, appoint the leader of the party, Saad Eddine Othmani, to the post of prime minister. Although the King retained the constitutional prerogative to appoint whomever he wished to the post of prime minister, the practice of appointing the leader of the largest party in the parliament to the premiership, as practiced in most European liberal democracies, had been followed in the wake of the 1997 elections. The fact that it had been the long time opposition party the Socialist Union of Popular Forces – or USFP (Union Socialiste de Forces Populaires) – that had emerged as the largest party in 1997 and that this did not prevent the King nominating the USFP’s leader, Abderrahmane El Youssoufi as prime minister, was widely applauded as a

¹² Willis, ‘Justice and Development or Justice and Spirituality’, 157-158

¹³ On a trip to Paris in December 2006 the Moroccan prime minister, Driss Jettou, reassured French business leaders that a PJD victory in the upcoming elections would not lead to a change in Moroccan policy. Heba Saleh, ‘Morocco PM moves to calm fears over poll’, *Financial Times* 29 December 2006

significant step towards political liberalisation and democratisation. When this practice was broken with following the 2002 elections when the USFP again emerged as the largest party but King Mohammed appointed a non party technocrat as prime minister, the move was widely portrayed as a backward step. A return to the practice of the appointment of the leader of the largest party to emerge from the elections was seen by many within Morocco as a key test of the regime's commitment to political liberalisation. If the PJD were to become, as most people anticipated, the largest party in the parliament this would mean Morocco having an Islamist prime minister.¹⁴

Morocco Will Not be Islamist

The election duly took place on September 7th but as the results from the voting filtered through the in the days that followed the election, it appeared that things were not occurring as predicted. Most noticeably, there was no apparent surge for the PJD: the party attracted just 11% of the votes cast in the constituencies and won just 46 seats in the new parliament – a result far short of even the PJD's own cautious predictions.¹⁵ The party that emerged as the proclaimed 'winner' of the election was the Istiqlal Party – the veteran conservative nationalist party – which having won the largest number of seats in the parliament saw its leader, Abbas Al Fassi, invited by the King to form a government in which the PJD were not even invited to participate.

¹⁴ Senior figures in the PJD later stated that they had not anticipated the leader of the PJD, Saad Eddine Othmani, being appointed prime minister, even in the event of the party becoming the largest party in the parliament after the elections, because they judged that the political scene was "not yet ready for that." Mustapha Khalfi, (Director of PJD Policy Commissions) in discussion with the author, Rabat, 4 April 2008.

¹⁵ For the official results see Royaume du Maroc, Ministère de l'Interieur: *Elections Legislatives 2007* (<http://www.elections.gov.ma/elu/clean/CandNomNAT.aspx>) Voters also cast votes for national party lists to elect thirty seats reserved for female candidates. The PJD secured just over 13% of the vote on these lists.

The obvious question that arose was: what had happened to the PJD whose domination of the elections had been taken as a given for months? What could account for what many of the party's enemies claimed was a catastrophic failure?

It is worthwhile being rather more specific about the nature of this failure which in reality was more relative than absolute. The party increased its presence in the parliament – albeit by just 4 seats – and moved from being the third largest party in the parliament to being the second. More importantly, the final detailed results of the election showed that the PJD *had* in fact emerged as the most popular party – winning more votes than any other party, but was deprived of becoming the largest party by the mechanics of the electoral system which had clearly favoured the Istiqlal party that had concentrated the votes it had received more effectively in the electoral districts than had the PJD. Nevertheless, despite these provisos, the PJD had still fallen short of all the expectations in the run-up to the election.

Explaining the PJD Failure

In the wake of the election results, there was no end of different explanations offered from all quarters for the unexpectedly poor result achieved by the PJD. The jubilant Istiqlal Party attributed its success to the resistance of both the party and the Moroccan people to what it described as a concerted campaign by the international media and the US government in support of a PJD victory. Indeed, Istiqlal militants chanted: 'No to America! No to Al Jazeera!' during celebrations – arguing that Middle Eastern media and an American desire to use Morocco as a laboratory for its political experiments – as in Iraq - were behind the international attention that had focused on the PJD during the campaign.¹⁶ However, although these factors may have swayed a few voters, such a claim was fundamentally only nationalist rhetoric from the Istiqlal which owed its success to more prosaic factors.

¹⁶ Larbi Messari (Member of the Istiqlal Party's ruling council), in discussion with the author, Rabat, 9 September 2007.

