

ISSUE BRIEF **05.28.18**

The PJD: The Vanguard of Democracy in Morocco in the Age of Populism and Authoritarian Entrenchment?

Lise Storm, Ph.D., University of Exeter, United Kingdom

INTRODUCTION

The idea of an Islamist party as the vanguard of democracy—whether in Morocco, Tunisia, or elsewhere in the Muslim world—sounds hollow to many secular actors and commentators, who fear that such a party has simply adapted to its environment without changing its core values. In other words, they suspect these parties have made strategic calculations in their quest for power, effectively masquerading as wolves in sheep's clothing (Wickham 2004; Ashour 2009; Schwedler 2006; Clark 2006; Tibi 2008; Baran 2008). That said, by now there are few who would argue—unless politically motivated—that the Morocco's Party of Justice and Development (PJD) is not a moderate political actor, regardless of whether the party is compared to other Islamist parties and groups within Morocco or further afield, or to other political actors within the country. In this regard, the PJD can be characterized as moderate if evaluated from the perspective of its religious discourse, and also in terms of its stance on the political process, as the party displays moderate tendencies through its support of democratic progress in Morocco. The PJD is open and tolerant of alternative perspectives (Schwedler 2006) and is willing to participate in the political system and reject violence in the pursuit of the party's agenda (Asseburg 2007). In comparison to other central actors within the political system—some more established and powerful such as the monarchy, the

makhzen parties (particularly the Party of Authenticity and Modernity, or PAM), and the Istiqlal (PI), which all have been reluctant to push for further reforms in a direction away from the current “executive monarchy” in which the king not only rules, but governs—the PJD stands out as more progressive in the sense of its commitment to a push for further democratization.¹ The reasons behind this may be neither highly altruistic nor with the state of democracy in mind, but rather result in a nice side effect (Ottaway and Riley 2006; Storm 2007; Storm 2013; Sater 2016; Boukhars 2010).

The PJD has always been a comparatively moderate actor within the Islamist political scene in Morocco, even during the days when the Movement for Unity and Reform (MUR) was a much stronger force within the party.² However, in recent years, particularly since the Casablanca bombings of 2003, the PJD has clearly moderated further with a view to appease (a) the monarchy, i.e., the gatekeeper to the formal political system, and (b) secular elements of society (Shehata 2010; Ridgeon 2015; Wegner 2011).³ This moderation began in earnest with the party's so-called “pacted” entry into parliamentary politics in the late 1990s, gaining speed during the early years in parliament when the party sought to establish working partnerships with the more established political actors inside and outside of parliament, and finally, following its ascent to the top after the party's victory in the November 25, 2011, elections and the



The PJD has always been a comparatively moderate actor within the Islamist political scene in Morocco, even during the days when the Movement for Unity and Reform (MUR) was a much stronger force within the party.

subsequent appointment of the Abdelilah Benkirane cabinets (2012–13 and 2013–16) and the cabinet of Saadeddine El Othmani (2017–present).

The reality that the PJD is generally considered to be a moderate Islamist party does not, however, imply that it is universally accepted as such. Foreign governments, particularly in Western Europe and North America, have been wary of the party due to its Islamist credentials, and so have members of the Moroccan population. These views are stoked by Western concerns, *makhzen* propaganda, and opposition to the fusion of religion and politics (Wolf 2018).⁴

RECOGNIZING THE PJD: MODERATION VIA PARTICIPATION AND ATTEMPTED CO-OPTATION

Within Morocco, the monarchy—via the *makhzen*—has long pushed the idea that the PJD is an actor in need of moderation. At the same time, the party's inclusion in the formal political system is viewed as a necessity to moderate the party and provide an avenue for those members of the population who identify as Islamists and who would otherwise not have a dedicated vehicle for representation—a strategy of co-optation with a view to co-opt (Mekouar 2010; Storm 2007, 2009; Wegner 2011; Boukhars 2010; Del Sarto 2006). Hence, the PJD has always known that the party's inclusion in formal politics has depended upon not upsetting the monarchy, and there is no doubt that this reality forced the party to moderate its tone in order to first become officially recognized as a legal political party and, later, to enter parliamentary politics.

