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ASSESSMENT REPORT

The September 2015 Municipal Elections in Morocco: the Performance of the Justice and Development Party

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | Sep 2015

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Introduction

On September 4, 2015, Morocco witnessed the first municipal elections held under an Islamist-led government, and under a new constitution. The latest polls provided an opportunity for intense rivalry between a government-aligned coalition, led by the ruling Islamists in the Justice and Development Party (JDP), and an opposition which is composed of a patchwork of more established political parties, including leftwing and conservative groups, alongside “Authenticity and Modernity Party”, a party associated with the Royal Court and founded in 2008. The poll was also a display of competitiveness between the JDP, in search for a new popular mandate following its 2011 victory in the legislative elections which brought it to power, and a political establishment looking to establish itself in the electoral fray.

The results at both regional and provincial levels were a boon to the JDP, who had secured victory in all of the major cities in the country, but they also provided an upset for the ruling Islamists and their competitors in the more traditional political parties. While the JDP-led Islamist coalition secured 1.5 million votes, the Authenticity and Modernity Party (PAM) managed to gain over 1.3 million votes. Ultimately, and despite a full field of political groups vying for power, the state of disarray that has afflicted the Moroccan public sphere for years meant that genuine competition was limited to three groups: the JDP; the PAM, and the Independence Party. The Socialist Union of Popular Forces, an established leftwing movement which spearheaded the opposition to the late King Hassan II, and which led the government from 1998-2003, was perhaps the biggest loser in the polls earlier in September.

A sweep for the Justice and Development Party

Official figures from the Moroccan Ministry of Interior show that the JDP won a total of 15.94 percent of the votes cast in the municipal elections, more than any other political party. Nonetheless, it only placed the JDP in third place when ranked by the 5,021 seats it won across district-level wards nationwide. Examining the results by the numbers alone, however, obscures the fact that the JDP was the biggest winner across all of Morocco’s major cities, areas in which the pro-JDP electorate was believed to be small. This includes cities such as Fez (formerly a stronghold of the Independence Party), Casablanca, Rabat, Tangier, Marrakech and Agadir (home turf of the opposition Socialist Union).

The poll victory was a turning point for the JDP, a group once derisively dubbed “the government of devout beards” by Abdulkabir al-Alawi al-Midghari, a Muslim scholar and politician who engineered the containment of Morocco’s Islamists through the velvet glove of political formalization. This turning point, and the breakthrough achieved by the Islamist JDP, was made possible by the group’s pragmatic political rhetoric (free of religious preaching), the way its competitors were mired in allegations of corruption, and the moderate public image of its leading member and current Prime Minister, Abdul Ilah Benkirane. These factors enabled the JDP to achieve a breakthrough in the major urban centers of Morocco and win over voters who were not a part of its rank and file, a decisive turn of events that has allowed the Islamist party to come to power in cities like Casablanca, Fez and Tangier.

The election results also demonstrate Moroccan voters’ continued desire to punish the traditional political parties which have dominated elections for years, as well as voters’ commitment to the program of reforms—albeit limited—which the JDP has begun to roll out from its position of power. Effectively, voters have affirmed the JDP slogan of “Let the Reforms Go On”.

However, not all the members of the JDP-led ruling coalition were equally fortunate during the local polls. These parties included: The National Rally of Independents, a base for businessmen with links to the Royal Court; the Popular Movement, a conservative, royalist group affiliated to the Liberal International; and the Party of Progress and Socialism, a leftist outfit with Communist roots. Their performance in the municipal elections placed these parties in fourth, fifth and seventh places respectively, further indicating that Moroccan voters associate the ruling coalition with the JDP.

Results: a Look at the Numbers

The statistics show the fierceness of the competition between political parties in their attempts to dominate the municipal elections, at the Province and District levels. To recap, the polls were contested by seven political groupings: the JDP; the PAM; Independence; the Socialist Union; the Popular Movement; the National Rally of Independents; and the Party of Progress and Socialism. Significantly, the first of these groups contested nearly 100 percent of the seats which were up for election. Data from the Ministry of Interior shows that a total of 130,295 candidates vied for the 31,503 seats which were being contested at District level, giving an average of four

candidates vying for each seat. At the Province level, a total of 7,588 candidates, from within 895 electoral slates, vied for control of 678 seats across the 12 Provinces. The number of candidates fielded by the three main parties can be seen in Table 1:

Table 1. The distribution of candidates for the local elections, by political party.

Political party	Number of candidates fielded
Authenticity and Modernity	18,277
Independence	17,214
Justice and Development	16,310
All other parties (total of 19)	15,879

Table 1 shows the intensity of the competition between the three largest political parties in Morocco’s municipal elections, and the extent to which this competition left the other parties trailing.

This intensity was also reflected in the number of votes that each of the three largest parties received:

Table 2. Votes won by the three main parties in Morocco's 2015 municipal elections.

Political party	Number of votes won (thousands)
Authenticity and Modernity	1,300
Independence	1,070
Justice and Development	1,500

The scale and spread of the support which the JDP received also allowed it to benefit from a new electoral law in Morocco. Voters who had supported smaller parties at the District level had their votes re-directed to the JDP at the Province level, giving the JDP 174 of a total of 678 Province-level seats. The JDP's main competitors were similarly fortunate:

Table 3. The number of seats secured by the main parties in Morocco's municipal elections.