For the PJD itself, it made it quite clear that it believed that it had been robbed of its victory by foul means. Significantly, the party did not imply that the whole election had been rigged by the authorities with the results simply falsified as had occurred in elections in the past. It did not make such a claim partly due to its policy of avoiding direct confrontation with the regime. More importantly, though, it was also due to the fact that the general consensus – including the political parties and the international election observers – was that the actual process of voting and the final counting of the votes cast had been remarkably transparent and fair. The National Democratic Institute, which had led the team of international observers, concluded that “overall the voting went smoothly and was characterized by a spirit of transparency and professionalism.” The counting of votes at the central polling offices formally observed “was transparent and there was no evidence of significant irregularities.”¹⁷

The PJD’s complaints thus concerned elements of the electoral process other than the formal voting and vote counting that it perceived to have been biased against it. Firstly, there was the accusation - already made well before the election - of gerrymandering by the authorities in the redrawing of the electoral districts between the 2002 and 2007 elections.¹⁸ Secondly, there was the allegation of massive vote-buying by the other parties during the elections. Thirdly there was the charge that candidates of other parties had made significant use of public funds and resources through abuse of positions that they held in public office. Lastly there was the policy of what was described as ‘negative neutrality’ pursued by the authorities with regard to these infractions, enabling them to go unchallenged and unpunished.¹⁹

¹⁷ National Democratic Institute (NDI), *Final Report on the Moroccan Legislative Elections, September 7, 2007*. (Washington: National Democratic Institute, , 2007), 25 and 16.

¹⁸ Mohamed Boudarham, ‘PJD: El Othmani fustige le découpage électoral’, *Aujourd’hui Le Maroc* 16 February 2007

¹⁹ PJD activists in discussion with the author, PJD Headquarters, Rabat, 8 September 2007. For detailed examples of these allegations see the PJD’s newspaper *Justice et Développement* 10 September 2007.

The validity of all of these points is difficult to judge but the PJD was specific in many of its accusations and anecdotal evidence indicates that there was something to each of its charges - most notably with regard to the redrawing of constituency boundaries and the prevalence of vote-buying.²⁰ The PJD argued that these factors had collectively deprived them of as many as ten seats in the parliament.²¹ Yet it should be noted that even if these ten seats had been won by the PJD, this would have resulted in it having 56 seats – still below the bottom end of its own purposefully modest pre-election estimates of its score. Indeed, it is difficult to believe that the combined impact of even widespread local skulduggery could have reduced the PJD's representation by much more than ten seats. Even the redrawing of the electoral districts, which certainly did appear to damage the PJD more than other parties, could not have had a huge impact and could have had no impact on the PJD's overall national vote. Indeed, the 11% of the vote the party received across the local constituencies was not just less than half of the vote the PJD had itself predicted but was less than a quarter of what the two IRI polls had predicted. Only massive fraud carried out by the authorities at the final stages of the counting of the votes could have reduced the PJD score so massively. The fact that the international observers and even the PJD acknowledged that no such fraud occurred still leaves the question of why the PJD performed so badly largely unanswered.

The Party ventured other explanations other than foul play for its poor performance. Many senior PJD figures argued that the party had suffered through its attempts to run a modern campaign which put emphasis on modern forms of communication and the fielding of well-educated, capable candidates. They argued that despite its apparent advantages, rival parties relied heavily on more traditional techniques that ultimately proved to be much more effective

²⁰ On the accusation of gerrymandering, the NDI stated that there was “serious concern” regarding the redistricting which had resulted in “substantially unequal numbers of voters per representative” and formally acknowledged that this seemed to have adversely affected the PJD in particular. On the allegation of vote-buying the NDI stated that it could not determine the extent of the practice but noted that high number of allegations. National Democratic Institute (NDI), *Final Report on the Moroccan Legislative Elections*, 11 and 15.

²¹ Catherine Graciet, ‘Les islamistes crient à la supercherie électorale’ *Le Journal Hebdomadaire*, No. 316, 15-21 September 2007

at attracting the support of voters than the PJD's approach. Rather than recruiting competent or qualified candidates, many of the PJD's rivals focused on adopting candidates with strong local profiles and roots who could mobilise support, particularly in rural areas, for the party. This policy of recruiting local 'notables' was used particularly effectively by the Istiqlal Party which devolved its candidate selection down to the local level and thus partly explains its relative success in the election.²² Again, though, whilst such an approach clearly helps explain why the PJD's rivals may have performed relatively well, it does not, in itself, explain the party's poor performance in absolute terms.

Another argument put forward by one of the PJD's senior figures, Abdelilah Benkirane, in the wake of the election was that the party had not done enough to establish links with the other political parties and therefore left it politically isolated and without allies.²³ It was certainly true that many parties, particularly those on the political left were suspicious to the point of hostility towards the PJD, but it is unlikely that this damaged the party. Indeed, the PJD's image as a new and rather different political party was one that had actually played well with electors who were tired of Morocco's other large established parties who appeared part of establishment and were increasingly difficult to distinguish ideologically from one another.

