

**MOROCCO'S NOVEMBER 2011 ELECTIONS:  
ENOUGH TO ENSURE A POLITICAL TRANSITION?***Claire Spencer\**

The Moroccan general elections of late November 2011 can best be seen as a staging post in a much longer process of transition and change than can be captured by reference to the region-wide “Arab Spring” alone. The repercussions of the sudden demise of the Ben Ali regime in neighbouring Tunisia in early 2011 undoubtedly provided the context for the constitutional changes proposed, then approved by referendum in July 2011, as well as the convening of general elections ahead of their anticipated date in 2012.

The question to be posed is whether these elections constitute a case of “Moroccan catch-up” with the dynamic of events further east along North Africa’s littoral – in Libya and Egypt, as well as Tunisia – or whether they reflect the culmination of domestic pressures that have been responded to in as timely a fashion as Morocco’s pre-existing dynamic of gradual reform can withstand.

Morocco is often presented as a state and society in tune with the ethnic, geographical and political diversities contained within it. The main achievement of the Moroccan monarchy since independence from France in 1956 has been to maintain the internal balance of a country that ranges from the Mediterranean to the Sahara. This has also meant managing a subsistence rural economy alongside the sophisticated urban commercial sectors of the Casablanca-Rabat-Fez triangle with a large parallel economy in-between.

The most notable achievements of this dynamic have been registered over the past twenty years, covering the transition from King Hassan II (reigning from 1961-1999) and his son King Mohammed VI from 1999. However, sustaining the dynamic of change within continuity that underlies this success has required increasing levels of flexibility and a lightness of foot to remain ahead of the curve of socio-economic pressures in recent years.

As elsewhere in the region, the combination of Morocco’s exposure to global markets and global communications with rising numbers of educated and semi-educated unemployed within an increasingly young population had already turned up the political heat in Morocco ahead of the

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events of 2011. Morocco has not been spared its own popular protests, even if the February 20th movement that has come to represent a broad platform of popular protest has been a disciplined and relatively limited phenomenon at the national level.

Combining elements of the traditionally anti-establishment Sufi-influenced Islamist movement Al-Adl wal-Ihsane with students, unemployed graduates and opponents of limited democracy, the February 20th coalition failed to gain widespread support for boycotting the November elections, and were internally divided over the matter. Both before and following the changes outlined under the new constitution, their grievances have focused on combating corruption and moving faster towards the establishment of a constitutional monarchy.

In their view, neither of these demands has been met under the revised provisions of the 2011 constitution. This does not mean, however, that the February 20th movement is a spent force, nor that the underlying ills of Moroccan society that they continue to articulate – above all corruption and nepotism in both the public and private sectors – are not shared by a larger sector of society.

At stake is the credibility of a process of change that still carries the majority of public and popular opinion with it. To the credit of the Moroccan state, whose main political trends are still driven from the royal palace, or Makhzen, the rebalancing and re-orienting of Morocco's development path had already been set in train over the past ten years.

Campaigns led by the King to alleviate poverty and to promote women's rights under the revised family law of 2003, together with the commissioning of studies to identify and redress the failures of development policy over the past 50 years, and the devolution of investment and administrative reform to the regional level had already made some headway before 2011. What is new in the 2011 constitution is an explicit recognition of the ethnic diversity of Morocco as being part of its intrinsic character and cultural wealth and of the regions being the main focus for increased political as well as economic diversity.

What is less certain in the new landscape is how reliable a model for future development political parties may be. A central plank of the new constitution, widely applauded as a further step in the direction of moving towards greater power-sharing, is the provision that the King would appoint as Prime Minister the head of the party winning most votes in the elections. Accordingly, the head of the Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD), Abdelilah Benkirane, was tasked with forming a government, having gained 107 of the 395 parliamentary seats contested on No-

ember 25th. This gain was significantly ahead of the 60 seats won by the Istiqlal party, which led the previous governing coalition, but who with the Popular Movement (MP, with 32 seats) will join the PJD in the governing coalition announced in early December 2011.

This combination – of the rural conservative Berberist party of the MP, with the conservative monarchists of the nationalist party, Istiqlal and the Islamists of the PJD – marks an untried and untested step away from the previous “Koutla” platform (dominated by the Istiqlal and Socialist Union of Popular Forces [USFP]) in government since 2007. The socialists of the USFP, in particular, have seen their voting strength diminished from 15.4% in 2002 to just under 10% in 2011, having tried, belatedly, to rejuvenate its party ranks in advance of the elections. This meant that the percentage of seats gained by the “Koutla” parties combined (25.1%) was still less than those gained by the Islamist PJD alone (27%).

The victory of the PJD, however, represents less of a pro-Islamist shift in Morocco’s politics than the emergence to a higher level of prominence of a particular brand of Islamism that has already played a role in Moroccan politics. The PJD differs in this respect from the Ennahda movement in Tunisia, which emerged from over twenty years of illegality only after the successful ousting of President Ben Ali in January 2011. The PJD already has experience of the official political system and, in doing so, explicitly supports the monarchy, unlike the extra-parliamentary opposition movement of Al-Adl wal-Ihsane, which is tolerated but not officially recognised as a result.

In the general elections of 2007, the PJD was widely expected to win a clear majority but failed to do so, having apparently deliberately fielded a limited number of candidates at the national level to avoid an overwhelming victory. For this reason, in the eyes of its critics, the PJD suffers from having been too closely associated with the machinations of the established party political system, whose own commitment to internal reform and regeneration is only now being put to the test.

The question now is how reliable a leadership the PJD will provide to keep the momentum of popular representation going. The electoral turn-out in November was 45% of registered voters, a notable improvement on the 37% who voted in 2007. However, it remains less than the 51.6% turn-out in 2002, and means that the PJD effectively received only 15% of support from registered voters. Of a potential 21 million voters, only 13.5 million registered ahead of the polls, meaning that only 28% of all potential voters actually participated.

In a country where spoilt or discounted ballots are commonplace, 19% of the votes cast in November were also discounted. With 57% of the voting public under the age of 35, the great

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unknown is how convinced the young and unemployed of Morocco will be by the political platform being prepared by the PJD and its coalition partners, as well as by the promise of future political progress implied by the constitutional changes earlier this year.

What is clear is that the technocratic parties favoured by the palace have enjoyed less success and credibility than the Islamists, which is in keeping with regional trends. The newly formed “G8” coalition of the National Assembly of Independents (RNI) and Fouad Ali El Himma’s Authenticity and Modernity Party (PAM), inter alia, failed to match the PJD’s support, with the RNI and PAM coming 4th and 5th in the voting order respectively.

A close associate of the King, Fouad Ali El Himma, has subsequently been appointed as a royal adviser, which may or may not spell an end to his parliamentary career. The new Moroccan parliament, meanwhile, will need to keep pace with popular expectations in order to vindicate the more central role accorded to political parties under the new constitution. Only by continuing to attract and retain younger members and younger voters will the legacy of Morocco’s November elections be seen as a genuine step towards more participatory and responsive politics.

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