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## MOROCCO'S LOCAL ELECTIONS: WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM MY FRIEND

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**1**st June 2009. The first day of the two weeks of official campaign time Morocco accords to its political parties before elections. The country's most powerful politician, King Mohammed VI is abroad. He follows the elections – as a sign of his ostensible neutrality – from Paris. The latest regime party, Authenticity and Modernity (PAM), nicely merged in the symbol of the “tractor”, holds its inaugural campaign meeting in a big hall in Casablanca. The party's leader, Fouad Ali Al Himma, known in Morocco simply as *l'ami du roi* does not appear in the scene. Allegedly, he is in Paris to meet the King. The audience of the meeting is said to consist mainly of people shuttled in by three busses from the poor neighbourhoods, many hastily dressed up in campaign t-shirts. After the meeting, they have to walk back.

7th June. One week before the elections there are only scarce signs of campaign activity. The most visible witnesses of the forthcoming elections are little pieces of paper with a party name and symbol that litter some of the streets, ignored and stepped on by prospective voters, only to be swiped away by the garbage men in the evening to give way to a new round the next day. At the origin of this campaign garbage are young men below 20 in campaign t-shirts. These are mostly not party activists but paid by individual candidates (around 10 Euro per day)

to cover different neighbourhoods. From time to time, one also sees a car with posters of the list of candidates for a city council. In a virtually empty party bureau in Larache, a northern city of Morocco, the candidate still awaits, among other things, prints

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of the party program. In the evening, a small demonstration of the Islamist Party of Justice and Development (PJD) passes by, but their animated slogans barely get people in the bars to look up before concentrating again on the much more important competition: a qualification match for the football world cup 2010 in South Africa.

13th June. The results of the Moroccan municipal elections are announced by the minister of interior, Chakib Benmoussa: Authenticity and Modernity (PAM), wins the elections (21.7% of the seats). The participation rate is, at 52%, not embarrassingly low as in the parliamentary elections of 2007. The Party of Justice and Development (PJD), anticipated winner and surprise loser of the 2007 parliamentary elections is again humbled by winning only 5.4 percent of the seats. What do these results say about Moroccan politics?

## The winners: the regime and its supporters

The Party of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM) is only the latest attempt to organize and unify supporters to the monarchy in to a political party. Although Moroccan monarchs have never associated their fate directly with any of the various palace parties, they have always relied on such parties to organize their supporters and to implement their policy preferences in parliament. The newest vehicle for this purpose was created just a few weeks before the 2007 elections. In 2007, the PAM appeared as a surprise creation and the media speculated on whether this was actually initiative of the powers that be or whether the new party reflected a rift between the Al Himma and King Mohammed VI. Soon, it became clear, however, that the PAM was a regime backed creation and that its mission was to a large extent to block a further rise of the Islamist party, the PJD. Since then, the PAM has been busy co-opting individual politicians or whole parties in parliament and it has lend its support to the weak, and

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highly unpopular, government of Abbas al-Fassi.

The long list of PAM-predecessors of so called parties of the administration includes the *Front pour la Défense des Institutions Constitutionnelles* (FDIC), a coalition comprised of the Popular Movement, a Berber party of landowners and notables, the *Parti Démocratique pour l'Indépendance* (PDI) and some individual monarchists created to hinder the victory of opposition parties in the first parliamentary elections after independence. Further creations were, for example, the *Rassemblement National des Indépendants* (RNI), founded by the King's brother in law, Ahmed Osman, out of the "independent candidates" that had won the 1977 elections, as well as one of the RNI's split-offs, the *Parti National Démocrate* (PND)), or the *Union Constitutionnelle* (UC).

The Moroccan minister of interior – in a statement that can hardly be seen as neutral – linked the PAM's victory to its "dynamic campaign". Yet, the electoral strength of these so called "parties of the administration" has always been, first, proximity to the king, the most obvious examples being the RNI and the PAM. Proximity to the *pouvoir* always attracts both local notables and especially the rural and/or poor voters that see this proximity as a necessary condition to help them with all sorts of problems. Second, regime parties always benefit from direct or indirect electoral support, in the past more obvious through outright electoral fraud, more recently through gerrymandering and tolerance of vote buying. Moreover, the PAM as other regime parties assembles large amounts of prosperous candidates that can finance their own campaign – legally, and illegally.

