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ISLAMIST SPRING IN MOROCCO, or a *Gattopardo's Effect*

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The landslide win of the Islamist *Parti de la Justice et du Développement* (PJD) in Morocco's parliamentary elections in November 2011 has been followed with great interest and some concern by many of Morocco's neighbours, both inside and outside the Arab World. The leader of the winning political party, Abdelilah Benkirane, was subsequently appointed Prime Minister - breaking the long-held practice that lets the King appoint an own or preferred candidate for the position. Only a year ago, both events - the victory of the Islamists and the appointment of Mr Benkirane as PM-, were widely held to be unthinkable scenarios. But real change has not seemed to take ground and one can imagine this to be a Tomasi di Lampedusa *Gattopardo's* effect, where everything is set to change in order it all remains the same.

The Islamists' Long Way to Government

The Moroccan Islamists are not a new political force; they were formed in 1996 and have since then participated in several parliamentary elections. As an initially small party with a moderate but determinedly Islamic message, the PJD decided to compete in a limited number of constituencies in the legislative election of 1997. In subsequent elections, the PJD initially

kept to this principle of running only in limited constituencies - increasingly in the 2000s, when the party attracted an ever-growing number of supporters, this self-imposed constraint arguably became a tactical move, aimed at not antagonising the population and, more importantly, the heart of Morocco's political power, the Moroccan Palace establishment, the *Makhzen*.¹

Algeria's short-lived experience with an Islamist party winning elections in a landslide victory in 1991 and the subsequent political turmoil that had not yet completely ebbed away by the late 1990s and early 2000s threw a strong shadow over a potential Moroccan Islamist experiment at the time.

The PJD's increasing popularity in past elections has been attributed primarily to its political discourse and the credibility of its local and national candidates. The party's

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In the wake of the Arab Spring, and following recent constitutional changes pushed through by Morocco's King Mohammed VI, Morocco saw a landslide electoral victory of the moderate Islamist party PJD.

The Moroccan Islamists' victory has built up over years, but this is the first time the party entered into a formal government. Yet, the Islamists' victory promises little fundamental change in Morocco's political system; the PJD's ability to bring about policies for which they were elected will depend first and foremost on the willingness of the Palace and the coalition partners.

The course of Morocco's foreign policy will remain unchanged. A change of government has a limited influence on the country's foreign relations that is still an exclusive sphere of the Palace. Morocco's key interest to revive the Maghreb integration project and foster its relation with the GCC countries is unlikely to come at the expense of its strategic partnership with Europe.

1. Malika Zeghal, *Islamism in Morocco: Religion, Authoritarianism, and Electoral Politics*, Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2008.

of Morocco's society. Internally, the PJD is seen as being well-organised, displaying greater levels of accountability (such as the publishing of party funds and their use) than many other Moroccan parties. The PJD's electoral candidates are elected by party members, which too, is a political novum to much of Morocco's political party landscape, where top party candidates are typically appointed by long term party leaders rather than elected by the party base. These factors have helped the PJD also win many sympathisers among secularists and technocrats.

But the PJD is far from being controversy-free. In the aftermath of the Casablanca terrorist bombings of 2003, the PJD came under severe attack and faced the threat of being dissolved. Several leftist political parties and secular activists have since then accused the PJD of preaching and spreading the extremism. The relations between the PJD and the Ministry of Interior have been at times confrontational and characterised by mistrust. Many observers also see the establishment of the Party of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM) by a long term member of the *Makhzen*, Fouad Ali al-Himma, as a counter-step to the emerging dominance of the PJD. Uncomfortable with being called

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Islamist party, PJD leaders describe themselves as a political party with Islamic reference. They emphasise that the party does not aim to establish a theocratic state, but rather accepts to function within the political system in place. Party leaders have outspokenly supported the right for freedom of expression, respect for individual liberties, and have declared their support of a free market economy. Islamically sensible topics such as the promotion of foreign tourism and the legal sale of alcohol are not part of the PJD's agenda. Women notably feature in all ranks of the party.

The PJD Electoral Victory in Perspective

The PJD's influence within parliament is constrained by its need to appease three smaller coalition partners – one of them being the long established, formerly dominant Istiqlal Party. Since the 2011 election, the PJD is the largest political party in the Moroccan parliament with 107 seats, but still lacks a voting majority.