During the early years, moderation referred both to the party's stance on religious issues (and the relationship between religion and politics, although the party was never an advocate of a return to the Caliphate)⁵ and its position on the executive monarchy. However, as the years passed and the party carved out a solid position for itself in Moroccan politics, turning into the darling of the electorate, the balance of power between the *makhzen* and the PJD changed, and

with it the ability of the former to pressure the latter. This is not to say, by any means, that the PJD is an actor even remotely on par with the monarchy within the political system. Rather, it is unthinkable that the monarchy can now simply eliminate the PJD from formal politics. The idea of a Moroccan political scene without the PJD is unthinkable to many, except in the case of an enormous scandal relating to the party—but even then, it would be highly improbable. Evidence of political corruption is rife in the country (Boukhars 2010; Boussaid 2009; Transparency International 2016), and putting a credible case together against the PJD based on radical, anti-systemic tendencies would be very difficult,⁶ even though the party has ill-advisedly allowed its platform to be used by ex-jihadi Salafis at election time.⁷ However, the PJD's leadership has also demonstrated its professionalism and commitment. For example, Moroccan Prime Minister Abdelilah Benkirane met with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in 2015, despite the latter being a symbol of political oppression of Islamists in Egypt following the Arab uprisings. Benkirane was met with strong criticism from within the Muslim community at home and abroad, but argued that the meeting was politics, and part of the job (Hamid and McCants 2017).⁸

LOOKING AHEAD: WHY THE PJD IS CRUCIAL FOR THE DEMOCRATIZATION PROCESS

There is no arguing that today, the PJD is a political party led by figures whose primary objective is the survival of the party, a goal that is now largely determined at the polls. The PJD is hungry for power within a political system whose ins and outs are now familiar, and which it does not seek to change. The PJD is no different from its counterparts on the Moroccan political scene. It plays by the rules of the game, and it does not actively seek to alter them in any way. It is not anti-systemic in the sense of being anti-democratic. Rather, it is one of the key actors keeping Morocco's feeble democratic process alive, although the party's commitment manifests in largely

The PJD has always known that the party's inclusion in formal politics has depended upon not upsetting the monarchy, and there is no doubt that this reality forced the party to moderate its tone.

passive rhetoric, voiced when prompted or put under pressure. In this respect, it is similar to Ennahdha in neighboring Tunisia, which at times has also been vilified for its Islamist credentials (Wolf 2018).

Parties like Ennahdha and the PJD are vital actors in need of support (domestic and international) if democracy is viewed as the desired destination. This is not because they are Islamists or because they are inherently more democratic than other parties on the scene. Instead, they are important for the following reasons: 1) they are not “flash” parties, but those that have managed to survive a series of elections; 2) their popular base is considerable, as evidenced by their grassroots electoral mobilization;⁹ and (3) their ties to the establishment—the remnants of the Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD) in Tunisia (largely in the form of Nidaa Tounes) and the monarchy/*makhzen* in Morocco—are weaker than those of most of the other Moroccan political parties of substance (Storm and Cavatorta 2018). It is not the case that Morocco, Tunisia, and similar countries cannot do without the PJD or Ennahdha; however, they cannot do without parties like them. Parties with characteristics such as longevity, roots, and relative independence are necessary if democratization is to stand a chance of moving forward, rather than grinding to a halt. At present, the feeble Moroccan democratization process is threatened by the events surrounding the Arab uprisings, which strengthened the monarchy domestically and internationally. Critics were silenced and old opposition parties were used as scapegoats.¹⁰ The only genuine challenger of the *makhzen* parties at the polls is the PJD.

That said, it is important to note that the Arab uprisings did not create this environment alone. The process had already begun years earlier, but the uprisings accelerated and cemented it. As the balance of power between the monarchy and the PJD began to shift and the battleground moved to the electoral arena as it typically does under competitive authoritarianism, strategies on both sides were adapted. The PJD responded by building alliances and working partnerships with other parties

in parliament—chiefly the Istiqlal and the Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP)—and with powerful actors outside of parliament, and by maintaining its comparatively strong links to society.¹¹ For its part, the monarchy sought to create a new party to balance the PJD: the PAM. At a time of an upward Islamist political trend (nationally and regionally), rising populism (globally and locally), and growing popular disaffection with the established political parties, coupled with anti-establishment sentiments in general (nationally and globally), PAM was seen as a savior of the executive monarchy and an antidote to the *makhzen*'s grip on power (Storm 2013; Wolf 2018; Hamblin 2015; Eibl 2011). The PAM, run by King Mohammed VI's old school friend and long-time ally, Fouad Ali el-Himma, is a party largely devoid of ideological foundations, but has one forte: connections, or “*wasta*.” This reality has made the party enormously popular with the electorate because it is more likely to deliver than most of its counterparts—even among the *makhzen* parties. In other words, it can get things done in a society with a murky, strictly top-down political system where connections are everything. The PAM does not have to pass any gatekeepers to be heard by the country's most powerful actor. It has direct access to the monarch.