The current municipal elections were the first real electoral test for the PAM. Its success and its capacity to unify

numerous regime parties was especially relevant because a six percent threshold had been introduced for these elections. The new threshold – while being an opposition request – is an attempt to stabilize and structure the party system. Morocco's party system has more than 25 parties out of which most are simply organized around one person and win just one or two seats in elections. These parties are unstable, lose their parliamentarians to other parties (a phenomenon known in Morocco as *transhumance*) – especially to those in government. The threshold was likely to eliminate many regime – and other – parties. A standard municipal council that would at the moment have around 15 parties is now likely to comprise only 5-6 parties. The new hurdle will make the bargaining among parties and between the king and individual political forces more efficient, but it also means that the regime needs one or two strong parties, not ten small ones. Hence the PAM.

To judge from these elections, the PAM will fulfil its mission well. Its strong showing in the municipal elections will generate local support for future candidates for the upcoming parliamentary elections in 2012. The most serious challenge for the PAM will indeed come not from other parties but from the inside, that is, to keep the party together. The PAM may be new, but its politicians are not (more than 60% of the new councillors had already seats from 2003-2009). Being a coalition of self-interested notables and businessmen who have obviously joined it for personal ambitions may also be the weakness of the PAM. These rather outworn politicians will be ready to leave it again if they cannot get enough out of the party. Indeed, this has already happened in some places before the elections where supposed PAM candidates decided that they would run ultimately as "independents". Nevertheless, for the time being, the PAM has performed its role well.

From the monarchy's perspective, the second key goal (besides the PAM's victory) was "to reconcile the voters with the ballot box" a flowery phrase used by Moroccan officials for "to increase the participation rate". While Morocco did receive strong praise for its "transparent and democratic" elections in 2007 from Western leaders, the abstention rate of more than 60% could hardly be overlooked, a plague shared by other authoritarian regimes in the region, for example its neighbour Algeria. Another abstention rate along this line would have compromised the credibility of elections which are a relevant tool to legitimize the institutions of a de-facto authoritarian monarchy. Thus, citizens were told that it was their duty to vote. Moreover, sit-ins, organized by *Annahj Ad-dimocrati* (Democratic Way), a party that called for a boycott of the elections unless the constitution was reformed, were banned by the authorities; in some sit-ins that were held, police forces injured several people, some heavily.

The actual declared participation rate of 52.4% in these elections came as a relief to the authorities and was strongly highlighted by the minister of interior in his declaration of

the official results. Yet, the participation rate is hardly a sign of interest and trust of Moroccan voters in the political class. First, just as in 2007, the 52% do not take into account the around 7 Million of eligible voters that chose not to register. Second, the percent of null votes was 11%, a sizeable figure. Taking into account these two figures, the real participation rate is thus closer to 30%. Moreover, the participation rates were highest in the southern provinces of Boujdour (69%), Smara (68%), and Oued Eddahab (61%), areas that depend for their survival directly on the regime and where between 30% and 50% of voters are public employees (compared to 11% for Morocco as a whole). Although the complete official figures have not yet been released, participation is also likely to be higher than the national average at the countryside and in slums – as in 2007 – areas that are prone not to programmatic voting but to clientelism and vote buying (at the moment, a vote is said to cost around 100 Dirham, approximately 10 Euro in Morocco).

Indeed, there are good reasons for the lack of interest, the most important being that voters in these – just as other elections in Morocco – do not elect autonomous representative bodies. Moroccans are tired of being convoked for elections that are unrelated to political power. In the case of local politics, most power resides with the *tutelle* of the central authority, most visibly embodied in the provincial and regional governors, directly appointed by the king. To be sure, an active mayor – or president of the municipal council as they are called in Morocco – can increase investment and tax collection, speed up projects, and decide where to allocate money. But he cannot do so without the consent of the governor, who has to approve the councils' decisions, and he can surely not govern against him.