The inability of political parties in Morocco to gain a majority is due to a set of factors that contribute to a fractured political scene in Morocco. First, a high number of political parties contend for votes. In the 2011 elections, 31 political parties competed for 395 seats. Second, a well-engineered electoral system based on a proportional representation formula ensures that no

single party gains an absolute majority of seats. This fragmented political scene serves the interests of the *Makhzen*, and cements the supremacy of the monarchy as the central, unifying political power. Finally, traditionally low voter turnout limits the possibility of any party gaining more votes on top of what is seen as each party's loyal voters.

After relatively swift and short negotiations, a four-party coalition government was announced on January 3, 2012, that includes the leading PJD, the nationalist Istiqlal Party, the pro-Palace *Movement Populaire*, and the leftist and secularist *Parti du Progrès et du Socialisme* (PPS). Thus, from an ideological point of view, the coalition seems fragile as these political parties have little in common. Some observers have drawn analogy between the Government of *Alternance* in 1998 and the now PJD-led government, and that the PJD could face the same destiny of the *Union Socialiste des Forces Populaires*, and lose its political credibility². As the Moroccan parliamentary system remains a *de facto* ineffective political power centre. Political decision-making in Morocco remains centred around Morocco's King Mohammed VI, and his entourage, the powerful and ubiquitous *Makhzen*. Unlike the European monarchies, the Moroccan

monarch rules and reigns, not having the parliament control over the executive monarchy. It legislates and debates decisions in a constrained number of government sectors, subject to the King's approval, who can at will dismiss ministers or the government, as well as dissolve both chambers of the parliament. Elected members of the parliament cannot debate or question the King's

speech or decisions. Key members of the government cabinet, including core ministers, are directly appointed by the King and not necessarily chosen from among the political parties in government.

A "Royal" Democracy?

The new constitution of Summer 2011 did not fundamentally change this balance. The King's prerogatives were mainly regenerated, not curtailed. The King remains the Commander of Faithful, and the supreme chief of armed forces, and heads the council of ministers. The King also heads the judiciary and security councils. He holds the power to appoint senior civil servants, and most importantly still retains the ability to dissolve the parliament. In a country whose institutions and citizenship are not the dominant elements of the political culture, the monarchy remains a critical source of national unity. With the monarch not relinquishing his powers, it is fair to say that

2. The inability of Youssoufi government, named so after its Prime Minister the Prime Minister Abdelrahman Youssoufi, to deliver on its promised leftist economic and political reforms during its term in government 1998-2002 damaged its political reputation, and caused a deep rift within the party. Youssoufi's space for political manoeuvring was constrained by continuous interventions of the Palace. Since then, his party, the USFP - which was once held in high esteem by the electorate - has not recovered from its disastrous participation in the *Alternance* government.

democracy in Morocco is still, and will remain in the near future, a “work in progress”, not yet a “real” but a unique “royal” democracy. Perhaps one of the most significant changes for the political system has been the constitution’s new provision for the country’s prime minister to be the head of the largest party in parliament – rather than, as it was previously the case, an appointee by the King himself.

The PJD has had to accept the appointment of six “independent” ministers to the country’s most strategic ministries by the Palace to assure a supposedly smooth transition and continuity. After being parcelled, the ministries of Interior and Foreign Affairs for instance have seen the appointment of Charki Draiss and Youssef Amrani, personalities associated with the *Makhzen*, as delegate ministers. Both ministries have been and still are the pillars of the *Makhzen*’s political dominance. They also hold much of the country’s sensitive information that corresponds to controversial aspects of Morocco’s modern history, such as human rights violations, former electoral manipulation or the Sahara question. Driss Dahak is another appointee of the Palace as Minister of Secretary General of the Government (SGG), which serves as the legal department of the government. The importance of SGG ministry emanates from the fact that its functions include drafting and scrutinizing proposals for new laws as well as the publication of the laws in the official gazette.

The PJD’s *modus operandi* may well be putting pressure not only on the existing political parties but also on all other public institutions. Recent decisions by PJD ministers to disclose their assets and rationalise the use of public finances at their disposal has increased the popularity of the party among many Moroccans. For the Moroccan political system, the spread of such practices would be a desirable outcome of the PJD’s apparent popularity it derives from such actions. Particularly visible steps have been the rejection by new prime minister Benkirane as well as by his party members in ministerial positions of established benefits such as business cars and drivers, which PJD members now use only occasionally for official use only. Benkirane’s publically stated decision to remain living in his private downtown flat in Rabat has been perceived by many voters as a sign of the party leaders to keep to their electoral promises to keep in touch with “ordinary” Moroccan citizens. An opinion poll conducted by the Moroccan newspaper *L’Economiste* in January 2012 subsequently showed that 88% of the interviewees were confident about the PJD-led government, the highest compared with any previous government.³