A stronger argument articulated by other figures within the PJD emphasised the exact opposite view: that the PJD had not distinguished itself enough from the other political parties and had thus suffered.²⁴ It is this view that brings us substantially closer to a real understanding of why the PJD failed to live up to its pre-election expectations.

²² The Istiqlal portrayed this policy as one of local democracy. Larbi Messari (Member of the Istiqlal Party's ruling council), in discussion with the author, Rabat, 9 September 2007.

²³ Taieb Chadi, 'Le PJD va-t-il changer de ligne politique?', *Le Journal Hebdomadaire*, No.317, 22-28 September 2007

²⁴ Omar Dahbi, 'Comment le PJD compte prendre sa revanche en 2009', *Aujourd'hui Le Maroc* 11 January 2008

Low Turnout and Disillusionment

Whilst the failure of the PJD to dominate the elections was the outcome from the election that most immediately grabbed public attention in the wake of the announcement of the results, a second aspect of the results soon came to be remarked upon. The official results from the election showed that only 37% of those Moroccans registered to vote had actually done so – 63% having stayed away from the polling stations.²⁵ This total was markedly lower than the 52% who had voted in the previous election in 2002 which itself had been an historic low for elections in Morocco.

A second remarkable statistic that emerged from the official results was the very high number of invalid or spoiled ballots cast – 19% of the votes cast amounting to over a million ballot papers and more than the score of the leading two parties – the PJD and the Istiqlal – combined. When this figure was taken into account, the actual total of voters who cast valid votes for political parties was reduced to barely 30%.

Although, by definition, there was no hard evidence to indicate why the turnout had been so low and the number of invalid ballots so high, substantial anecdotal evidence from those who chose not to vote indicated that such a low level of participation was a result of dissatisfaction with the choice of parties and candidates on offer. It was further supported by accounts from the election observers who reported that significant numbers of the numerous spoiled ballot papers featured complaints and frequently abuse against the political parties featured on the ballot paper. Typical examples were “None of these parties deserve my vote” and “they are all thieves and liars.”²⁶ These comments confirmed an established and growing trend within Morocco and picked up in pre-election polling by the NDI that was deeply

²⁵ Royaume du Maroc, Ministère de l’Interieur: *Elections Legislatives 2007* (<http://www.elections.gov.ma/elu/clean/CandNomNAT.aspx>)

²⁶ Members of the international observation team in discussion with the author, Rabat 8 September 2007.

cynical towards the political parties and politicians believing that politicians are simply on the make and take.²⁷

This factor suggests that it was possible that the level of disillusionment with the political parties potentially explained the poor performance of the PJD: the Islamist party appearing to be no different from the other parties. Yet, this still did not account for the large levels of support accorded to the PJD in the opinion polls conducted by the IRI. A closer look at these polls is perhaps merited. Such a look reveals that the figures of 45-50% of support accorded to the PJD reflected the intentions of those who stated to the pollsters that they ‘might’ rather than ‘would’ vote. If one looks at the figures of those who themselves declared they were certain to vote, then the result both in terms of shares of the vote and even turnout are far closer to the actual outcome of the voting on September 7²⁸ So it can be concluded from this that there were unusually high levels of support for the PJD among voters who thought that they ‘might’ vote rather than those who were certain they would vote. Why was this and why, then, did these potential voters clearly opt to stay at home or even spoil their ballots on the day of the election? Was it the case that voters decided that the PJD was really no different from the other parties? This is certainly at least partially true but other deeper factors appear to be at work.

One of these factors is illustrated by a conversation the author had with a young Moroccan man a few days after the election. Dressed in a classically religious fashion and with a large beard, the young man, when solicited for his opinions on the election, told the author that the only honest political party in Morocco was the PJD. He had, however, not voted for the party because he saw no change in Morocco – there being no jobs, no work and no prospects for ordinary people.²⁹ Disillusionment was thus not limited to the political parties and may not

²⁷ National Democratic Institute (NDI), *Final Report on the Moroccan Legislative Elections*, 51-53

²⁸ See A. Jamaï, F. Iraqi and M. Rhandi, ‘Demain les Islamistes?’, *Le Journal Hebdomadaire*, 247, 18 March 2006.

