

# Morocco's Legislative Elections Will Test the Reform Process

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

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**The second parliamentary election since the protests of 2011 will be a referendum on the kingdom's leading Islamist party and the broader reform process.**

**O**n October 7, Moroccans will elect a new Chamber of Representatives, the legislature's lower house. This is the second such election since 2011, when the "February 20 Movement" (M20F) led nationwide protests in the context of "Arab Spring" demonstrations throughout the region. The outcome will indicate whether the progress spurred by those protests is continuing or stagnating, and whether the Islamist-led governing party will retain its current mandate.

## BACKGROUND

**I**n response to the 2011 protests, King Mohammed VI called for a new constitution and parliamentary elections. Among the changes introduced by that charter were expanded powers for the bicameral legislature and a requirement that the king appoint the prime minister from the party receiving the most seats. At the same time, the king retained power over government decisions and sole authority over national security, foreign policy, and religious affairs, serving as both head of state and "Commander of the Faithful," the country's supreme religious authority.

Some M20F groups were dissatisfied with the new constitution and boycotted the ensuing elections, as did the largest Islamist antimonarchy movement, al-Adl wal-Ihsan (Justice and Benevolence), which is boycotting again this year. Yet many Moroccans saw the draft charter as an important, if gradual, step toward democratic reform. Around 45% of eligible voters wound up participating in the first elections, choosing a parliament dominated by the moderate Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD), which received 27% of the vote and 107 of 395 seats (the

remaining 288 seats were split among seventeen parties).

Consistent with the new constitutional procedures, the king appointed PJD leader Abdelilah Benkirane as prime minister. The party then formed a governing coalition with the center-right Istiqlal (Independence) Party, the Berber-oriented Popular Movement, and the leftist Party for Progress and Socialism. When Istiqlal pulled out in 2013, it was replaced by the neoliberal National Rally of Independents, and Benkirane's government survived the remainder of its five-year term.

## PARTIES TO WATCH

Over thirty parties are competing in the current elections, but only three -- the PJD, the palace-friendly Party of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM), and Istiqlal -- are fielding candidates in all ninety-two electoral districts. Polling is not permitted during the campaign period, but most observers expect the PJD and PAM to vie for first place. Other formations to watch include Istiqlal and a newer bloc known as the Federation of the Democratic Left.

*Justice and Development Party.* Morocco's Muslim Brotherhood derivative, the PJD, won a plurality in the 2011 elections on a platform emphasizing social justice, economic reforms, and anticorruption efforts. Once in office, however, it encountered obstacles to implementing this program -- some of its own making, others the result of an unstable coalition and ongoing palace dominance in key policy arenas.

This year, the PJD has campaigned on a promise to continue implementing its reform agenda. It has also defended its record in office -- the party can claim credit for implementing Morocco's widely acknowledged pension reform and adopting nineteen of the twenty organic laws called for in the new constitution. But it has failed to meet several of its goals, such as increasing economic growth to 5.5% and reducing unemployment to 8%. Instead, real GDP growth over the past five years has fluctuated between 1.7 and 4.7%, and unemployment now hovers around 10% nationally and 20% among young adults. The party has also failed to demonstrably reduce corruption, which may explain why it quietly dropped the issue from its policy priorities this time around.

Still, the PJD's mixed record in office is unlikely to dent its support much, given its well-maintained image as a clean party, Benkirane's enduring popularity, and its widely shared Islamic orientation. In fact, the party garnered 1.5 million votes in last year's regional and local elections -- half a million more than its 2011 parliamentary total, a gain achieved despite its inability to deliver on key economic promises.

*Party of Authenticity and Modernity.* Created in 2008 by a close confidant of the king's, the center-left PAM is currently headed by Ilyas El-Omari, a politician with roots in the northern Rif region. PAM came in fourth place in 2011 but beat the PJD in local elections last year, capturing five of the country's twelve regional council chairs and winning the largest number of municipal council seats. Seeking to capitalize on its opposition status throughout Benkirane's tenure, PAM has highlighted the PJD's economic failures and called into question its long-term aims, emphasizing the Islamist party's close ties to the Movement of Unity and Reform, a civil society organization devoted to proselytization (*dawa*) and social service provision.