## The loser

Serious electoral opposition to the regime could only come from the Islamist Party of Justice and Development (PJD). As all former major opposition parties, namely the Socialist Union of Popular Forces and the Istiqlal, have been co-opted into government since 2002, the PJD is the only one remaining legal party with a potential to cause some headache to the palace. Large parts of the party – albeit not its current leader – do demand larger prerogatives for elected bodies and a clearer separation of power. By the time of these elections, the mobilization capacity of the PJD could not be fully grasped. In the previous municipal elections in 2003, the party had reduced coverage strongly and still done relatively well. In the 2007 legislative elections, while not winning the largest number of seats it had won the largest number of votes. Yet the results of the 2009 elections were again disappointing for the PJD. It won a mere 5.4% of seats (1513 councillors compared to 6015 for the PAM) with a total of 420.000 votes. It appears to be moving towards the role the palace would like it to play: that of being present but never in a pole position.

In the previous municipal elections of 2003, held a few months after the Islamist terrorist attacks of 16 May 2003 in Casablanca, it appeared as a political choice of the PJD to accept that role. In these attacks, simultaneous suicide bombings targeted a Jewish community centre, a Spanish restaurant, a hotel and the Belgian consulate, and killed 43 people and wounded over 100. Politically, they led to a general crackdown on Islamist groups and to restrictions on civil liberties and became a resource for the PJD's opponents that had felt threatened by its rise in the 2002 elections. Left parties ran a campaign against it, holding it morally responsible for the attacks and calling upon it to apologize to the Moroccan people. The regime, in turn, made it difficult for the PJD to distance itself publicly from the attacks by not allowing it to declare – as all the other parties – its opposition against terrorism and its solidarity with the families of the victims via the national TV stations and by banning anti-terrorism demonstrations the PJD wanted to organize.

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Importantly, the party was forced to reduce its coverage of the communal elections of 2003 to only 16% of the available seats and to enact a system of partial coverage in big and medium sized cities. In such cities, which are divided in different electoral districts, the PJD would only cover up to half of the districts in order to prevent itself from gaining a majority in these towns.

In these elections, the PJD won 320,299 votes and still came out as second strongest party in the total of the circumscriptions of the city districts (*arrondissements*) and the cities with more than 25,000 inhabitants. Nevertheless, it gained only 8/81 councillors in Rabat, 10/71 in Sale, 16/131 in Casablanca, 14/81 in Fes, and 6/81 in Marrakech, hardly a majority for governance in any of these cities. Indeed, the PJD governed in only 13 municipalities (including city *arrondissements*) in the period from 2003 – 2009.

In the current elections, there were no such restrictions. The PJD still only fielded 8,870 candidates (compared to around 4,000 in 2003) for the available 27,795 seats, again focussing mostly on the urban areas. This was, however, related to organizational limitations, as the PJD is more selective about the candidates it presents than most other parties. (Even the PAM, which had the largest coverage of all parties, fielded only 16,793 candidates). By doubling the candidates, the PJD did indeed triple the number of councillors it won. However, there is only one big city where it has chances to govern, Tanger, where it won a simple majority in three out of five city districts. In all the other big cities it did increase its seats, even doubled them in Casablanca and Rabat, but is still far away from city government. Besides this, it won an absolute majority in twelve smaller towns, among them four

governed by the PJD since 2003, and a simple majority in another seven.

As in the 2007 parliamentary elections, this result, qualified by the party's leader Abdelilah Benkirane as "normal", is likely to be partly of the PJD's own making and partly of the regime's. In 2007, the PJD was expected to win the largest number of seats since an opinion poll of the International Republican Institute, an American NGO, had been leaked to the press in 2006. It found that 47% of the voters would vote for the PJD.<sup>1</sup> The PJD had done its own polls that were somewhat more modest but still predicted a simple majority. In the months before the elections, the Islamists were highly scrutinized by Western media and researchers. Whereas some feared the policies of an Islamist government – the Spanish newspaper *El Pais* for example put photographs of fully veiled women next to an article on the forthcoming elections – others reassuringly reported on how 'moderate' the PJD was. The PJD did not win the elections but merely maintained its number of votes. After the elections, PJD leaders blamed firstly and unsurprisingly, electoral fraud and gerrymandering. The King had, ultimately, not wanted an Islamist Prime Minister and other parties had been buying votes. Although this is likely to have had an impact, even PJD leaders acknowledged that they had been too tame, too eager to accommodate. The PJD had not mobilized the street