²⁹ Young Moroccan man in discussion with the author, Rabat, 11 September 2007

have extended to the PJD, but extended to the broader political system and its failure to deliver noticeable change to the lives of ordinary Moroccans. Evidence from both the official observers and anecdotally, supports this contention – that the low level of turnout and the high level of spoiled ballots were also due to unhappiness with the broader political system. Derogatory comments about politicians and the political parties were matched by observations that the parliament was a waste of time and could change nothing in the country. It could change nothing in the country because all meaningful power was in the hands of the King.³⁰ Even activists from the ‘victorious’ Istiqlal Party privately acknowledged that during the campaign voters had complained that voting was meaningless because the Royal Palace controlled everything.³¹ Indeed this is a view that cannot be contradicted by looking either at the Moroccan constitution or the reality of politics in Morocco. Despite being a constitutional Monarchy, the constitution accords the Royal Palace executive, legislative and appointment powers that supersede all other institutions and thus makes the Monarch the real ruler and governor of Morocco.³² In this way, the role of the Monarchy was an issue in the election despite the fact that it traditionally sat above the elected institutions. Significantly, the widespread view that the elections were of very limited significance because power was located elsewhere broadened the debate that emerged from the elections to encompass the role of the Monarchy.

The Monarchy in Question

At one level the popular perception that it was the Royal Palace rather than the parliament and the ministers that was running Morocco suited the Monarchy very well. It is one that

³⁰ These views were confirmed in a study carried out by the NDI following the election to discover why turnout had been so low. National Democratic Institute (NDI), *Voter Apathy in the September 2007 Moroccan Elections. A qualitative study conducted for the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) from November to December 2007*. June 2008, 5

(http://accessdemocracy.org/library/2322_ma_postelection_engpdf_06042008.pdf)

³¹ Istiqlal Party activists in discussion with author, Rabat, 8 September 2007

³² For the provisions of the Moroccan Constitution see Kingdom of Morocco: Ministry of Justice: ‘Legislation: Constitution’ (http://www.justice.gov.ma/an/legislation/legislation.aspx?ty=1&id_1=)

could be seen to even have been encouraged during the elections: coverage of the elections in the official media consistently ran second to coverage of the King's activities. On the day the election results began to be announced, the main evening news bulletin on the main Moroccan television channel, RTM, carried a fifteen minute report on the King's activities, before moving to a report on the outcome of the elections. The same day Royal activities, specifically the King's opening of a new terminal at Casablanca airport, similarly dominated the front page of the main establishment newspaper, *Le Matin*, with only a small boxed text in the bottom corner relating the results from the election.³³ This sent out the clear message that whilst the elected politicians squabbled and fought each other the Monarch was getting on with running and improving the country. This was part of a broader pattern that had strengthened in recent years – the King being portrayed as taking the lead in combating the problems of Morocco ahead of the parties and the politicians. Official emphasis has moved away from the diplomacy and ceremony of King Mohammed's father, Hassan II, to economic and social issues, particularly in rural areas and the King has consciously cultivated an image as 'King of the Poor.' This is a message that has found some resonance amongst the ordinary population: the religiously dressed young Moroccan who had expressed the view that the PJD was unable to change anything finished his remarks on politics by stating that: "The King is the only one changing anything in this country."³⁴

Although emphasising the efficiency of the Monarchy in dealing with Morocco's problems compared with the failures of the Kingdom's elected officials, has obvious political benefits for the Monarchy, being perceived as the sole factor for change and development in the country and undermining the elected institutions may not be in the more long term interest of the Palace. First of all, it weakens Morocco's claim to be making significant progress down the road of democratisation since democratisation primarily concerns the ordinary

³³ 'S.M. le Roi a inauguré le nouveau terminal de l'aéroport Mohammed V', *Le Matin* 10 September 2007

³⁴ Young Moroccan man in discussion with the author, Rabat, 11 September 2007

population exercising control and choice over its rulers and the programmes they implement. There are also implications for Morocco internationally since much of the effort Morocco has made in running regular and fairly clean elections has been for external consumption. As a country with limited resources, Morocco has one of the most externally orientated and thus dependent economies in the Arab World making good relations with the countries and institutions of the European Union, with which it conducts two-thirds of its trade, essential. Pressures to improve Morocco's human rights record from Europe at the beginning of the 1990s were arguably a major factor in the moves towards greater political liberalisation from that period onwards. Politically, Morocco is aware of the need for support from Europe and the United States for its claim on the Western Sahara – a claim that is seen as vital to regime security and which will attract much more support if the country is perceived as making noticeable steps towards greater democratisation.

