



# THE MOROCCAN PATH TO ISLAMISM

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## IN THE MIDDLE EAST, ALL PATHS LEAD TO ISLAMISM<sup>1</sup>

These days, all paths in the Arab world lead to Islamism. The electoral success of the moderate Islamist Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi Al-Noor Party in Egypt, of the Justice and Development party (PJD) in Morocco, and of Al-Nahda in Tunisia confirms what has long been suspected: If and when democracy finally comes to the Middle East, Islamism will triumph because it is the only game in town. The Islamists are strong, well organized, politically popular, and willing to privilege pragmatism over ideology. Both the PJD and Al-Nahda are Islamist-leaning parties, but both have vociferously insisted that they believe in democracy, are willing and even eager to share power with the secularists, and are more focused on good governance than ideological and symbolic gestures. This moderation is a key ingredient of their success.

Three different pathways to political change have emerged in the region as a result of the Arab Spring. The first path is that of peaceful revolution as exemplified by the Jasmine revolution in Tunisia, which more or less inspired the rest of the disenfranchised Arab masses to rise up and demand political change. The second path is the Libyan way, that of a violent armed revolution that turned into a successful joint venture with western allies that eventually resulted in regime change. Both pathways to political reform necessitated regime change. Then there

is the Moroccan way, which is political change without regime change. The formula here is simple. The goal is to gradually make the “constitutional” stronger and the “monarchy” weaker in the constitutional monarchy. Jordan is also following this path; perhaps even the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) will follow. But regardless of what path is taken, the destination for all Arab states seems to be the same: governance under political Islam.

Many of the region’s secular intellectuals and politicians fear that the Islamists will use the democratic process to transform countries in the region into Islamic states and undermine the civil and political liberties of those who do not share their vision. Tunisia has made considerable strides in terms of granting women equal rights, and there is a genuine fear among its young women that Al-Nahda may now seek to transform Tunisia into another Iran. Needless to say, the party and its leadership denies such allegations as fear mongering and insist that they are just another party, albeit one that places a greater emphasis on the fact that Tunisia is a Muslim country and believes that Islamic values can contribute much wisdom to political governance.

The success of Tayyip Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey has given hopes to secularists that Islamist parties elsewhere can thrive in a democratic context without undermining or endangering democracy. It has also given Islamist parties a roadmap to legitimacy. Observers in the region and in the West are asking whether Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Jordan, and Libya will gradually follow the Turkish model and become Muslim democracies in which secular and

<sup>1</sup>This policy brief is based on research conducted in Tunisia in June 2011 and in Morocco in June and November of 2011.

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Islamist parties compete to provide good governance to their people.

## THERE IS MORE THAN ISLAMISM BEHIND THE ISLAMIST VICTORY

The PJD's victory was expected and, one could argue, even desired by the King of Morocco because it legitimizes both the electoral process and the constitutional reforms of June 2011. In the last elections, held in 2007, the PJD came in second by winning forty-seven seats in Parliament. Its supporters, however, maintained that it was cheated out of several seats, and the king was accused of deliberately fixing the outcome. But now its victory is also victory for the king, for it sends the message to the masses that the elections were honest. It therefore perhaps erases the lingering resentment at past fixes and gives the reforms the oxygen of trust they need to survive.

The PJD's triumph also sends the message that the king was serious when he promised political reforms. *Abdelilah Benkirane*, Morocco's new and first real prime minister, is an Islamist, with sufficient power to both shape the government and the directions of policy in several areas ... but not in those of foreign policy, defense policy, and religious affairs. This can happen only when Arab regimes allow free and fair elections and the West does not intervene against the Islamists. The memory of the Algerian elections of 1992, when the West and the Algerian regime combined to deprive the Islamists of their electoral victory, as well as its aftermath are still alive.

Thus the PJD's victory sends the powerful message that Arab regimes can be reformed and that the West is ready to embrace change and will not actively oppose the will of the Arab peoples. The facts that the Islamists received over 30 percent of the vote, emerged as the single largest party, and now have their leader *Abdelilah Benkirane* serving as prime minister are significant. Nevertheless, one must not overestimate their victory and interpret it as an indication that a "Sharia tsunami" is engulfing Morocco. In fact, several factors suggest that this election is not the beginning of a systematic take over by the Islamists.

First, King Mohammed VI is immensely popular among some sectors of Moroccan society. Several scholars and individuals told me that things have improved, slowly but surely, since he ascended the throne. People would like to see more and more rapid change; but when they saw what happened in Libya and what is happening in Syria, the relatively slow but peaceful change in their own country began to look more appealing. For many, the king's religious legitimacy is incontestable and thus they remain staunch loyalists. One can find loyalists among both the old and the young people. These loyalists do

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want to see more democracy in Morocco, but not at the expense of the monarchy. The emotional attachment to the king is strong among large sections of the society, and political parties that dream of challenging him do so at their own peril. Islamists from the PJD have publicly sworn allegiance to the king, and their success comes with his success and not at his expense.

As *Ameer-ul-Momineen* (the commander of the faithful), the King enjoys a special status in Moroccan society: He embodies the country's most important religious institution. Many intellectuals told me that even though they support democracy, they also support the institution of the *Ameer* and believe that it is essential to sustaining the state's integrity and harmony. They claimed that Morocco is so diverse that without this particular "glue" it would fall apart. This institution also gives the king a great deal of legitimacy and religious authority. In a society where Islam still matters, his Islamic pedigree as the *Ameer* matters too. The point is simple: King Mohammed VI enjoys both political and religious influence in Morocco and plays ball with the Islamists on their own court.