While PAM's economic platform does not differ markedly from the PJD's, the party is proposing to reform Morocco's personal status code (*mudawanna*) and increase gender equality in matters of inheritance and transmission of Moroccan nationality (the latter right is currently enjoyed by fathers only). The emphasis on empowering women may reflect an effort to distinguish PAM from the PJD's social conservatism. Whether it bears fruit remains to be seen, but PAM's central appeal among supporters remains its image as a progressive force protecting the country from Islamism. To its detractors, however, the party's close affiliation with the palace-linked elite (also known as the *makhzen*) is its greatest liability.

*Istiqlal.* The oldest of Morocco's political parties, Istiqlal has migrated in and out of the opposition over the years. More recently, the PJD has cut into its base of support among the urban, socially conservative middle and working

classes. In last year's municipal elections, for example, Istiqlal came in second place behind PAM but suffered embarrassing losses to the PJD in most major cities, including its traditional bastion of Fes. Accordingly, the party has the most to prove in the current election. This may be why it has outlined an ambitious -- arguably impossible -- set of policy goals, such as creating 800,000 new jobs in the next five years and reducing unemployment to 7%.

*Federation of the Democratic Left.* A noteworthy development in this election is the unexpectedly high visibility of the Federaliyya al-Yassar al-Dimoqrati (or FDG by its French acronym), a bloc of three secular parties fielding candidates in 97% of voting districts. Despite boycotting the 2011 constitutional referendum, the bloc participated in last year's local elections and surprised observers by coming in second place in Rabat, behind only the PJD. The FDG is headed by Nabila Mounib, who in 2012 became the first Moroccan woman to lead a major political party.

This year, the bloc has sought to position itself as a reinvigorated alternative to what many see as a sclerotic and fragmented left -- that is, a third way between the Islamist PJD and the *makhzen*-friendly PAM. With its emphasis on more equitable distribution of political power and possible constitutional revisions toward that end, the FDG will likely appeal to disaffected M20F elements and social democrats turned off by PAM's ties to the palace.

## IMPLICATIONS OF THE VOTE

**T**he election's most immediate impact will be to determine Morocco's next prime minister. A PAM victory would blunt the momentum of the country's leading Islamist party, likely a welcome development for the palace. Still, the experience of the past five years suggests that a PJD victory would not spell chaos or even conflict with the monarchy, as both remain keen to shield Morocco from the region's upheaval and keep it on a path of gradual reform. In any case, with 4,000 election observers slated to monitor the vote, the palace is unlikely to interfere in the process.

Beyond what the results will mean for each party's political standing, a second free and fair national election since the 2011 unrest is an important milestone for one of Washington's few relatively stable allies in the region. Morocco continues to face serious challenges, not least the high levels of unemployment and corruption that helped trigger the 2011 protests, as well as persistent security threats reflected in the government's frequent disruption of domestic jihadist plots. Yet a successful election with steady turnout would signal a measure of public buy-in to a reform process aimed at tackling these challenges -- a process that has so far managed to eschew the extremes of authoritarian stagnation and violent revolution seen elsewhere.

*Sarah Feuer is a Soreff Fellow at The Washington Institute and author of its recent report [State Islam in the Battle Against Extremism: Emerging Trends in Morocco and Tunisia](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/state-islam-in-the-battle-against-extremism) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/state-islam-in-the-battle-against-extremism>). ❖*

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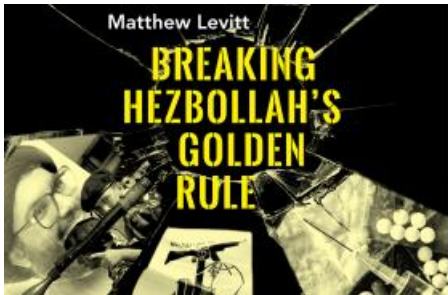
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