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The Party of Justice and Development's Pragmatic Politics

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In response to anti-government protests that swept across the Middle East and North Africa during the Arab uprisings, King Mohammed VI of Morocco announced constitutional reforms in 2011 with a view to expand the powers of the country's parliament and to grant the judiciary greater independence. Against this background of change, the Justice and Development Party (PJD) rose as a major political party and secured two successive electoral victories, in 2011 and 2016. The new constitution of 2011, however, maintained the king's executive powers over strategic issues and preserved his religious and political prerogatives. The king is "the commander of the faithful" and the head of the ministerial council, and has the right to dissolve the parliament.[1] Another constraint in this context is Morocco's highly fragmented multi-party system, which makes it difficult for powerful parties to gain ground or become dominant. While Morocco's party system preserves the king's role as the main political actor, it also serves to fragment and weaken the political elite.[2] Compounding the issue, elections have long been characterized by low voter turnout, reflecting Moroccans' political disinterest and mistrust of politicians.[3]

In this highly constrained political environment, how did the PJD survive to win two elections? I argue that the PJD applied pragmatic politics—first, to maintain the king's support, and second, to appeal to heterogeneous constituencies—in order to remain standing. When campaigning in 2011, the PJD promised to initiate democratic reforms. However, did pragmatic politics grant the party leeway to implement such reforms? I argue that such politics constrained the PJD and failed to protect it from moves to weaken and fragment the party.

PRAGMATIC POLITICS AND PARTY SURVIVAL

In order to survive in a highly constrained political context, the PJD recognized the necessity of gaining the monarchy's trust. The party thus prioritized improved relations with the palace over confrontation. The PJD, which had once called for a "democratic struggle," began calling for "an effective partnership" to build a democracy.[4] To this end, it endorsed the king's decisions and showed clear support for the monarchy's political and religious roles.[5] In his speeches, former party leader Abdelilah Benkirane often positioned himself as the servant of the king and never openly challenged him.[6] By doing so, the party intended to win and maintain the king's support, and to survive.

Survival also required the party's ability to strengthen its popular base and appeal to heterogeneous constituencies. Thus, the PJD employed a pragmatic approach that combined neoliberal economic policies and social services. In its economic program, the party launched major construction projects, engaged in privatization reforms, and favored public-private partnerships for the provision of public services. The PJD also

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sought to reduce taxes for large companies and to provide various tax credits and other incentives to small and medium-size businesses.[7] In addition, foreign enterprises were encouraged to invest in Morocco.[8]

In regard to social policies, the PJD aimed to support the most vulnerable Moroccans through cash transfers. Widows and divorced mothers were offered financial help. Poor families also received cash assistance on the condition that they sent their children to school. More scholarships were made available for students. The PJD also replaced Morocco's system of subsidies with direct cash transfers to the poor. In addition, the party worked to lower prescription drug prices and provided a health insurance program to the most needy through a system called RAMED, or *Regime d'Assistance Médicale pour les Économiquement Démunis* (Medical Assistance Plan for the Economically Disadvantaged).[9] Finally, party youth groups often organized humanitarian aid campaigns for those living in rural and mountainous areas. These campaigns provided help in the form of clothing and also offered educational and extracurricular activities for children.[10]

The combination of neoliberal policies and improved social services proceeded in tandem with the PJD's de-emphasis of religious discourse and the adoption of modern political terminology that primarily referenced human rights and democracy. During the party's seventh national party conference in July 2012, for instance, the PJD defended the idea that religion should function only as a guiding principle to politics and included "freedom of belief" in the party program.[11] The PJD also endorsed a United Nations resolution on religious freedom, marking a shift to a discourse based on policy rather than morality.[12]

In order to better connect with voters, the PJD implemented a communication strategy that highlighted the personal qualities of party members and utilized populist speeches. PJD party members were particularly keen on emphasizing their moral values and how little their new positions have changed them.[13]

For example, former party leader Abdelilah Benkirane is credited with creating a new type of politics for the PJD based on a simple, populist approach, which made him extremely popular. Benkirane also favored open, direct channels of communication with citizens by using monthly parliamentary meetings to reassure them that the party was doing its best to fight corruption and implement reforms.[14] In another grassroots outreach measure, PJD members of the parliament organized the "al-Misbah caravan" in 2013. In the years since, the caravan has travelled across the country and held meetings with local communities to share the party's experiences and the obstacles it faces.[15]

In the 2011 elections, the PJD principally prevailed in large cities, as its core constituency was primarily composed of the urban, educated middle class—engineers, doctors, professors, and lawyers.[16] However, the PJD's neoliberal economic policies helped the party to expand its electoral base and gain the support of wealthy business owners as well.[17] The latter, who believed the PJD's economic liberalization plans would make the Moroccan market more competitive, agreed to finance the party's social policies.[18] Such social programs consolidated the party's support among the poor and helped to portray the PJD as a "people's party."[19] In addition, by downplaying its religious and moral discourse, the PJD appealed to more secularists and technocrats.[20] The party's humanitarian aid caravans appealed to voters in rural areas who were disappointed with the lack of social policies from other parties.[21] The strategy to develop a connection with voters, which helped the party to maintain high approval ratings,[22] projected an image of the PJD as a party that understood the people's needs, and appealed to urban and rural voters disillusioned with other political parties.[23] The 2016 election results validated PJD's approach, as evidenced by its higher vote totals (from 22% to 27% of the vote) and seat shares (from 107 to 125) compared to the 2011 elections.