The PAM is the modern face of regime parties. It is a party evidently created by those in the highest echelons of power who are keen to maintain that power, but it is also one that is extremely popular with voters—possibly for the wrong reasons (i.e., its ties to the regime), but popular nonetheless. And this is the crux of the matter. The PAM is not a flash party, and neither are its predecessors such as the National Rally of Independents (RNI), the Constitutional Union (UC), and the Popular Movement (MP). These parties represent a significant segment of the electorate, as does the PJD and other opposition forces such as the USFP and the Istiqlal, which were tolerated and later co-opted into the political system to keep it stable and ensure the survival of the executive monarchy. These parties form the core of the Moroccan party system. They have become the usual suspects—the parties that voters expect

The PJD is no different from its counterparts on the Moroccan political scene. It plays by the rules of the game, and it does not actively seek to alter them in any way.

Parties like Ennahdha and the PJD are vital actors in need of support (domestic and international) if democracy is viewed as the desired destination.

These parties represent a significant segment of the electorate, as does the PJD and other opposition forces such as the USFP and the Istiqlal, which were tolerated and later co-opted into the political system to keep it stable and ensure the survival of the executive monarchy.

to see on the polling lists. Regardless of their flaws, this nucleus—the USFP, the Istiqlal, the PJD, the MP, the RNI, the UC, and the PAM—guarantees choice and a certain degree of representativeness both at election time (as together they cover most of the political spectrum, to the extent that it applies in Morocco) and after, via the formation of coalition governments, which most of the time tend to be oversized.¹² They also guarantee a modicum of rotation of power in the government, even if real power is vested in the monarch. These factors—rotation of power and choice—are fundamental aspects of democracy.¹³

The election campaign surrounding the 2016 legislative contest and the cabinet-formation process in its aftermath showed worrying signs that the monarchy is seeking to change this situation by weakening the opposition to such an extent that the *makhzen* parties—and particularly the PAM—will command a disproportionate amount of power. This has been a strategy of the monarchy during the entire post-independence period—but in the past, the campaigns usually took the form of divide and conquer, while 2016 was much more targeted, singling out the PJD in particular. And this is worrying, not only because such moves are against the fundamental democratic principle of reasonably free and fair competitive elections, but also because it undermines the only party on the political scene that has a modicum of interest in pushing the stale democratization process in Morocco. As it stands, the established political parties all benefit from the status quo; their interest lies in the survival of the executive monarchy and, hence, they do very little to advance change. In fact, they often do exactly the opposite. That said, out of all the parties the PJD stands to gain the least from the current system prevailing, partly due to the party's relative distance from the monarchy and to the latter's constant vilification and belittling of the PJD and its leadership (Sakhtivel 2013a, 2013b). As a result, the PJD has threatened on more than one occasion to start rocking the boat, rather than being such a good pupil. While this is in all likelihood an empty threat, it nonetheless keeps the monarchy and the

makhzen on their toes, and that is very much needed if the democratization process is not to halt entirely.

ENDNOTES

1. The party's relatively strong support for the democratization of the political system is frequently viewed as a "radical" stance by the regime, which is undeniably in favor of the status quo, i.e., the perpetuation of the executive monarchy.

2. Please note that while the moderation of the PJD gained momentum around the time that it formally separated from the MUR, most members of the PJD's leadership remain members of the MUR; it was not this separation that accelerated the process, but rather factors external to the party, most notably the monarchy. The PJD was allowed entry into formal politics by the monarchy as a means to counterbalance other (less moderate, and potentially more popular) Islamist forces. That said, the monarchy might have looked less favorably at the PJD's wish to become recognized as a political party in its own right had it not formally severed its ties with the MUR, something that the party's leadership would have been very well aware of (Mekouar 2010; Zeghal 2008).

3. It is worth noting that virtually all Western news outlets, even those on the right, including Fox News, routinely refer to the PJD as moderate.

4. Please note that according to survey data, most Moroccans are primarily concerned with economic issues. See the Arab Barometer (www.arabbarometer.org) and the World Values Surveys (www.wvs.org).

5. It is worth noting that very few highly ranked Islamists in Morocco, even within *Al Adl Wal Ihsane*, could imagine a Morocco without the monarchy. What they are taking issue with is the extent of the monarch's political powers and his use of the religious title "commander of the faithful" (Storm 2007).

