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Party of Justice and Development: A Strategy of Differentiation

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INTRODUCTION

After decades in the opposition, the Party of Justice and Development's (PJD) rise in the Moroccan government brought a critical issue to forefront: in an extremely restrictive political system, what would the PJD do to maintain its popular support among the electorate? Many within the PJD were concerned about following in the footsteps of the Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP) and the so-called government of *alternance* (1998–2002); the USFP failed to pursue reforms, grew increasingly unpopular, and did not win a second term in office.¹ The national context was challenging. Abdelilah Benkirane had become the head of a heterogeneous coalition government in which the PJD was in the minority. Although some PJD parliamentarians occupied Foreign Affairs, Justice, and other key ministries, the party controlled only 8% of the government budget (Desrues 2017).² In this highly restrictive context, it was particularly difficult for the PJD to enact promised reforms. Nonetheless, governing issues do not seem to have eroded Moroccans' support for the PJD, which received one-half million more votes in the 2016 legislative elections than it did in 2011, thereby consolidating itself as the country's leading political party.

The PJD pursues a dual strategy (Mainwaring 2003) to maintain its popularity. On one hand, the party plays the regime's game by assuring the monarchy

that its authority is respected.³ Indeed, PJD leaders often reference the term "kingdom" in their public communications. Former party leader Abdelilah Benkirane's statement "*le roi est le patron*" ("the king is the boss") is a clear example of this strategy.⁴ On the other hand, the PJD plays an electoral game whereby it attempts to preserve its leading political position by setting itself apart from other political actors. In this brief, I will focus on this strategy, which I term "the strategy of differentiation." In other words, the PJD presents itself as a different and alternative political party in a system where, according to the PJD, there is widespread corruption, lack of political commitment, and an absence of moral values.

The PJD's strategy of differentiation relies on three core and interrelated ideas:⁵ (1) PJD officials and activists possess the expertise, management skills, and moral values of its members and representatives;⁶ (2) the PJD is a role model for how intraparty and deliberative democracy should operate; and (3) the PJD's new political praxis seeks a direct and fluid communication with the people. I will discuss each in turn.

PJD REPRESENTATIVES: AT THE FOREFRONT OF THE PARTY'S ELECTORAL AND POLITICAL STRATEGY

PJD officials have become fundamental symbols and key political assets for the party. A new narrative that points out high-level management skills, a sense of



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responsibility, and moral commitment has been incorporated into the PJD's public discourse, which directly contrasts with the previous narrative that emphasized its "political virginity."

The PJD's current narrative highlights party officials' advanced education and good governance capabilities. Its 2011 electoral program, for example, underscored the ability of party members to manage public affairs by dedicating an entire section to a discussion of the officials and their backgrounds.

As a matter of fact, while an average of only 23.06% of local representatives in 2011 completed college, one of every two PJD representatives had a university degree. This percentage was even higher among national PJD representatives: almost all were graduates of Moroccan or foreign universities.⁷ According to data that I gathered,⁸ the majority of the PJD's parliamentary representatives are university professors or civil servants, although they hail from diverse professional backgrounds. Since the late 1990s, the PJD replaced the USFP as the "professors' party" (Bennani-Chaïbi 2013), thereby unveiling a broader social tendency: political socialization in Moroccan universities is increasingly Islamist-oriented.

PJD officials are also presented as "good Muslims." According to Abdelhak El Arabi, who oversaw the party's 2016 electoral campaign, the party's candidates should represent the party's values, which are inspired by Islam and "its moral capital and values" (PJD 2016).⁹ In line with other Islamist parties in the region, the end of the "revolutionary paradigm" brought an emphasis on moral issues in the PJD's official discourse in place of references to sharia or a hypothetical Islamic state. With this move, the PJD seeks, on one hand, to establish a dialectical relationship between its incorruptibility, transparency, commitment, and moral standing. On the other hand, by presenting Muslimhood as one of its main traits, the PJD links itself to a religious Moroccan identity.

