



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات  
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

# Moroccan Parliamentary Elections: Political Parties Jockey for Power

Policy Analysis Unit | Mar 2016

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## Introduction

Morocco's upcoming parliamentary elections in October 2016 hold out the prospect of a massive change to the country's political landscape. The Authenticity and Modernity Party (*Parti Authenticité et Modernité*, PAM) will seek to use the polls to secure a position of power, while the Islamist Justice and Development Party (*Parti de la Justice et du Développement*, PJD) is keen to protect the power it won through the ballot box with an eye to a renewed term. Some of Morocco's older, establishment political parties meanwhile are nervously waiting, as the upcoming polls could in fact cast them aside entirely.

The upcoming legislative elections open the door for fierce electoral competition. This kind of political jockeying, however, leaves no room for serious discussion on economic agendas, there being no considerable distinctions between Morocco's major political parties in their approach to the country's generally liberal economic policies. In the past, political parties in power have lacked the political courage to carry out far-reaching and necessary reforms to some of Morocco's crumbling economic policies such as the state pension fund, national consumer goods subsidy programs and energy subsidies.

## Political Parties in the Run-Up to the Elections

While electoral competition is effectively restricted to that between the PAM and the PJD, a number of more established, but now beleaguered, political parties—such as the Popular Movement (MP), the Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP) and the National Rally of Independents—are waiting to see the best way to preserve their power by building an alliance with the winner from the two dominant parties.

Known for its traditionally close links to Morocco's Royal Court, the PAM is acutely aware of the fact that the October, 2016 elections will decide its political fate. The party does not want to be a mere coalition partner of the PJD, but is keen to oust the Islamist group and replace it as the governing party. Having recently announced its plans to confront Islamists, the PAM is now looking for ways to prevent the victory of the PJD, by depicting the Islamist group as a "royalist party with reformist leanings". Fearful that the PJD will tighten its grip on power, and that its time in opposition could be prolonged, the PAM is now throwing all its weight behind its campaign against the Islamist party in the months running up to the polls.

For its part, the PJD views the October elections as an opportunity to reap the benefits of years of risky economic reforms championed by the party. The October polls will be seen as a popularity test of its wide ranging reform program, and the durability of a model of government in a region where numerous other Islamist political movements have failed before it. In the run up to October, the PJD is keen to avoid being dragged into the polarized debate over identity politics which the PAM is attempting to impose on the electorate. Indeed, the PJD leadership remains weary of the attitudes of Morocco's deep state, of the country's centralized authority ("*Makhzer*") and other state apparatus towards it. It is these worries against which it must balance its electoral gambit.

Competing with both the PJD and PAM is the Independence Party. The group has already failed to make any gains from its previous alliance with PAM against the PJD. Aware of the fact that it had little to show for its attack on the PJD, the Independence Party has since made amends with its Islamist former foes, and is now eagerly awaiting the opportunity to join a coalition government in some capacity or another.

Meanwhile, the National Rally of Independents (RNI), a junior member of the ruling coalition, acknowledges the importance of its role within the ruling coalition. Equally, however, it is aware of the potential difficulties in navigating the political landscape, and of the price it has to pay for siding with the PAM in some of its battles against the PJD. It also knows it cannot be seen to court the Independence Party as a feasible ally in the event of a PJD victory.

Also invested in the outcomes of the October legislative election is Morocco's political left. For the Socialist Union, the coming polls are an existential threat to its future shape and its prospects as a viable party. There is the inherent danger that the results in October could cast the party out of all realistic future competition for electoral power. Based on its performance in the September municipal elections, the leadership of the Socialist Union is apprehensive that the coming legislative elections will place it in an even worse electoral position. Another leftwing party, the Party of Progress and Socialism, has managed to strengthen its already robust relationship with the now-dominant PJD. Its experience of government over the previous few years has dispelled any fears which this socialist party might have towards the victory of an Islamist group in the legislative elections. Likewise, it will stand to lose massively in the case of a PAM victory. Finally, the Popular Movement, another leftwing grouping, seems little concerned with the political jostling between larger parties, it being too small to be a player or even a target in these machinations. Realistically, the Popular Movement does

not expect to bolster its political power through the ballot box, but instead will make itself available to any possible political coalitions, seeking only to find a foothold in the upcoming government.

