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Working Under Constraints: The PJD in the Aftermath of the 2016 Elections

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THE CURSE OF THE MULTI-PARTY SYSTEM IN MOROCCO

A fragmented multi-party system is a fundamental feature of the Moroccan political system and is often considered a critical conduit for political reform and democratization in the long term. While a multi-party system could be seen as an opportunity to encourage the political participation of different political forces, elections also carry the prospect of sustaining authoritarian rule.¹ The latter is indeed the case in Morocco, where the monarchy has used elections as a mechanism to structure and control the country's political arena. The power of the monarchy is preserved by preventing the emergence of a strong party, maintaining a balance among political parties, and further dividing an already fragmented political elite.

The Moroccan political landscape comprises 33 parties. Some, like the PAM, were rapidly established and rose quickly in order to serve as a counterweight and a balancing political force against the rising popularity of the Party of Justice and Development (PJD).² This development is part of the palace's long-term strategy of "segmentary politics," which allows it to maintain control of the political field.³ In this regard, the monarchy has strategically used elections within the multi-party system to integrate popular parties and subsequently curb their potential rise. Over the years, a number of different parties

have had electoral success and popularity among the electorate, but they have been unwilling or incapable of challenging the regime in ways that can significantly advance democracy. The PJD is no exception. Moroccan politics has been shaped by what is known in Morocco as the *makhzen*, also referred to as the deep state,⁴ which is the political authority that is associated with the monarchy and its hegemonic state apparatus. In what follows, I argue that, in its relations with the *makhzen*, the PJD faces constraints similar to those experienced by other parties, and, as a result, is unable to change the underlying dynamics of Moroccan politics.

MONARCHICAL POWERS AND THE CONSTITUTIONAL LIMITS OF THE PARTIES

In order to evaluate the PJD's status within the Moroccan political system, we must consider the following questions: constitutionally, what inhibits a greater political role for parties, and what obstacles impede the growth of powerful parties in Morocco? The first form of power that is defined in the Moroccan constitution is that of the "commander of the faithful." Accordingly, Sections 41 and 42 define the dual functions of the king as "commander of the faithful" and "head of state." Article 46 states that "the person of the king is inviolable, and respect is due him," adding that "the integrity of the person of the king shall not



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be violated.” The acts of the king also enjoy complete immunity. Constitutionally, the king is unaccountable and, hence, remains above the law. Under these constitutional provisions, the role of Moroccan parties in the country's political system is significantly limited; they lack autonomy. In addition, the majority of Moroccan parties are aligned with palace politics, which further constrains their independence and freedom of action. As a result, parties exist as instruments of the *makhzen*. Via formal and informal institutions and practices, the monarchy keeps political parties under its control, especially when it perceives that one has gained more strength or popularity.

THE PJD AND THE DIALECTICS OF POPULARITY AND VULNERABILITY

The PJD faces a dual dilemma that is inherent in the Moroccan political context. On one hand, the factors that might contribute to the PJD's popularity with the electorate can simultaneously be perceived as a threat to the Moroccan monarchy. On the other hand, the factors that can contribute to the PJD's acceptance by the regime can undermine the party's popularity among the voters. For example, the former secretary general of the PJD, Abdelilah Benkirane, was able to win a great following among Moroccans. While his widespread popularity, open style, and implicit strategy of exposing the contradictions of the Moroccan political system⁵ made him more popular with the people, he was gradually perceived as a nuisance to the regime and a clear justification for undercutting his efforts to form a coalition government after the 2016 elections.

However, when Benkirane's charismatic leadership was replaced with that of the lackluster new secretary general of the PJD, Saadeddine El Othmani, the PJD faced a different dilemma. El Othmani won the blessing of the palace but thus far has failed to gain popularity among the broader electorate or even within his own party. In the aftermath of the 2016 elections, party members were torn between keeping the blessing of the monarchy that clearly aligned

itself with El Othmani—and subsequently remaining part of the government—or siding with Benkirane, who had become persona non grata in palace circles, and shift to the opposition. The fact that the intraparty vote on party leadership favored El Othmani by a slim margin—51% for El Othmani and 49% for the mayor of Fez, Driss el-Azami—further pushed the PJD into a position of weakness vis-à-vis the monarchy because, from the perspective of the voters, it showed the party's predisposition to be as acquiescent and submissive as other parties. The PJD's compliance is therefore more likely to create a credibility gap and a sense of disenchantment among its own electorate in future elections.