6. The party has been accused by Salafis of not representing Islamic values. A frequent critic has been Sheikh Mohammed al-Fizazi, who crucially is not against political

participation, being an admirer of Egypt's *al-Nour*. In fact, it is important to note that a significant segment of the Salafi community has moderated considerably in recent years, and whereas they previously eschewed political participation, several prominent figures are now engaging in formal politics. In the October 2016 parliamentary elections, a number of ex-jihadi sheikhs ran on the slates of established political parties, the majority contesting under the banner of the PRV (Party of Renaissance and Virtue), but some also on PJD lists, and on lists belonging to smaller political entities such as the *makhzen* MSD (Democratic and Social Movement) and the Party of New Democrats. A significant number of Salafis have also joined the non-*makhzen*/traditional opposition Istiqlal party, and the main *makhzen* party at the moment, the PAM (Party of Authenticity and Modernity), is known to be aligned with Mohammed Maghraoui (Masbah 2017).

7. A further example is that of Hammas al-Khabbaj, who, despite being put forward by the PJD, was barred from contesting the elections by the local governor of Marrakech on the grounds of his “anti-democratic tendencies.”

8. For a discussion of PJD strategies and scope in the wake of the Arab uprisings, please also see Daadaoui (2014, 2017) and Masbah (2017). For data on the popular support base of the PJD, see Pellicer and Wegner (2014) and Ciftci and Tekin (2009).

9. See also survey data from the Arab Barometer (www.arabbarometer.org) and supplementary data on Muslim opinions in the MENA from the Pew Research Center at <http://www.pewglobal.org/2012/07/10/most-muslims-want-democracy-personal-freedoms-and-islam-in-political-life/>.

10. This comment refers to the USFP, the Istiqlal, and the then-leader of the Istiqlal, Abbas el-Fassi, in particular, and it is not to say that these actors were not corrupt or power-hungry or, indeed, not complicit in stalling the democratization process, as all evidence points in the other direction. Rather, it is to say that they were not the main culprits given their position within the political system and, indeed, the party system.

11. See Clark (2017); Pellicer and Wegner (2014); Ciftci and Tekin (2009).

12. Given the fragmentation of the party system—Sartori (1976) would describe it as verging on atomized—coalition governments have been the order of the day since the opening up of the party system in the 1980s (Storm 2007, 2013).

13. An institutionalized and relatively strong and stable party landscape also makes for much less fraught and, consequently, more peaceful transitions to democracy, as more actors have a vested interest in a pact rather than revolutionary transition. Furthermore, most segments of the population are likely to feel included in such a scenario, as the pact will be more representative.

REFERENCES

- Ashour, Omar. 2009. *The De-Radicalization of Jihadists: Transforming Armed Islamist Movements*. London: Routledge.
- Asseburg, Muriel, ed. 2007. “Moderate Islamists as Reform Actors: Conditions and Programmatic Change.” Research paper 4, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, German Institute for International and Security. Berlin.
- Baran, Zeyno. 2008. “Turkey Divided.” *Journal of Democracy* 19, no. 1: 55–69.
- Boukhars, Anouar. 2010. *Politics in Morocco*. London: Routledge.
- Boussaid, Farid. 2009. “The Rise of the PAM in Morocco: Trampling the Political Scene or Stumbling into It?” *Mediterranean Politics* 14, no. 3: 413–19.
- Ciftci, Sabri and Yusuf Tekin. 2009. “Voter Preferences, Electoral Cleavages, and Support for Islamic Parties.” Paper prepared for delivery at the 2009 Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, April 2–5, Chicago, IL.
- Clark, Janine. 2017. “The Party of Justice and Development and Municipal Elections in Morocco.” Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS), September 22.
- Clark, Janine. 2006. “The conditions of Islamist moderation: Unpacking cross-ideological cooperation in Jordan.”