A second potential hazard for the Monarchy in associating itself too explicitly closely to the day-to-day running of the kingdom is that the Monarchy runs the risk of being blamed for the inevitable failures that will accompany attempts to develop a country with the scale of social and economic problems that Morocco has. Although public criticism of the Monarchy is illegal in Morocco, there has been increasing incidence of such criticism. Four months before the election two groups of individuals were arrested, charged and imprisoned for having chanted slogans against the King at two separate demonstrations across the country. One of the offending slogans, referring to the King's social life and reputed fondness for water sports, ran "Where has the people's money gone? On the jet ski and the parties!"³⁵ Although those responsible belonged to small leftist and human rights organisations with established oppositional stances, these overt criticisms were unusually bold. Although it was impossible to judge whether such sentiments were shared more widely, the outcome of the

³⁵ Ahmed R. Benchemsi, 'Edito', *Tel Quel*, No. 275 26 May – 1 June 2007

legislative elections did indicate a gap between the population and the Monarchy – notably through the very low turnout.

The King and the Elections

In spite of the advantages in downplaying the role of the parliament, it was clear that authorities in Morocco were keen to make the elections at the very least appear a success. This was demonstrated by the admirably huge efforts that went into enabling and persuading people to vote – notably massive publicity campaigns, a more effective distribution of voting cards and the invitation of external observers.³⁶ In total, the state spent an estimated 500 million dirhams (c.\$50 million) on the election.³⁷ Most significantly, perhaps, was the clear appeal of the King himself to participate – in one of his annual set piece speeches just two weeks before the election he appeared to suggest that failure to vote in the elections was a form of “nihilism.”³⁸ Thus the fact that 70% of those Moroccans entitled to vote ignored these entreaties was interpreted in some quarters as defiance not just of the system but of the King himself.

Even more potentially worrying for the Monarchy was the profile of the people who did not vote. Turnout was lowest in the urban areas of the country. In Morocco’s largest city – Casablanca – only 27% of people bothered to vote 28% of which cast spoiled ballots bringing the number of people who cast valid votes below 20%.³⁹ In the Anfa district of the city – probably the wealthiest and best educated – 26% of people voted with a staggering 36%

³⁶ The NDI described the official efforts to educate the Moroccan public about the election as “impressive in scale and quality.” National Democratic Institute (NDI), *Final Report on the Moroccan Legislative Elections*, 12

³⁷ Fahd Iraqi, ‘Des Urnes et des thunes’, *Tel Quel* 15 September 2007

³⁸ For the full text of the speech see *Aujourd’hui Le Maroc* 21 August 2007 (<http://www.aujourd'hui.ma/nation-details56385.html>)

³⁹ Royaume du Maroc, Ministère de l’Intérieur: *Elections Legislatives 2007* (<http://www.elections.gov.ma/elu/clean/CandNomREG.aspx?s=1>)

spoiling their ballots – leaving a total of less than 17% real voters.⁴⁰ The absence of Morocco's urban and better educated voters from the polls was also borne out by anecdotal evidence and testimonies from official observers. One official observer told the author that in the area he was observing the only people who came to vote were the “old, the poor, the sick and mentally ill.”⁴¹ Indeed, observers generally noted a marked absence of younger voters on election day.⁴²

Overall, the picture of the younger, better educated and more urbanised parts of the population staying away from the poll was a matter that should have been of concern for the Monarchy. The fact that these important and growing sections of the population were disillusioned with not only the electoral process but the wider system was worrying. This disillusionment was underlined by the fact that not only turnout but spoiled ballots were highest in these areas - the two being strongly linked. These spoiled ballots showed a desire to protest against the system – the very high rate of spoiled ballots being highest in the best educated areas indicating that Morocco's high level of illiteracy was not really a factor in explaining the large numbers of spoiled ballots.

The decision by so many younger, better educated, middle class and urban Moroccans to not participate in the election also had an impact on the PJD. It seriously damaged the party's election prospects since the profile of the party's supporters was precisely these segments of the Moroccan population.⁴³ It can therefore be concluded that whilst the IRI polls showed that many Moroccans were thinking of voting PJD as the party furthest from the political mainstream they ultimately decided that simply failing to vote or spoiling their

⁴⁰ Royaume du Maroc, Ministère de l'Intérieur: *Elections Legislatives 2007* (<http://www.elections.gov.ma/elu/clean/CandNomPROV.aspx?s=1>)

⁴¹ Member of the international observation team in discussion with author, Rabat 8 September 2007.

⁴² Members of the international observation team in discussion with author, Rabat 8 September 2007.

⁴³ Catherine Graciet, 'Les islamistes crient à la supercherie électorale' *Le Journal Hebdomadaire*, No. 316, 15-21 September 2007

ballots was a much more effective means of registering their unhappiness with the election and the wider political system.

Conclusions

Three sets of conclusions that can be drawn from the legislative elections in Morocco. One concerns Islamism and its role in the political system in Morocco and elsewhere. A second concerns the political realities and future evolution of Morocco. A third concerns lessons that can be drawn regarding mechanisms of democratization – particularly with reference to the Arab and Muslim worlds.