Religion is also an important aspect of these dialectics because both the monarchy and the PJD can be viewed as direct competitors who use Islamic references in their political discourse. The PJD has been able to establish a moral basis and religious legitimacy that resonate with many voters. Although formally detached from the party, the Movement of Unity and Reform (MUR)—an Islamic movement—is an important factor in the PJD's popularity; many PJD members and leaders are active in the MUR, and the separation between the two organizations remains blurred.⁶ The MUR has moral standing among many Moroccans. In principle, the MUR exclusively focuses on *da'wa* (an Islamic call or missionary activism), but the relationship between politics and preaching is symbolically important. However, regardless of the PJD's efforts to downplay its religious message and symbolism,⁷ from the perspective of *makhzen*, the party was gradually perceived as a potential threat. This perception was largely based on the PJD's use of religious “symbolic capital”—such as social work and occasional references to religious codes and principles—which has served the monarchy for ages and become its “special domain.”

By the end of the 2015, it was evident that the palace did not want Abdelilah Benkirane to remain the head of government. The palace sought a strategy that would curb the popularity of the PJD in critical and gradual ways, but would not necessarily require the removal of the party from power.

Signs of this strategy began appearing during an election campaign that incited Moroccans against Benkirane and his party. This included a well-orchestrated but surreptitiously organized rally against the so-called “Islamization of the state” by the PJD.

AFTERMATH OF THE 2016 ELECTIONS

Following the September 4, 2015, municipal and regional elections in which the PJD managed victories in major cities such as Casablanca, Fez, Marrakech, and Tangier, the party continued to be an important force in Morocco’s electoral landscape, as demonstrated by its success in the 2016 parliamentary elections. Yet the party’s growing popularity was not well received by those in the inner circles of power. In 2016, the PJD increased its number of seats in parliament from 107 to 125, while the Party of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM) won only 102 seats—and this is a party created under the auspices of the king’s advisor, Fouad Ali El Himma, with the goal of undermining the growing popularity of the PJD.

Benkirane’s charisma was an important factor for the party’s success in the October 2016 elections. However, because he lacked a majority in the parliament, Benkirane had to search for partners to form a coalition government. This was exactly the terrain where the palace could engage in formal and informal politics to make the task impossible for Benkirane. The party’s former ally, the National Rally of Independents (RNI), asked to include two other parties in the coalition talks, a condition that Benkirane refused. In the end, an electoral victory did not translate into a win during the government formation process for the PJD, and for Benkirane in particular. Behind-the-scenes political maneuvering and the utilization of other political parties by the palace were sufficient to block the formation of a coalition government headed by Benkirane. This situation became popularly known as the “blockage” (deadlock).⁸ After six months of deadlock, Benkirane was replaced by El Othmani, who was finally appointed by the king to form a new coalition government.

CRACKS WITHIN THE PARTY

Following the decision to remove Benkirane from office in what was perceived as a humiliating experience for many within the PJD, it became clear that internal “cracks” might turn into long-lasting divisions. The party engaged in a heated debate over a proposal to change its internal bylaws to allow Abdellilah Benkirane to serve a third term as the secretary general of the PJD. Those opposed to the bylaw change believed that the party should not be based on the “personality cults” that characterize other parties in Morocco. This group also argued that the party should not embark on a path of confrontation with the palace. Some in this group even referred to the changing international context and the fate of Islamist parties in Egypt and Tunisia. This group was primarily associated with individuals integrated into the political and administrative system. The MUR did not favor the extension of Benkirane’s term. Another group of PJD members supported the extension. They argued that the decision to remove Benkirane countered democratic principles and contradicted the will of the people. They also suggested that under current conditions, it would be much better for the party to be part of the opposition. This group was associated with many parliament members and younger party members.