3. Nadia Salah, “Lenquête L’Economiste–Sunergia Benkirane: Les Marocains optimistes À 88%!”, *L’Economiste*, edition N° 3703, 20 January 2012. Available from: www.leconomiste.com/article/890561-enquete-l-economiste-sunergia-brbenkirane-les-marocains-optimistes-88

The Moroccan Palace’s relations with the PJD remain ambivalent. In principle, the Palace could have not wished a better electoral result. The holding of so far the most uncontested parliamentary elections, and the victory of PJD has reinforced the credibility of the political initiatives adopted by the King Mohammed VI in response to the demands of the Moroccan protesters. In the context of mainly youth protests in spring 2011, a new government of whatever orientation has been a potential relieving factor against renewed political protests. The new Islamist government, after the recent constitutional reform, perhaps signals most strongly the willingness of Morocco’s monarchy to open the country to political reform and to accept alternative governments. At the same time, the newly empowered government will also serve as an important political buffer for the Palace over the coming months; for any underperformance in delivering on the socio-economic promises that were made prior to the elections will subsequently be blamed on the elected government, not the King.

Nevertheless, the desire to overpass the current sensitive political momentum, characterised by the re-emergence of people power, will most likely inhibit for the time being any con-

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frontation between the government and the Palace, who will remain not at ease with the emergence of a powerful political rival legitimated by the popular vote. Despite the PJD passing several tests, key figures among the court elites remain deeply suspicious of the Islamists. This entrenched mistrust emanates from the challenge that the political Islam constitutes to one of the fundamentals of the monarch’s legitimacy; the religious authority of the King. The Palace is likely to continue its long term use of divide and rule tactics, and encouraging the establishment of other Islamist parties, for instance, could be one of its tactics to curtail the PJD’s dominance of the political scene.

On the other hand, judging from the recent parliamentary debates of the current government’s programme, the PJD is likely to face a systematic and fierce opposition in parliament. The opposition parties may see increasing aggressiveness as an easy way to raise their profile and demonstrate their performance to the electorate. On the other hand, reform opponent elites in the *Makhzen* may use the opposition as a proxy to stop unwanted reforms initiated by the current government, and undermine its reputation. Tensions are likely to

intensify when the PJD-led government starts its promised reforms, in particularly introducing greater accountability; the fight of corruption; and exercising closer scrutiny on public finances of state institutions and public companies.

The government's ability to implement reforms will to a large degree depend on how cooperative the Palace will be. The proposed reforms will collide with the interests of senior civil servants, military, and prominent businesses that have access to supreme corridors of power. Allegations of corruption and crony capitalism involving close collaborators of the King are often highlighted in the Moroccan press. These envisioned structural reforms will also require strong backing by all parties of the coalition, as well as substantial change in the mentality of the government's bureaucracy and of the citizens.

The government's primary battlefield will lie in its efforts to enact dozens of organic laws following the constitutional reforms, including the implementation of the advanced regionalisation plan, a judiciary basic law, and a law that introduces gradually Tamazight as an official language of the state. There are high expectations that the government will introduce measures to tackle the cost of living, unemployment, housing, health care, education and the income divide. In the immediate term, the government is confronted with a complex and pressing issue of

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unemployment, particularly among the youth and graduates.⁴ All in all, it may result in too much fish to fry for an inexperienced government that has to handle a fragile coalition and the permanent monitoring from the Makhzen.

Foreign Policy: Continuity by all means

Unlike in Turkey, where the current governing Islamist party AKP relies on Ahmet Davutoglu's foreign policy doctrine as developed in the party leader's books and other strategic papers, the PJD has so far devoted little attention to foreign policy issues, its focus and *raison d'être* being staying close to the peoples everyday life.

In Morocco, foreign policy has always been an exclusive domain of the royal Palace; and the appointment of Amrani as Foreign Minister is yet a clear sign that maintaining that influence not only on key foreign policy issues, but also regarding the management of key senior civil service in the ministry, remains a fundamental issue for them. The Palace's significant influence in shaping Morocco's foreign policy has not come to an end with the 2011 constitutional amendment. On the contrary, it has been formalised by extending the prerogatives of the King to include the presidency of the Supreme Council for Security (SCS). Once its functions and organisation are defined in an organic law, the SCS will serve as a forum to oversee and tackle domestic and foreign security matters. The PJD contribution is likely to be visible through introducing some structural administrative reforms within the Foreign Affairs Ministry, particularly in the human resources. For decades, the ministry has been considered a bastion of the regime loyalists and elites from prominent families that dominated the political and economic scenes for decades.