Islamism

There are several conclusions that can be drawn from the PJD's performance in the legislative elections in Morocco. Firstly, it shows that Islamism as a broader movement throughout the region is not necessarily a force whose current rise is inexorable. Indeed as the Moroccan case shows, the performance of Islamist parties can be tied much more closely to local circumstances than to global trends. Secondly, the case of Morocco confirms the view that support for Islamist parties and movements is substantially a product of popular unhappiness with existing political, social and economic circumstances - with Islamists being perceived as a vehicle for protest against these circumstances. When an Islamist party, such as the PJD, is no longer seen as representing the most effective vehicle for such protest, its support declines to unremarkable levels – or perhaps to levels that reflect its core level of ideological support. Ironically, this failure of the PJD is in line with its own stated demand to be viewed and treated as a normal political party like any other – senior figures having compared its role with that of the Christian democratic parties of Europe.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ PJD MP Amine Bouhobza, *Ar-Raya*, 199 quoted in Mohamed Tozy, *Monarchie et Islam Politique au Maroc* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 1999), 245

The decision the PJD now has to take is whether it is happy with this status or whether – as some of its more radical figures argue – it should adopt a far more critical line which it had abandoned to reduce antipathy to its presence in the legal political system. Mustapha Ramid, the recognised leader of the more hard-line and critical trend within the party, argued in the aftermath of the election that the party had allowed itself to be intimidated in the aftermath of the Casablanca bombings of 2003 and that it should seek to distinguish itself from the other political parties.⁴⁵ In the aftermath of the election intense debates engulfed the party and there appeared to be a growing consensus that the party needed to mark out a more radical and critical line to distinguish itself from the other parties.⁴⁶ It was therefore of huge surprise when at the party's Congress in July 2008 the party changed its leader for a figure that had long advocated a more accommodating line towards the regime. Abdelilah Benkirane, who replaced Saad-Eddine Othmani, had been one of the only figures in the aftermath of the legislative elections to have argued that the party had lost support because it had been politically isolated. Quite why the PJD chose to move in this direction is not entirely clear. The very open fashion in which the PJD conducted its leadership election made interference in the process from the regime unlikely if not entirely impossible. One newspaper explained the outcome as an unplanned result of the way in which the vote was conducted with Benkirane benefiting from an anti-Othmani sentiment following a debate on the shortcomings of the 2007 election and the withdrawal of more radical candidates in a first round of voting.⁴⁷

The normalisation or domestication of the PJD does not, however, mean a full domestication of Islamism as a political force. Although two other smaller Islamist parties ran candidates in the election (with only one securing the election of one of its candidates), other

⁴⁵ Mustapha Ramid (PJD Member of Parliament), in discussion with the author, Casablanca, 2 April 2008

⁴⁶ Omar Dahbi, 'Comment le PJD compte prendre sa revanche en 2009', *Aujourd'hui Le Maroc* 11 January 2008

⁴⁷ Mouaad Rhandi, 'Le sacre de Benkirane', *Le Journal Hebdomadaire* 26 July 2008

Islamist elements did not. Various groups espousing radical Wahabi, salafi and even jihadi ideas counselled their followers to stay away from the poll. More significantly the much larger *Al Adl wal Ihsan* (Justice and Spirituality) movement that is formally banned but largely tolerated called for a boycott of the poll. A long time opponent of the monarchical regime, Justice and Spirituality, argued in the months before the election that the election was a waste of time since the political system was skewed in the Monarchy's favour.⁴⁸ Following the release of the results the movement argued that the low turnout demonstrated that the bulk of the population shared their scepticism and mocked the process by stating that most Moroccans had preferred a post couscous siesta to going to vote on election day.⁴⁹

Although no more than a part of the abstention rate can really be attributed to the call by other Islamist groups to boycott the election –their rejectionist stance is likely to have bolstered popular support for them. This includes the small, extremist groups that have tried and - on occasion- succeeded in carrying out acts of violence – most notably the bombings in Casablanca in May 2003.