INTRAPARTY DEMOCRACY, MERITOCRACY, AND SOCIAL ASCENSION

Beyond party officials' profiles and skills, the PJD promotes the party's image as an ideologically consistent, nationally well-established, and highly professional organization. PJD statements often highlight the party's internal democratic processes

TABLE 1 — EDUCATION LEVELS OF MOROCCAN LOCAL ELECTED OFFICIALS, BY PERCENT (2011)

Political party	No formal education	Primary school	Secondary school	University graduate
Party Authenticity and Modernity (PAM)	22.74	26.99	30.18	20.76
Party Istiqlal (PI)	21.75	26.07	31.62	20.83
Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP)	17.40	24.49	31.46	26.63
National Rally of Independents (RNI)	4.28	27.08	29.54	9.36
Popular Movement (MP)	22.39	25.29	32.03	20.27
Party of Progress and Socialism (PPS)	18.90	23.74	34.42	22.92
Party of Justice and Development (PJD)	6.16	12.00	28.71	53.11
Average	20.49	25.18	31.27	23.06

SOURCE National Bureau of Territorial Collectivities, 2011

as one of its distinctive features. Although the general secretariat and the electoral committee have a specific role and influence in the candidate selection process, regional and local PJD commissions can propose candidates for the party's electoral list.¹⁰ However, the electoral committee makes the ultimate decision on the candidate and the placement on the party list.¹¹ The electoral committee's decision takes into account both the candidate's individual qualifications and the party's general strategy.¹²

The candidate selection process follows the "rules of the game" that the PJD established in its internal regulations (Wegner 2011). The party highlights transparency and honesty as the pillars of its political discourse. Given the impossibility of criticizing the political system and calling attention to its shortcomings, the PJD seeks to present itself as an alternative model and example of good governance.

In this sense, the PJD aims to transcend the image of an elitist party and to project, instead, a grassroots image that highlights the role and involvement of members. From this perspective, the party is defined not by the prevalence of professional politicians but how it functions as a cohesive and coherent community. This image is presented and promoted at every national party congress, where the party highlights its nationwide mobilization, discipline, and unity.

Moreover, the possibility of intraparty promotion to and nomination for electoral lists and party offices within the PJD is an important incentive for members and potential recruits (Wegner 2011). The institutional growth and territorial expansion of the PJD creates many opportunities for party activists. In turn, activists progressively gain management experience at the national and regional levels. A national list that reserves 60 seats for women and 30 for young people opens up new positions to some of the politically marginalized sectors of the population.

Because it is a growing and relatively young party, the PJD offers new opportunities for political (and social) ascension, in contrast to older Moroccan

parties, which are increasingly constrained by their traditional approach to politics and are rapidly losing influence and parliamentary representation.

A NEW POLITICAL CULTURE: DIRECT COMMUNICATION WITH THE PEOPLE

In its efforts to mitigate the potentially adverse effects of the shift from an opposition party to a party of government, the PJD has developed a political praxis that underlines its grassroots activism and a dialectical proximity between the party and Moroccan citizens.¹³

First, PJD candidates and representatives do not confine contact with the electorate to electoral campaigns. The party's communication channels are constantly open. According to PJD parliamentarians, party directives clearly require parliament members to meet with the electorate at least twice a month.¹⁴ The "Al Misbah" caravan follows the same logic. Launched in 2007, the caravan allows party members to explain the scope and limits of their actions in government as well as "maintain a dialogue with the citizens to examine their problems and find the appropriate solutions."¹⁵ Moreover, PJD officials can present themselves and their "PJD brand" beyond the urban centers where the party's presence and leadership are already well-established.¹⁶

In the search for a direct and fluid communication with the Moroccan electorate, the role of the party's former leader and prime minister, Abdelilah Benkirane, was essential. His use of colloquial Arabic and plain and powerful language connected with many voters who felt directly addressed and represented by him. Moreover, Benkirane adopted a populist discursive approach during the 2016 electoral campaign. In line with one of the defining elements of populism, Benkirane directed strong, forthright, and sometimes inflammatory words toward his main political opponent, the Party for Authenticity and Modernity (PAM) (Hawkins 2009, 1064). Indeed, he even referred to PAM's members as "drug dealers."¹⁷ By

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calling attention to PAM as the PJD's main political antagonist, Benkirane tried to emphasize the distance between members of his own party and the traditional Moroccan political elite. While the former were average Moroccan citizens driven by serious and committed work, the latter used state institutions for their personal benefit and, therefore, "subverted the system to its own interests, against those of the good majority or the people," he said (Hawkins 2009, 1064).¹⁸ Indeed, Benkirane coined the term "Tahakum" to refer to a kind of "deep state" that failed to be neutral during the electoral campaign and pulled strings from the shadows to undermine the PJD.