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for its positions, for example, against an unpopular increase of the VAT, for fear of provoking the regime. Moreover, the party had lost the support of its Islamist founding organization, the Movement of Unity and Reform that had, in previous elections, campaigned vigorously for it. Indeed, there were indications that the PJD had to some extent altered its electoral base in 2007, losing support in former fiefs and gaining some support in new areas.<sup>2</sup>

Surprisingly, in the year following these elections the PJD party congress elected not a more critical party leader but a more monarchist one, Abdelilah Benkirane, who has always been the most monarchist within the PJD leadership. Different from both the more technocrat and the more radical (in terms of human rights and calls for constitutional change) factions inside the PJD, he has never viewed the PJD as an opposition party that tries to reform the political system.

Under his leadership, the public face of the PJD has become more conservative in terms of values. Yet, it has hardly been able to distinguish itself from the bulk of the political elites as it was able to do in 2002 where it was perceived as a clear anti-establishment party. Thus, it is not clear how the party could have reached out to those voters that are dissatisfied with politics in the current elections.

At the same time, as in previous elections, the palace has continued working out "legal ways" to decrease the proportion of PJD votes in 2009. Again, electoral districts have been readjusted to bring in non PJD voters into PJD fiefs. Take the example of the city of Ksar al-Kebir, a town governed since 2003 by the PJD (in a coalition with the Istiqlal party) and that is part of a circumscription for the parliamentary elections where the PJD won 2 out of 4 Members of Parliament in 2007. In this town, two new large neighborhoods at the periphery have been incorporated into the city. Being poor areas, these neighborhoods are prone to vote buying and thus may constitute a resourceful hunting ground for some of the competing parties. The same applies to the neighboring city of Larache, a town where the PJD won the largest number of councilors in 2003 and the largest number of votes in the 2007 elections. In Larache, electoral results are largely influenced by three villages that are part of the district. These villages usually vote *en bloc* for the candidate/party that is willing to provide them with the largest club goods and/or put the village leader high up in the list. Acknowledging the importance of these villages for the results the PJD there has been working in the last years to establish links with these villages, for example by providing legal services to

one of them and was hoping to do less bad in these than previously. It is hardly a coincidence that a new remote village, Ain Shouk where the PJD has no contacts, has been added to the electoral district.

Moreover, the PJD is still not supposed to govern too many or too important places, or to govern them alone. In Temara, a town governed by a coalition led by the PJD, the mayor was sure to win an absolute majority. He did not: the PJD only won a simple majority of seats there. Although his views of the PJD's mobilization capacity turned out to be exaggerated, more important is that he already announced that he would take in a coalition partner in any case. After some rosy side note about the importance of pluralism and the usefulness of having an "outside" perspective inside, he admitted that the PJD cannot afford to be viewed as a party that excludes other forces. The PJD is thus still concerned about, and working on, its image. In Larache, the PJD is likely to accept to be the junior partner in the coalition even though it won the largest number of councillors – as it would have in 2003. Given the proximity of another PJD governed town (Ksar al Kebir, where the PJD won an absolute majority), Larache simply cannot have yet another Islamist mayor (in coalition or otherwise).

1. It passed unnoticed that the poll had asked which party people would for if voting were mandatory.

2. Wegner, Eva and Miquel Pellicer. Hitting the Glass Ceiling: The Trajectory of the Moroccan Party of Justice and Development'. Research Paper presented at the workshop "Islamist Mass Movements, External Actors, and Political Change in the Arab World", Rome 12.October 2008.

Overall, continuity seems to be the main result of these elections, at least in the short run. The latest regime creature has won, the most important opposition party has been contained. The medium term prospects, however, are not so clear. It remains to be seen whether the new attempt by the regime to hold on to power through a “consolidation” of its clients will endure. Similar attempts have proven unstable in the past. As to the PJD, the role it will play in future politics is far from resolved. Clearly, the “regime preparations” for the elections showed that the palace is concerned about the party’s strength and not willing to concede it a very prominent place in Moroccan politics. On its side, the PJD is obviously still ready to accept constraints on its mobilization capacity. The type of local government coalitions the PJD will be able to form and, importantly, whether these coalitions reflect its electoral strength or undervalue it are an interesting way of probing the positions of both, regime and Islamists, while preparing for the next electoral battle in 2012.