- International Journal of Middle East Studies* 38: 539–60.
- Daadaoui, Mohamed. 2017. "Of Monarchs and Islamists: The 'Refo-lutionary' Promise of the PJD Islamists and Regime Control in Morocco." *Middle East Critique* 26, no. 4: 355–71.
- Daadaoui, Mohamed. 2014. "Morocco's 'Spring': The Monarchical Advantage and Electoral Utility." In *Elections and Democratization in the Middle East*, edited by Mahmoud Hamad and Khaled al-Anani. London: Palgrave.
- Del Sarto, Rafaella. 2006. *Contested State Identities and Regional Security in the Euro-Mediterranean Area*. London: Palgrave.
- Eibl, Ferdinand. 2011. "The party of authenticity and modernity (PAM): Trajectory of a political *deus ex machina*." *Journal of North African Studies* 17, no. 1: 45–66.
- Hamblin, Amy. 2015. "Morocco." In *Arab Spring: Negotiating in the Shadow of the Intifadat*, edited by I. William Zartman. Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 182–208.
- Hamid, Shadi and William McCants, eds. 2017. *Rethinking Political Islam*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Masbah, Mohammed. 2017. "Morocco's Salafi Ex-Jihadis: Co-optation, Engagement, and the Limits of Inclusion." Middle East Brief 108, Brandeis University.
- Mekouar, Mohamed. 2010. "Moroccan Islamists: All the Taste, Half the Calories." Paper prepared for Midwest Political Science Association meeting, Chicago, Illinois, April 2010.
- Ottaway, Marina and Meredith Riley. 2006. "Morocco: From Top-Down Reform to Democratic Transition?" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Carnegie Papers, Middle East Series, Number 71.
- Pellicer, Miquel and Eva Wegner. 2014. "Socio-economic voter profile and motives for Islamist support in Morocco." *Party Politics* 20, no. 1: 116–33.
- Ridgeon, Lloyd, ed. 2015. *Sufis and Salafis in the Contemporary Age*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Sakhtivel, Vish. 2013a. "Assessing Morocco's New Cabinet." The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington, D.C., October 16.
- Sakhtivel, Vish. 2013b. "Morocco's Governing Islamists Remain Vulnerable." The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington, D.C., September 10.
- Sartori, Giovanni. 1976. *Parties and Party Systems*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sater, James. 2016. *Morocco: Challenges to tradition and modernity*. London: Routledge.
- Schwedler, Jillian. 2006. *Faith in Moderation: Islamist Parties in Jordan and Yemen*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Shehata, Dina. 2010. *Islamists and Secularists in Egypt*. London: Routledge.
- Storm, Lise. 2013. *Prospects for Democracy in North Africa: Parties and Party System institutionalization in the Maghreb*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.
- Storm, Lise. 2009. "The persistence of authoritarianism as a source of radicalization in North Africa." *International Affairs* 85, no. 5: 997–1013.
- Storm, Lise. 2007. *Democratization in Morocco*. London: Routledge.
- Storm, Lise and Francesco Cavatorta. 2018. "Do Arabs not do parties?" In *Political Parties in the Arab World*, edited by Francesco Cavatorta and Lise Storm, 1–20. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Tibi, Bassam. 2008. "Why They Can't Be Democratic." *Journal of Democracy* 19, no. 3: 43–8.
- Transparency International Online. "Asset Declarations in Morocco: Illicit Enrichment and Conflicts of Interest of Public Officials," May 17, 2016, https://www.transparency.org/whatwedo/publication/asset_declarations_in_morocco_illicit_enrichment_and_conflicts_on_interest.

- Wegner, Eva. 2011. *Islamist Opposition in Authoritarian Regimes: The Moroccan Party of Justice and Development*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.
- Wickham, Carrie. 2004. "The Path to Moderation: Strategy and Learning in the Formation of Egypt's Wasat Party." *Comparative Politics* 36, no. 2: 205–28.
- Wolf, Anne. 2018. *Political Islam in Tunisia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Zeghal, Malika. 2008. *Islam in Morocco: Religion, authoritarianism and electoral politics*. Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener.

AUTHOR

Lise Storm, Ph.D., is a senior lecturer in Middle East politics at the University of Exeter. Her core research interests are democracy, democratization, and party systems with a regional focus on North Africa. Storm is the author of *Party Politics and the Prospects for Democracy in North Africa*. She holds a Ph.D. in political science from the University of Exeter.

center for the
MIDDLE EAST
Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy

This issue brief is part of a two-year research project on pluralism in the Middle East after the Arab uprisings. The project is generously supported by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

See more issue briefs at:
www.bakerinstitute.org/issue-briefs

This publication was written by a researcher (or researchers) who participated in a Baker Institute project. Wherever feasible, this research is reviewed by outside experts before it is released. However, the views expressed herein are those of the individual author(s), and do not necessarily represent the views of Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy.

© 2018 Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy

This material may be quoted or reproduced without prior permission, provided appropriate credit is given to the author and Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy.

Cover image credit:
Morocco World News

Cite as:
Storm, Lise. 2018. *The PJD: The Vanguard of Democracy in Morocco in the Age of Populism and Authoritarian Entrenchment?* Issue brief no. 05.28.18. Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy, Houston, Texas.