Political party	Number of seats at provincial level (of 678)	Rank
Authenticity and Modernity	132	2
Independence	118	3
Justice and Development	174	1
Socialist Union	48	6

The spread of support for the JDP is also instructive. The Islamist group polled well in some of the rural environs surrounding big cities, specifically in the outskirts of Casablanca (where it won 30 Province-level seats), the Fez-Meknes region (22 seats), the Rabat-Sale-Quneitra region (26 seats) and the Tangier-Tetouan-El Hoceima regions (18 seats). It performed less well in other rural regions of Morocco. In general, the JDP also performed better in wards in urban centers than it did in rural regions. Across rural wards more generally, the PAM was the larger winner, repeating the pattern it established in 2009. In both cases, the strength of the AMP was due in no small part to an expansive organizational and support network, as well as reliable support from local notables and chieftains. Results indicate that all three of the main political parties benefited from contesting across a wide number of electoral constituencies.

In the Wake of the JDP Experiment

In the context of Morocco, the idea of a "political alternative" was touted as a means to allow breathing space and a buffer for the Monarchy and state to absorb social

movements. In 1998, at a time when the state apparatus was suffering from a paralysis (known colloquially in Morocco as “heart attack politics”), the late King Hassan II brought together the leaders of the Independence and Socialist Union parties to form the Arab world’s first minority government. Gradually, however, this unprecedented experiment in allowing the political opposition a say in public decision-making proved unsuccessful, and the massive reservoir of public support for these two parties, formerly in the opposition, dissipated. The Socialist Union, now bereft of popular backing, eventually withdrew from government, and returned to the opposition trenches following its electoral humiliation in 2011.

Today, the JDP offers the same kind of buffer against public anger: it is a popular “political alternative” and one which is reliable, in the midst of ongoing tensions and uncertainties surrounding the path of democratization in the countries of the Arab Spring which share Morocco’s geography. A close reading of the events which followed the February 2011 protests in Morocco—at the height of the Arab Spring—reveals just how successful the Islamist JDP was in assuaging public anger at such a critical time. These events also show how the JDP failed to achieve far-reaching reforms that would accelerate the democratic transition in Morocco. Within this broader context, the results of the municipal elections can be viewed as a public endorsement of the JDP’s rhetoric of political stability and reforms, which it built on throughout the campaign. The wide level of public awareness surrounding municipal elections in Morocco can be reflected in the steady level of participation in these polls, in which 53.67 percent of the electorate cast their ballots, compared to 52.4 percent during the 2009 elections.

Benkirane’s JDP exploited the compatibility of the “Let the Reforms Go On” slogan with a deep-seated desire for stability, of which the JDP was also a champion. In other words, the JDP has succeeded in presenting itself as the political alternative capable of carrying out the reforms needed at this present time. Since its inception, the JDP has also been adamantly in favor of a system of rule where the monarchy rules as a guarantor of stability and of the functioning of political life, suggesting that the leadership of the JDP see themselves as agents of change who operate from within the political establishment.

The results of Morocco’s latest municipal polls show that the JDP’s popularity even within the urban middle classes surpassed observers’ expectations. They also show that the party has been able to overcome the negativity that media opposition towards a moderate, centrist approach to political Islamism has engendered, and which has

allowed the JDP to survive in the relatively narrow margin of political freedom afforded to it by the Moroccan monarchy—and which was widened by the Moroccan protest movement of 2011.

Conclusion

Coming amidst calls for a boycott by leftist political parties unhappy with the limited constitutional reforms enacted so far, which they believe turn elections in Morocco into a theatrical display for the gratification of the actors willing to play their scripted roles, these elections allow observers to place the JDP—which presently leads the Moroccan cabinet—in its true context. In spite of these boycott calls, the elections were characterized by an extensive level of participation in these local polls. They are also an indication of a return of voters' confidence in the country's political life, despite futile political spats carried out during the campaign by the general-secretaries of a number of Moroccan political parties, who traded insults and accusations of political corruption between each other.

The September 2015 municipal elections ushered in a new era for local politics in Morocco, one in which the JDP and its candidates are well represented. Across urban centers where their candidates have won outright majorities and in others where they have nearly done so, the JDP is already preparing to field mayoral candidates. Meanwhile, Morocco's proportional representation system for its municipal councils, at both the Province and District levels, means that otherwise "unnatural" coalitions are likely to take shape and dominate the formation of local councils. Out of a desire to distribute positions of power among various parties, political disagreements might be put aside and improbable coalitions can be formed; such as an alliance between the opposition Socialist Union of Popular Forces and the Islamists who are now leading a coalition government, or between the Communists, already incorporated into government, with rightwing conservatives.

What has come to an end, following the municipal elections this month, is the era of outright political majorities which previously allowed Morocco's traditional political parties to dominate public life in the country. Additionally, allowing the JDP to play a role in the municipal councils, which are intimately connected to the daily worries of Moroccan citizens, will likely have implications for the legislative elections planned for next year.