## Making the Most of Constrained Power

Even from its position of power within Morocco's establishment, the dominant PJD does not hold all the power it would need to carry out any major political and economic reforms to singlehandedly change the course which Morocco is charting. In many such instances, the ascent from the Royal Court—of which the government is in effect an arm—is necessary. This limited space from which it could maneuver proved to be a major hindrance to the PJD's reform program, which was never even a priority for most of its coalition partners, with the exception of the Party of Progress and Socialism.

Nevertheless, there have been noticeable changes to the behavior of the Moroccan state at large towards the country's Islamist political groups, particularly since the massive popular protests of 2011. During the intervening five years, the PJD has been able to build bridges with other groups operating within the country's power structures. These changes have served to cast away many of the doubts and misgivings which Rabat's ruling elite had towards the Islamist PJD; the possibility of coexistence between Morocco's rulers and the Islamists has now been proven. This has bought the PJD some grace, and holds out the prospect of ever greater power to change reality on the ground, for which it would need good will from the Royal Court. Yet this newfound tolerance has only served to arouse the suspicions and anxieties of Morocco's other opposition groups, in particular the PAM.

As for relations between the Court and the PJD more broadly, the reformist camp within the PJD holds strongly to the ideal of "reform under stable conditions", a non-confrontational approach which has come to be the defining theme of Morocco's political landscape. The PJD's outlook is rooted in a reading of history which regards the underdevelopment of Morocco since the post-colonial era to be a consequence of a long-standing conflict between the Royal Court and the country's political parties. Eager not to reignite such conflict, the PJD now appears to other political forces to be more royal than the king.

Today, the PJD is defined by its urban character. This role was cemented by the September, 2015 municipal polls in which the group won control of most of Morocco's cities. The PJD's preeminence in Morocco's urban centers offers the group a large

advantage in the legislative elections later this year: the Islamist group's ease of access to wide swathes of the population is now much enhanced. Another electoral asset which the PJD will be keen to highlight is its ability to balance economic reforms with social stability. The PJD's ability to deal with a number of economic portfolios has demonstrated remarkable political bravery and a willingness to tackle socially sensitive economic issues, such as the state's retirement fund. This is further evidence of the massive political capital which the PJD can rely on when dealing with matters of social relevance, something which will be very useful as it continues to address Morocco's subsidies of basic consumer goods, as well as its concomitant expansion of the social welfare net. The PJD's success in these affairs has only served to enhance its credibility among voters, and will only be served further by the modest success of competing political parties, which have been relegated to the opposition in recent years. In contrast, one area in which the PJD's achievements over the past five years at the helm of the country's government has been more limited is the reform of the security establishment, and in particular the enactment of the 2011 constitution. The PJD is in fact reluctant to involve itself in security affairs, which have so far remained out of the purview of government oversight. Since the 2011 protests, with the government hobbled by its own internal conflicts, the security sector has been subject to only the bare minimum of reforms.

## Possible Scenarios

The aftermath of the coming legislative elections could fall into one of two main scenarios.

Given the group's success in the September, 2015 municipal elections, where it polled more than any other group, the first, and more likely, predicted outcome will be a major victory for the PJD and the construction of a governing coalition, the broad contours of which are in fact already becoming apparent. One important development in this regard is the radical realignment of the Independence Party, which has unraveled the previously standing opposition camp, unsettling its former allies in the PAM and the Socialist Union. In the event of a PJD victory, the Independence Party will immediately become a strong contender for a position as a coalition partner—and it is likely to press its claim to such a position very strongly. This will not preclude the PJD from forming alliances with other political parties, such as the Progress and Socialism Party or the Popular Movement.



The second, less likely scenario is one which sees the victory of the Authenticity and Modernity Party. In such an outcome, the PAM will come to dominate all of the pivotal functions within the state apparatus, and will likely bring a number of other political parties into coalition with it. These include the RNI which, albeit a nominal member of the PJD-led coalition, has in effect been an ally of the PAM. Other likely members of a PAM-led coalition include the Socialist Union, and even the Independence Party which, given its eagerness to avoid being confined to the opposition, has become a willing partner in any coalition, regardless of whichever party leads such a governing coalition. In the event of a PAM victory, conservative forces within Morocco's deep state will likely realign to join in a new and emboldened attack on the PJD, which they will seek to weaken.