The cracks in the party’s cohesion became obvious during the PJD’s National Assembly session in November 2017, when 126 assembly members voted against amending the party’s internal laws (articles 16 and 37) while only 101 members supported the amendment that would have paved the way for Benkirane’s third term. In the opening speech before this extraordinary session, Benkirane acknowledged the existence of rifts within the party and tried to reconcile the two opposing groups. He hoped to calm the conflict by affirming that the party was established, able to withstand external pressures, and could reach independent decisions through democratic processes. After the vote, Benkirane stated, “The king has dismissed me, the party has put an end to my responsibilities.”⁹

The PJD’s use of religious “symbolic capital”—such as social work and occasional references to religious codes and principles—is perceived as a potential threat because it has served the monarchy for ages and become its “special domain.”

While this situation was a testament to the PJD's democratic process, it did make divisions within the party public, which could cause further disunity. The divisions were still evident during the party vote on new leadership. Saadeddine El Othmani barely won with 1,006 votes out of 1,943 PJD delegates against 912 delegates for the mayor of Fez, Driss el-Azami, who was clearly supported by Benkirane.

THE CURRENT GOVERNMENT AND THE SYMBOLIC WEAKNESS OF THE PJD

Given the nature of the political system in Morocco, the government is effectively powerless; Benkirane regularly made it clear that the real power resides with the king¹⁰—which is possibly another reason the former PJD secretary general became *persona non grata* within palace circles. While at the beginning of his term, Benkirane made every effort to denounce corruption and the everyday problems associated with the *makhzen*, he regularly emphasized that his hands were tied. The palace controlled the so-called “*les ministères de souveraineté*” (the ministries of sovereignty): the Ministry of Foreign Affairs under Salaheddine Mezouar, the leader of the National Rally of Independents; the Ministry of Education under the technocrat Rachid Belmokhtar; and the Interior Ministry under another technocrat, Mohamed Hassad. These ministers were known for their close relationships with palace circles.

Under El Othmani, the weakness of the PJD has become even more evident, especially in view of the difficulties related to the formation of the cabinet. For example, Moroccans regularly read the following phrase in newspapers: “El Othmani's government, which is headed by Aziz Akhennouch.” Akhennouch is a billionaire, a friend of the king, and currently serves as the minister of agriculture. Because the PAM and its leader, Elyas Eloumari, fell out of favor in palace circles due to the party's failure to serve as a political counterweight to the rise of the PJD, Akhennouch has seemingly replaced Eloumari in that same mission. Akhennouch unexpectedly

became the secretary general of the RNI and emerged as the key political figure in the formation of the 2016 government. The new government follows a pattern set by those that preceded it: key ministries are kept under the control of technocrats and individuals associated with the palace. In sharp contrast to Benkirane's candor and charisma, El Othmani's uninspired leadership, acquiescence, and nonconfrontational style have exacerbated the party's weakness.

For many Moroccans, El Othmani does not exude confidence and fails to give the impression of a strong leader who can effectively manage the government. The government appears ineffective in the face of the Rif and Khribga protests. On October 24, 2017, when the king dismissed four ministers and barred five former ministers from assuming their official duties, the structural deficiencies of the government were on full display. These dismissals came only a few months after a major speech by the king in which he blamed the country's political paralysis on parties and the political elite. In his speech, the king stated that “the evolution witnessed in Morocco in the political domain and in the area of development has not led to the kind of positive reaction you would expect from political parties, leaders, and government officials.”¹¹ Meanwhile, Benkirane remains a presence in the party; his public pronouncements still stir debates and highlight the differences between him and El Othmani. Benkirane said in March 2018 that “we want the monarchy but we don't want the *makhzen*.”¹²

WILL THE PJD OR MOROCCAN PARTIES CONTRIBUTE TO DEMOCRACY?