IMPLICATIONS

Looking back, the PJD's strategy of differentiation can be deemed successful. Today, the party is Morocco's leading political force; it won 27% of the votes and obtained 125 seats in the parliament in the 2016 elections. This strong showing indicates that the PJD is able to attract the votes of those who do not favorably view the ability of other parties to represent them.¹⁹ One factor that has limited the party's electoral growth is its weak presence in rural areas. This failure may negatively affect the party's efforts to attract those interested in climbing the social and political ladder.

The main challenges facing the PJD in the post-Benkirane era are its ability to attract new voters and its internal cohesion. A key question is how to continue the mobilization of party activists under the less charismatic leadership of the new general secretary and head of government, Saadeddine El Othmani. Although PJD politicians insist that "the party is open to debate, but final decisions are compulsory,"²⁰ it may increasingly become a challenge to manage possible internal dissent between those who are more willing to make concessions (this group is led by the general secretary himself), and those (such as younger party members)

who demand that the PJD assert greater independence from outside pressure. This problem could become particularly serious if the party makes electoral gains in the near future.

ENDNOTES

1. While the USFP won 14% of the popular vote in the 1997 parliamentary elections, it won only 11.9% of the vote in 2002. The socialists lost 165,333 votes in five years (López García 2010). For more about the impact on the PJD of the so-called government of *alternance*, see Willis (1999).

2. For an evaluation of the PJD's government, see Desrues and Fernández Molina (2013).

3. To learn more about the dual political system in Morocco, see Desrues and Hernando de Larramendi (2011).

4. See, for example, Bilal Mousjid, "Abdelilah Benkirane: Chef du gouvernement cherche majorité," *TelQuel*, November 10, 2017, http://telquel.ma/2016/11/10/gouvernement-benkirane-face-au-mur_1523028.

5. See the PJD's construction of dialectical opposition based on Islamic concepts against the rest of the primary elites (opposition-instrumentalization) in Macías-Amoretti (2014).

6. See the PJD's electoral programs for the 2016 and 2011 legislative elections (PJD 2011 and 2016) and also Benkirane's closing campaign speech in the city of Salé on October 6, 2016, available at pjd.ma.

7. According to data extracted from their CVs, around 77% of PJD's MPs had a university degree in 2011–2016; this percentage reached 100% during the PJD's first legislative period in parliament (1997–2002) and has since been above 90% (95.25% in 2002–2007; 91.30% in 2007–2011).

8. This information is based on personal research conducted in Morocco between September and December 2017.

9. See Médias24 (2015).

10. To learn more about the PJD's candidate selections process, see Wegner (2011); also see Desrues (2017).

11. Author's interview with a PJD MP in Rabat, November 2017.

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12. To learn more about the PJD's electoral strategy, see Zaireg (2016) and Mejdoubi (2015) for interviews with Abdelhak El Arabi, who was in charge of the PJD's 2016 electoral campaign.

13. The OPEMAM electoral observation team (opemam.org) could observe *in situ* how the PJD electoral meetings were the most numerous among the political parties' electoral campaigns in Rabat. See López García (2017) and López García and Hernando de Larramendi (2017).

14. Author's interview with a PJD MP in Rabat, February 2018.

15. Author's interview with a PJD MP in Rabat, April 2013.

16. Author's interviews with different members of the PJD in Rabat, September 2014 and November 2017.

17. Benkirane's electoral speech, Salé, Morocco, September 24, 2016.

18. *Ibid.*

19. According to Abdellah Bouanou in an interview with the author in April 2013, available data shows that three primary reasons motivate people to vote for the PJD: (a) they agree with its Islamic references; (b) PJD's fight against corruption; and (c) as "punishment" toward other political forces.

20. Author's interviews with different PJD MPs in Rabat in April 2013 and November 2017.

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