THE LIMITATIONS OF PRAGMATIC POLITICS

Although the PJD managed to increase its popularity in its first term in government, the party's decision to not challenge the monarchy's powers left the party constrained; its reforms were either marginally effective or not carried out if they were deemed problematic by the *makhzen*. Some reforms were primarily symbolic. For example, the reform of the National Body for Integrity, Prevention, and the Fight Against Corruption in 2014 did not grant the institution independence from the government or the right to pursue investigations.[24] Similarly, the charter introduced by the PJD in September 2013 to reform the judiciary led to relatively minor changes related to the judges' salaries and the modernization of courtrooms. Transparency, accountability, and judicial independence were not on the agenda.[25] Fighting corruption was one of the PJD's main policy stances; when the names of those who benefitted from state transportation agreements were published, no new legal measures were put in place as a result.[26] Such agreements—granted as royal favors to artists, notables, and top officials—have largely served to create a system of patronage and clientelism.[27] Efforts to curb corruption and initiate reforms would have threatened the *makhzen's* interests. Typically, corruption investigations of figures close to the monarchy are quickly dismissed. When, for example, a former minister of justice, Mustafa Ramid, opened a corruption investigation against a former minister of finance, Salaheddine Mezouar, and the current treasurer, Noureddine Bensouda, the case went nowhere; Benkirane was quick to reassure the palace that "God has pardoned what is past," and he rejected criticisms from his own party.[28]

In its efforts to survive, the PJD became unable to carry through reform policies, which compromised the party's political power and threatened to weaken its popularity. However, by directing a highly critical discourse toward the palace's coterie of elites and their manipulation of politics, Benkirane sought to maintain the party's popularity by reassuring the people that the PJD was doing its best to implement reforms. Calling the economic and political actors close to the palace "ghosts and crocodiles," the PJD aimed to protect itself from criticism and limit the government's accountability for any shortcomings.[29]

For a political party to survive in Morocco, it needs to operate with the king's consent. Though the PJD tried to build trust with the monarchy, there was no shortage of attempts by the monarchy to undermine the PJD or subvert its internal cohesion. First, in order to weaken and contain the PJD, technocrats[30] were appointed in 2011 to strategic government departments such as religious affairs, national defense, and the general secretariat, which drafts most of the country's laws. Second, in 2013, the PJD was confronted with a crisis when the nationalist, monarchist Istiqlal political party decided to withdraw from the coalition government. This situation—believed to be orchestrated by the king's counselors—led to the nomination of more technocrats to important cabinet positions, thus allowing the regime to maintain control over crucial issue areas such as the ministries of the interior and national education.[31] Finally, despite its electoral victory in 2016, the PJD had difficulty in forming a coalition government—a predicament also believed to have been engineered by the king's coterie. After a months-long post-election deadlock, the king dismissed Benkirane and nominated Saadeddine El Othmani as the head of government. This was followed by the formation of a coalition government composed of actors that Benkirane had once rejected. El Othmani's government is weak and might be forced by coalition partners to accept governmental decisions that would eventually undermine the reputation and the credibility of the party.[32]

The PJD itself went through an episode of internal polarization between those who refused to take part in the coalition government and those who accepted it.[33]

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The latter were perceived to have been co-opted by the king and to be a threat to the party's independence.[34] Cracks within the party formed between Benkirane's sympathizers and El Othmani's supporters. Indeed, in February 2018, a PJD member, Lahbib Choubani, filed an appeal against an internal party regulation that bars regional party officials from simultaneously holding the office of president of a regional, provincial, or communal council.[35] The appeal, which stands to postpone PJD's regional congresses, presumably serves to weaken Benkirane's sympathizers and thus prevent them from winning the party's regional elections.[36] Disunity within the PJD was on full display in parliament when some PJD parliament members criticized the way El Othmani's government is handling unrest in the Rif.[37] Because Benkirane's increasing popularity began to antagonize the regime, the PJD made a practical choice to refuse to change the bylaws and elect him as secretary general for a third term.[38] However, the way Benkirane was dismissed by his own party angered its popular base and led to mass resignations among party members who felt betrayed.[39]

The king's speeches have also become more critical of the PJD and the coalition government it leads. King Mohammed VI has expressed his disapproval of certain government actions related to educational system reforms and criticized the government for failing to address outstanding issues such as social inequality. "The current government should have capitalized on the positive experience gained in the field of education and training" instead of implementing unsuccessful educational programs, he said in a speech to the nation.[40] The king has also demanded that the disconnect between the educational system and the demands of the job market be addressed; likewise, he has called for a resolution to address the inconsistencies between the educational language in primary and secondary levels (Arabic) and in higher education (foreign language). Such royal criticisms are reminders that the monarchy remains the main political actor in Morocco.

LOOKING AHEAD

To date, the PJD has managed to survive by appealing to voters beyond its core constituency and transcending class, geographical, and ideological divisions. However, it is becoming increasingly clear that the party is "losing" the king's support. The self-described "party of reform" has had to make major concessions on its policies, even as its practical dealings with the monarchy create major problems within the party. Some members, especially the youth, fear that a cooperative approach will be ultimately detrimental to both the PJD's credibility and the democratic process.

For now, the fissures within the party are less apparent and the PJD remains strong at the local level. However, the palace's attitude toward the PJD follows a long tradition of delegitimizing political parties, which results not only in their marginalization but also in the citizens' disenchantment with the election process. In this regard, the PJD is still facing a formidable threat to its popularity and long-term interests.

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