The campaign season saw the emergence of three political forces: the moderate Islamists, represented by the PJD, and two secular, centrist, and loyalist coalitions: the Coalition for Democracy, led by the National Rally of Independents, and the Koutla group, led by the formerly ruling Istiqlal party. Both coalitions won more seats than did the PJD. The eight-party Coalition for Democracy won 159 seats, the Koutla group won 117 seats, and the PJD won 107 seats. If Morocco had adopted the Indian political system, then the Coalition for Democracy, as the largest coalition, would have formed a minority government and governed as long as all opponents did not combine to pass a "no confidence" motion.

The point is simple: The PJD won, but the people of Morocco did not give it a decisive mandate. If the secular parties had managed their differences more astutely than the Islamists, who benefitted from the division of the secular vote, the latter would not have performed so well. But the silver lining here is that the Moroccan polity has not yet aligned itself along the Islamist-secularist axis, which suggests that Islam's role in the political sphere is not the main point of political contention. In other words, the Islamists are important but they are not the only game in town.

The PJD also attracted the votes of the more conservative sections of society that were not represented on the ballot. If the more conservative Justice and Charity party, which opposes the monarchy and did not compete in the elections, then the PJD's vote would have been divided and they would not have won as many seats. It is also possible that the party's stronger rhetoric could have mobilized the secular and conservative sectors and thus raised the voter turnout higher than the reported 45 percent. Both Al-Nahda in Tunisia and the PJD in Morocco did not face a challenge from the more conservative right, which allowed them to indulge in very moderate discourse. This may not necessarily be so in the future, and I wonder if the PJD would have sounded so moderate in their proclamations if they had to compete with the Justice and Charity party for the Islamic vote.

## ISLAMISTS NOW OWN THE PROBLEMS

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Finally, the PJD will have to govern in constant consultation with its secular partners. Coalition governments often give the minority partners a veto on policy. While the Islamists will monopolize the main cabinet positions and be the face of the government, they may not be able to advance any signature policies that would give them and their ideology the political capital necessary for an outright victory in the next elections. Besides, the PJD now owns the policies. If they do not work and if the people experience no significant change in their living conditions, then they will pay the price. “Islam is the solution” has been the Islamists’ long-term slogan, but can it now create jobs, galvanize the economy, and erode corruption?

I travelled through Morocco in the summer of 2011 while the people were debating the constitutional reforms and during the elections in November 2011. I spoke with cab drivers, vendors, waiters, and bellhops, as well as with professors, business people, and private university students. The lack of enthusiasm was epidemic. Most people, more or less, said, “Well, nothing is going to change so what is the point?” A cab driver with the instincts of a political science professor explained to me that since there were few differences among the parties, there was not much at stake. The two main contenders were the moderate PJD and the Coalition for Democracy, a pro-monarchy coalition comprised of eight parties.

The cab driver also opined that since no party was capable of winning a majority, given that the system is so structured that a party can win no more than 20 percent of the vote, the ensuing governing coalition would render the elections less meaningful. A professor and important intellectual from Rabat told me that he was leaning toward the Islamists, even though he expected them to “become like everyone else” in the post-election jostling for power and positions. Confident that the PJD

would be the largest party, he nevertheless expressed his fear that the Islamists would compromise so much in order to form a coalition government that selecting them over the others would be rendered moot. “What is the point of preferring them if they all are the same in the end?”

It was an interesting and oft-repeated observation during this election cycle. The Islamists are no different from the rest, just politicians even in the eyes of their supporters. For someone who is fed on the daily diet of western fears of Islamist victories, confirmed by Al-Nahda’s win in Tunisia, this particular sentiment was both amusing and enlightening. Most critics in the West fear Islamist parties without recognizing that they are political parties and that their trajectory of development and evolution, once electoral politics have been institutionalized, will follow that of most other political parties in the region.

It appears that the people of Morocco are tired with moderation and consensual politics and are looking for a more decisive direction. Even though most of them acknowledged that the next prime minister will be more powerful than the last one, they were not enthused. I was in Morocco when the constitutional reforms were being debated before the national referendum. Clearly there was a lot of enthusiasm and excitement in the public at that time. Any question about the reforms elicited immediate reactions and people aired their points of

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view, whether pro-monarchy or pro-democracy, with great gusto. Perhaps they intuitively sensed that they had an opportunity to bring about real change. But now they seemed to be resigned to a slow and meandering change of their fortunes.

I talked to many Moroccans before and on the day of elections in Marrakesh, Casablanca, and Rabat. There was a degree of apathy that recognizes that political change

may not necessarily lead to economic transformation. People were excited about the constitutional reforms, but remained lukewarm to what was billed as an historic election. Even the Islamists' supporters were afraid that the Islamists may not behave and perform any differently from the current set of politicians.

Life in Morocco is difficult. Economic opportunities are few. Social and now political freedoms are available, but freedom is not economic security. For the vast number of Moroccans who are barely making ends meet, often with a smile and remarkable sense of self-dignity, bread is still more germane than ballots.

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**POLICY BRIEF**

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