Morocco

The conclusions that can be drawn from the elections for Morocco are similarly manifold. Whilst many in the upper echelons of power have congratulated themselves on having survived any putative challenge from the 'green peril' of the PJD, it remains to be seen whether the more profound messages that came out of the poll – most importantly the widespread popular disillusionment with the current political system demonstrated by the high rate of abstention and spoiled ballots – are taken on board. The official report from the National Democratic Institute that led the team of international observers stated that "If the

⁴⁸ Abdelwahed El Moutawakkil, (Head of the Political Circle of Al-Adl wal Ihsan), in discussion with the author, Salé, 12 April 2007. For more details on Al-Adl wal Ihsan's approach to the political system see Willis, 'Morocco's Islamists', 60-62

⁴⁹ 'Maroc: La semaine' *Tel Quel* 22 September 2007

Moroccan authorities hope to engage a substantial majority of the public in the political process, they will need to undertake substantial political reforms designed to strengthen elected institutions, empower elected officials and solidify the concomitant accountability between political parties, elected officials and the electorate.”⁵⁰

In the period before the election it was only the small parties of the extreme left and more hard-line voices within the PJD that spoke of a need to reform the Moroccan political system to give more power to the Kingdom’s elected institutions and thus make them more credible in the eyes of the population. The fact, however, that the necessary corollary of a strengthening of the parliament and the office of prime minister is a corresponding reduction in the powers of the Royal Palace has prevented most mainstream politicians from endorsing such a call for reform. Although some senior figures in the post election governing coalition of parties have spoken privately of the need to change the balance of power in the constitution, the programme of the new government contained no programme of political reform. Indeed, the new prime minister Allal Al-Fassi when asked about the new government’s programme replied “During my campaign I explained to my voters that my programme is called *le discours du trône* (the King’s programme) ”⁵¹

As to whether the Palace itself will perceive a need for reform as one of the lessons that came out of the election, the early indications were that it did not and blamed the political parties for their shortcomings in failing to attract the interest and support of voters. The one noticeable political initiative that has occurred since the elections has come from within the regime itself which has attempted to forge a new bloc of support for itself in the parliament. Shortly before the elections, the deputy Interior Minister, Fouad Ali El Himma, resigned his post and announced that he would contest the election as an independent candidate. Successfully elected on September 7, El Himma worked to create a bloc of supporters around

⁵⁰ National Democratic Institute (NDI), *Final Report on the Moroccan Legislative Elections*, 2

⁵¹ Karim Boukhari, ‘Tous, sauf Abbas!’ *Tel Quel*, 15-21 September 2007

him in the new parliament which he eventually forged into a new political party that through attracting defectors from other parties and subsuming a string of small parties, came to rival the main parties in size. The fact that El Himma had long been acknowledged as the King's right hand man and who, whilst at the Interior Ministry, had managed relations with, amongst many other things, the political parties made it clear that this was far from being an individual initiative. El Himma's presence and activism within the parliament were clearly aimed at injecting a dynamic into an institution that had become moribund and – as the elections had demonstrated – increasingly irrelevant to the ordinary population. Many of the larger political parties were very wary and felt threatened by the new party and even began to reorganise themselves to meet the challenge. The party that felt most threatened was the PJD and with good reason. The day after his election in an interview on national television, El Himma had implicitly attacked the Islamist party by condemning those that had made accusations of corruption for bringing into disrepute what had been acknowledged as being a fair and transparent election.⁵² For its part, the PJD responded by highlighting the former minister's inappropriately close relations with the administration and accusing him of having been elected with help from Ministry of Interior officials.⁵³ What was clear was that one of the main objectives of El Himma's initiative was to act as a bulwark against the PJD in the parliament. How far the new party, named the Party of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM), would succeed in its objectives was unclear but there were clear historical precedents for the initiative. The PAM represented at least the fourth attempt by the Moroccan regime since independence to create a new bloc of support for itself. It followed exactly the first steps of a historic pattern of "the creation of a group, a rally, and then a government at the beginning of

⁵² Omar Dahbi, 'La député des Rehamna monte au créneau', *Aujourd'hui Le Maroc* 12 September 2007

⁵³ Omar Brousky, 'Lorsque El Othmani se dévoile', *Le Journal Hebdomadaire* 16-22 February 2008

each parliament.”⁵⁴ The objective was the same: to reinvigorate the parliament but, more importantly, combat the opposition to the regime in the parliament. The only difference was that whilst it had been the leftist and nationalist parties that had been the main opposition in earlier initiatives, now it was the Islamists. Although all three previous efforts had substantially succeeded in restricting the ambitions of the opposition, the other objective of reinvigorating the parliament had clearly repeatedly failed and thus seems likely to do so again. The likely net effect of El Himma’s initiative is to further undermine the credibility of parliament as an institution increasingly controlled by the Palace.

Meaningful constitutional reform is clearly not on the agenda of the regime.

Internationally, whilst the low turnout rate was noted beyond Morocco, the strong consensus inside the regime is that the fact that the administration of the voting and the counting of votes in the election were remarkably fair and clean will outweigh this in the eyes of opinion in Europe and the United States. Domestically, the view will be taken that popular support for the Monarchy remains very solid and that there is no need for reform. There may indeed be unhappiness with aspects of the political, economic and social situation inside Morocco which the elections may have reflected but that this presents no genuine threat to the status quo.

