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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

The October 2016 Legislative Elections in Morocco

Policy Analysis Unit | October 2016

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
On the Eve of the Elections	2
A Political Duality	3
The Royal Court	3
Prospects of the Coming Government	4

Introduction

Morocco's last legislative elections¹ were held on Friday, October 7. The polls will have been the second such nationwide poll since the new constitution, agreed in 2011. They are widely viewed as a test of the ability of the Justice and Development Party to maintain the wide public support it achieved in the previous election. The 2016 legislative elections will also be seen as a test of the will of the Royal Court, and its commitment to abide by the democratizing path on which it embarked five years ago and its preparedness to remain neutral and non-partisan across the political spectrum.

Additionally, the 2016 parliamentary elections in Morocco come one year after the September 2015 elections for local councils across the country. The results of those municipal polls last year are generally held to be indicative of the broad composition of the Moroccan political landscape. With that in mind, the October 2016 parliamentary elections are expected to be fiercely contested by the two main political factions in the country: the Islamist Justice and Development Party (JDP), the present incumbent; and the Authenticity and Modernity Party (AMP), a centrist faction with close ties to the Royal Court and which now represents the country's political opposition. The 2015 municipal elections suggest that these competing groups enjoy broadly similar levels of popular support, though rooted in different social sectors: while the JDP found its support base in Morocco's urban centers, the AMP was more widely supported in rural Morocco, where it won a majority of seats. Observers of Moroccan politics tended to interpret this as a continuation of the same sociological trend which took root with the country's independence in 1956: rural communities tending to be a bastion of support for political forces aligned with the Royal Court in Rabat, while the cities became a political battleground open to a wide variety of political parties.

¹ Note: This analysis was written prior to the election. On October 8, it was announced that JDP had won the election with 125 seats, followed by AMP with 102 seats. The Independence Party came third, with 45 seats.

On the Eve of the Elections

A total of 6,992 candidates will contest the October 7 elections, representing some 24 political parties and coalitions. Of these, 4,742 candidates will be contesting the 305 seats representing the 92 multi-member local constituencies, while the remainder will contest the 90 seats selected to represent a single nationwide constituency (on a proportional representation basis). Across the local constituencies, the 4,742 candidates are divided into 1,385 electoral lists—there is an average of 15 different parties and coalitions contesting each of the local constituencies—and an additional two electoral lists which do not represent a political faction. The number of electoral blocs contesting each of the local constituencies varies from 25 in the most hotly contested constituency to nine in the least contested.

Only three political blocs—the conservative Independence Party, the JDP and the AMP—have been able to field candidates across all constituencies, suggesting that these are the only groups attempting to take outright control of the parliament. Yet all indications are that genuine political competition for the formation of Morocco’s next cabinet will be limited to the JDP and the AMP. Despite the plethora of competitors jostling for electoral gains, effective competition is restricted to eight main groups: the JDP, the AMP, the Independence Party, the Socialist Union of Popular Forces, the Popular Movement Party (a rightwing group closely connected to the Royal Court), the Patriotic Union of Liberals and the Progress and Socialism Party (PPS, a Communist group which forms part of the JDP-led coalition). The level of coverage across all political factions varies between 97.8% of constituencies (PPS is running in 90 out of 92 constituencies) and 13% of constituencies (equivalent to 12 of 92).

In general, all of these groups are either rising political stars or belonged to the previously dominant ancient regime but have suffered in recent years. A third group of political parties aims purely to obtain power, and is prepared to form a coalition with whichever party is tasked with forming the cabinet.

For its part, the JDP will enter the fray following a five-year term in government. Last year’s municipal polls also gave this important Islamist group control of some of Morocco’s most important cities: Casablanca, Fez, Marrakech, Rabat and Mekness. In contrast, the second most popular party in Morocco, the AMP, was able to take control of five of Morocco’s nine administrative regions—as opposed to the two won by the JDP—thank to its rural base. Given the recent desertion of leading JDP functionaries to

join the AMP, the threat which the AMP poses to the ruling JDP must be taken very seriously. The Independence Party, on the other hand, belongs to that other class of political parties, the prestige and political power of which have suffered recently following periods during which they were much more powerful. The most well established political party in the country, the Independence Party, which had the third highest votes during last year's municipal elections, is clearly aiming to form part of the next governing coalition and regain some of its former glory. Other parties, such as the Patriotic Union and the PPS, part of the present-day ruling coalition, know full well they are unable to mount a significant challenge to the JDP, but hope instead to consolidate their positions within the upcoming ruling coalition.