Thus, the main feature to characterise the new government's foreign policy views will continue to be strong adherence to what is considered issues of "national territorial integrity". This includes backing the traditional claims over the West-

ern Sahara, and maintaining the sovereignty demands on Spanish enclaves and islands in the north of Morocco. In relation to the Western Sahara dispute, the PJD-led government will support the Moroccan proposal of semi-autonomy.

For obvious pragmatic and economic reasons, the European Union remains a key area for the Moroccan diplomacy. The PJD leaders are fully aware of the importance of that. More than half of Morocco's in-

ternational trade is conducted with European countries. The new government will pursue more collaboration and cooperation with the European institutions to define the features of the "Advanced Status" that was accorded to Morocco few years ago. Having said that, the economic and financial difficulties of Europe are closely scrutinised in Morocco's economic and political circles. There are real concerns among the decision makers in Rabat that Europe might turn inward, and become more protectionist. These fears were fuelled by the debates over the long-delayed EU-Morocco free trade agreement for agri-food and fishery products. However, the approval of the agreement in the European parliament has been well received by the Moroccan government, and seen as a sign of good will to strengthen the EU-Moroccan relations while, given its strategic importance and complexity, Morocco's relations with Spain will remain the domain of the Palace. Thus, the Moroccan approach regarding the territorial issues with Spain is unlikely to see a radical change.

4. Bachir Thiam, "Emploi des Jeunes: La Mise en Garde au Conseil Économique et Social", *L'Économiste*, edition No. 3612, 09 September 2011.

Developing relations with the Maghreb countries is one of the key policy areas for the current government where one might see some evolution given the fluid situation of the region since January 2011. Early indications of the priority assigned to the Maghreb region were already highlighted by the visits of the new Foreign Affairs Minister, Saadedine Othmani, to Tunisia and Algeria. A combination of political turmoil in the region and Europe's economic difficulties are giving a strong impetus to re-activate the Maghreb economic integration project. Economic gains to all Maghreb countries could be significant, should the economic synergies among them be fully harnessed. This interest by the Moroccans in re-activating the Maghreb is also met by the enthusiasm of the Tunisian interim president, Moncef El-Marzouki, who sees in the Maghreb integration a viable solution to revive the Tunisian economy. The apparent warming of bilateral relations between Morocco and Algeria allows for more hope to revive the Arab Maghreb Union, currently in a catatonic state. The undergoing rapprochement between the two countries is likely to be more serious than the previous attempts. Since last year, Moroccan and Algerian ministers have exchanged a number of visits and set an agenda for sectoral cooperation in energy -gas supplies are already crossing the border-, tourism and agriculture. But the strong signal of normalising the relations will be the effective opening of the land borders between the two countries that have been closed for the last eighteen years, sharing that dubious honour only with North and South Korea.

The success of these efforts to achieve closer regional integration depends on many variables in a region beset by unfinished revolutions and conflicts. Post-Qadhafi Libya, politically unstable and insecure, is in no position to fully engage in regional projects, as the National Transitional Council and the interim government are overwhelmed by the state-building tasks and the management of the transition.

Conclusions: a Gattopardo's Effect?

At first glance, the victory of PJD appears to be a qualitative change in the political scene; this is because for many Moroccans, it symbolises the start of a promising phase of Morocco's democratization process. But this does not necessarily mean a radical transformation of the Moroccan political system. The balance of power remains fundamentally unchanged, and favourable to the *Makhzen*. The King is still, constitutionally and informally, in hold of many executive prerogatives, which make the prospects of significant changes announced by the PJD very limited and probably slow. Key ministries such as the Ministry of Interior, Finance, and Foreign Affairs remain in the hands of men of the Palace, rather than being allocated to elected party men and women. The PJD's dependence on three other coalition partners, all of which are set to have different views and policy goals will further limit the PJD's ability to achieve own set goals. This doesn't mean that no changes are likely going to happen – rather, these changes may be most visible in domestic Moroccan politics, in particular inner-party structures, and most likely in the long run. Morocco's foreign relations are unlikely to be impacted by the PJD's electoral win.

The Palace remains the key decision-maker regarding the country's strategic partnerships and choices, and will attempt to ensure continuity. However, in this time of difficult political and economic changes regionally and globally, it seems that Morocco's policy and politics will stay static, confirming that the PJD's victory might turn to be a *Gattopardo's effect*, where apparent change in political realms will not necessarily result into a real change in politics.