Such a view from the Palace is understandable but is probably complacent.

Significant social and economic problems exist inside the country with high levels of poverty and illiteracy and the gap between the rich and poor widening. This situation has worsened considerably since the elections of September 2007 with sharp rises in world oil and food prices hitting Morocco particularly hard as a net importer of both food and oil.

Unemployment, particularly among the young, remains very high, and is a clear source of popular concern. Opinion polls conducted before the election consistently cited

⁵⁴ Rkia El Mossadeq, ‘Political Parties and Power Sharing’ in I. William Zartman (Editor), *The Political Economy of Morocco* (New York and Westport: Praeger, 1987), 70

unemployment as far and away the most important concern of the electorate⁵⁵ – way ahead of issues such as the Western Sahara which the King named as the main priority for the new post-election government in a speech opening the parliament on October 15.⁵⁶ The regime has in part attempted to address these problems chiefly through a series of high profile projects such as the Tangier-Med Port project and the development of the Bou Regreg estuary in Rabat-Salé but the overall impact on poverty and unemployment is likely to be fairly limited and their grand scale has elicited a degree of popular cynicism about their cosmetic nature. The limited impact of these initiatives and the possible need for a more political response has been demonstrated in the months following the election which have witnessed the most serious incidence of social unrest across the country for nearly two decades.⁵⁷ Although provoked primarily by social and economic factors such as rising prices and unemployment, the willingness of the protestors to move onto the streets to express their grievances indicated disenchantment with formal political processes that had already been shown in the poor turnout in the elections.

Democratization

The main lesson that emerges from the Moroccan elections with regard to moves towards democratisation is that the establishment of democratic institutions is not a guarantee of genuine democratisation. The elections held in Morocco on September 7 were undoubtedly some of the most unfettered and transparent elections ever seen in the Arab world in terms of

⁵⁵ For example, an opinion poll for the semi-official organisation *Daba 2007* established to mobilise young Moroccans to vote in the elections found that the most important issue for Moroccans under the age of thirty was unemployment.

<http://www.leconomiste.com/upload/document/Rapport%20r%C3%A9sultats%20sondage%20Juillet%20-VPPP2382007.pdf>

⁵⁶ M'Hamed Hamrouch, 'SM le Roi fixe des objectifs précis au future gouvernement', *Aujourd'hui Le Maroc* 15 October 2007

⁵⁷ A matter of weeks after the election there was unrest that developed out of a protest in the town of Sefrou on September 25 against prices rises and which resulted in pitched battles with police and the torching of several public buildings. Several months later serious unrest also occurred in the southern town of Sidi Ifni, again related to economic grievances.

voting procedures and final results being an accurate reflection of what people actually voted for in the polling stations. In this way, Morocco is to be congratulated. The Moroccan case shows, however, that functioning democratic procedures do not equate to real democracy if the institutions being voted for are not those that make the real decisions that govern the country. Morocco has long had a vibrant multiparty system, has over recent years established regular elections at both national and local level and now, with the 2007 elections, has remarkably unfettered and transparent electoral processes. Yet it is not yet a democracy because all meaningful power is located with the King and his advisors.

The case of Morocco thus highlights the fact that the institutions and accoutrements of democracy – parties, elections, parliaments – do not in themselves equate to democracy. Many in the West – including most governments in Europe and the United States – are possibly yet to fully take on board this fact: Iraq is another example in the Arab World where parties and elections were proclaimed to be the panacea for the country's ills and which largely failed to deliver. Many non-democratic and even repressive states in the Middle East – notably Egypt, Tunisia and Algeria - have exploited this mistaken view to persuade western governments that they are democratising. To be fair, many Western governments are probably aware of this but are willing to publicly go along with the deception because the regimes in place provide more valuable services such as (in the case of Tunisia and Algeria) allies in the 'War on Terror' or, in the case of Egypt, a peace treaty with Israel.

In the cases of Egypt, Algeria and Tunisia, though, the republican nature of their constitutions makes genuine democratisation a theoretical possibility, particularly if the existing elections of the dominant presidency are made fairer and more reflective of popular will. The irony is that Morocco, despite having a much more liberal political and electoral system than any of its other neighbours in North Africa faces a potentially far more difficult path to democratisation because its own all-powerful executive, the Monarchy, is explicitly and by definition unelected. Thus the step to full democracy would require an alteration to the

status and powers of its oldest and most powerful institution. It remains to be seen whether the Monarchy is willing to take this step.

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