A Political Duality

In the run up to the polls, the political discourse in Morocco was dominated by a polarization which pitted the JDP against the AMP. While the former had announced its alliance with the Communist PPS, with which it intended to form the next government, the AMP announced that it planned to dethrone the present coalition together with the help of a number of other political parties associated with the Royal Court. This was made abundantly clear by a series of unpublicized confrontations between Abdelilah Benkirane, Secretary General of the JDP, and a royal adviser who supports the creation of a political party to counter the growing strength of the Islamists.

Some observers have begun to fear that this growing diametrical opposition between the JDP and the AMP will ultimately threaten democracy in Morocco. Others argue that the present state of political polarization provides a pretext for the marginalization of the JDP by a coalition of right-wing and progressive forces. Given the continuing influence of the Royal Court, this is a distinct possibility, notwithstanding the constitutional stipulation – part of the 2011 amendments – that the King charges the leader of the political party with the greatest number of seats in parliament to form the government.

The Royal Court

A reading of the political landscape in Morocco makes clear that certain forces within the state are determined to see the JDP fail and stripped of its power. It appears that these forces have been at least partially successful in discrediting the JDP with the

Royal Court, thus explaining statements found in the last Royal Address, delivered on July 30 to coincide with the King's Ascension Day:

"Some people seem to engage in activities which are contrary to the principles and ethics of political action within the state. They proclaim statements and promulgate concepts which are harmful to our national reputation, impinging on the credibility of national institutions in an effort to win over voters and public sympathy ... no sooner do the elections approach, and all candidates and political parties join in the fray ... the ensuing chaos has nothing to do with the freedom of choice which the elections are supposed to guarantee for the voters."

Some observers have seen this royal address as a rebuke to all of the political parties in the country, especially the JDP and the AMP. Despite this, the Royal Court does not appear to be disinterested in the country's political affairs: although the JDP is electorally more popular than the AMP, the Royal Court is strongly expected to treat the AMP preferentially. On the other hand, these two facts underscore that while the deep state, aligned with the Royal Court, controls the levers of power in Morocco, it does not tamper with the electoral process. This was emphasized again with the triumph of the JDP in the municipal elections. The fact that these elections were relatively recent, coupled with the large, relatively stable and pro-active grassroots support base which backs the JDP all serve to make a new JDP victory more likely.

Prospects of the Coming Government

The undisputed preeminence of the JDP alongside the AMP reflects the huge challenge which the Kingdom of Morocco faces going into the future. Polling day will be a chance for the people of Morocco to express their opinions: do they want to see a continuation of JDP policies, or would they prefer to see the AMP lead a change across the Kingdom. In the event that the margin between the JDP and the AMP proves to be small, intervention by the Royal Court could prove to be the decisive factor in selecting the next government in Morocco.

A JDP victory would likely result in the persistence of the policies which the group has held since 2011. A second JDP-led ruling coalition would likely include such groups as the Independence Party; the PPS; the Popular Movement and other parties that want to escape the fate of being relegated to the political opposition. This first scenario may be the most likely, but the possibility of an AMP victory unsettling Rabat's political scene cannot be entirely discounted.

For its part, the AMP has the advantage of a sophisticated structure and the dynamism of its cadres, giving it ever increasing strength on the ground. The chances of its victory in the elections are considerable. Its electoral rhetoric is built on the refutation of JDP policies which it claims are completely inadequate on both the domestic and international political fronts. The AMP regards itself to be the best possible candidate to lead the country during the present time.

In the event of an AMP victory, its coalition partners would likely include the Patriotic Union of Liberals and possibly the Independence Party, or even the Socialist Union, if the latter is given the chance to leave the wilderness of the opposition.