Extensive research on the democratization process documents a well-established consensus about the crucial role of political parties. Political parties are the link between society and policymaking and their role is essential to any polity that aspires to democracy and democratic representation. Whether it is the PJD in the current context or other parties in Moroccan history,

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political parties have agreed, implicitly or explicitly, to operate in a politically inhibiting environment that gradually deprives them of their main political function, limits their actions, and subsequently leads to their demise. Moroccans' perceptions of these parties have also shifted; parties are increasingly viewed as spineless, opportunistic, able to be co-opted by the palace, devoid of ideological consistency, and driven by personalities. The long-term policy of the palace to create the so-called "*partis de l'administration*" (parties of the administration) and its propensity to intervene in the parties' internal affairs further raises questions about the ability of Moroccan political parties to constructively contribute to the process of democratization.

Morocco's political parties have gradually veered into irrelevance because there is no indication that a confrontation between the palace and the political elite that could advance democracy is a realistic possibility. In the long term, democratization in Morocco depends on reducing the fragmentation of the party system and establishing political parties that are ideologically coherent, aspire for democratic governance, are independent of palace politics, and have strong popular support. In this regard, Europe and the United States can play a bigger role in promoting the growth of Moroccan political parties committed to democratic governance, instead of supporting authoritarian regimes in the name of the "stability paradigm" that has so far created further instability in the Middle East and North Africa region.

ENDNOTES

1. James N. Sater, "Parliamentary Elections and Authoritarian Rule in Morocco," *Middle East Journal* 63, no. 3 (Summer 2009): 381–400.

2. The PAM is often referred to the new *Front de la défense des institutions constitutionnelles* (FDIC), which was established by Hassan II in 1963 to counter the opposition.

3. Rémy Leveau, *Le fellah marocain défenseur du trône* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 1985); and John Waterbury, *The Commander of the Faithful: The Moroccan Political Elite—A Study in Segmented Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970).

4. The term *makhzan* means "storage" and was used historically to refer to the sultan's court. The notion of "*makhzan*" has variously been used to refer to the state apparatus; the services that the state provides to its citizens, such as education, health care, and other forms of economic and social development; and all persons in the service of the central power (the monarchy) and with official and unofficial (religious, military, economic, or political) authority. See Rachida Chérif, *Le Makhzen politique au Maroc: Hier et aujourd'hui* (Casablanca: Afrique Orient, 1988).

5. For example, Benkirane referenced the practices of informal politics and the dualism of rule, and spoke a little more openly about some of the obstacles he faced as the head of government.

6. Ashraf Nabih El Sherif, "Institutional and Ideological Re-construction of the Justice and Development Party (PJD): The Question of Democratic Islamism in Morocco," *Middle East Journal* 66, no. 4 (Autumn 2012): 660–682.

7. Driss Maghraoui and Saloua Zerhouni, "Searching for Political Normalization: The Party of Justice and Development in Morocco," in Quin Mecham and Julie Chernov Hwang, *Islamist Parties and Political Normalization in the Muslim World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014).

8. The idea of "*blocage*," as it came to be termed in the popular media in both Arabic and French, was associated with the obstacles that Abdelilah Benkirane faced as he sought to establish a new government following the 2016 elections.

9. *The North Africa Post*, "No Third Term for Benkirane at Helm of PJD," November 27, 2017, <http://northafricapost.com/20937-no-third-term-benkirane-helm-pjd.html>.

10. He emphatically stated that "leading the government is not synonymous with holding power."

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11. See "Maroc: Mohammed VI critique sévèrement l'administration et la classe politique," *Jeune Afrique*, July 29, 2017, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/462066/politique/maroc-mohammed-vi-critique-severement-ladministration-et-la-classe-politique/>.

12. See "Benkirane: le PJD est royaliste mais pas 'makhzénien,'" *Le Site Info*, February 4, 2018, <http://www.lesiteinfo.com/politique/benkirane-pjd-royaliste-makhzenien/>.

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