Party Politics and Elections in Morocco

By Mohamed Daadaoui

This Policy Brief *examines party politics and limited elections in Morocco. Political parties in Morocco do not contest the regime's traditional sources of power and embrace the monarchy's religious status as an integral part of the political identity of Morocco. The monarchy's religious authority and its use of rituals of power impede the ability of political parties to mobilize and to penetrate Moroccan society, and force them to adopt positional strategies in limited elections. The regime has also promulgated new palace parties, such as the Party of Modernity and Authenticity, to placate political challenges from opposition parties.*

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In July 1999, King Hassan II died after 38 years on the throne. His son, King Muhammad VI, assumed office with the same broad constitutional powers, including the appointment and dismissal of cabinet ministers, vetoes of parliamentary legislation, and the dissolution of Parliament. Unlike his father, however, Muhammad VI has launched many reforms that were shelved during Hassan's reign. The reforms include codifying a body of law, promoting the democratic process, encouraging economic and fiscal reforms, and granting more civil rights for Moroccans. Over a decade into his reign, Muhammad VI's reforms seem more of an extension of the late Hassan II's rule. Like his father, Muhammad VI has sought to strengthen the power of the monarchy and has largely managed to increase monarchical prerogatives *vis-à-vis* other political actors.

In 2000, Muhammad VI released all political prisoners and prisoners of conscience. All political exiles were allowed back into the country to take part in the political process. In addition, the government tacitly assumed responsibility for the hundreds of prisoners of conscience who were arrested during the infamous "years of lead," and offered monetary compensation to the families of the victims.

The new King, dubbed "the king of the poor," also launched a campaign against poverty and unemployment and further endorsed the process of structural economic adjustment already initiated by his father and catered by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. But perhaps his most controversial step, which sparked massive Islamist protest, was the government's plan to give women more rights. The plan sought to "grant women a quota of 33% of seats in Parliament, raise the legal age of marriage from 15 to 18, end the obligation for women to marry only with the consent of a male guardian, change divorce from a male repudiation to a judicial decree, and ban polygamy." In their first demonstration over an issue of national concern since the 1970s, Islamists flexed their muscles in March 2000 by staging a large demonstration in the Moroccan capital.[1]

This event was significant because it marked the resurgence of the Islamist movement, which had been in abeyance since the early 1980s. Most importantly, it showed the public acknowledgement of a sizeable, organized, and popular Islamist opposition. The '*Ulama* (religious clerics) marched alongside the banned 'Adl wa al-Ihsane(Justice and Charity) party and its rival parliamentary party 'Adala wa Tanmiya (Justice and Development). Despite the Islamists' protests, the King's controversial reforms of the *Mudawanna* (Family Code) passed and gave women equal rights in family matters and restricted polygamy.

The process of liberalization coincided with the reemergence of the Islamist movement[2] and is intrinsically linked to periods of economic crisis in Morocco. Economic underperformance has in the past presented several challenges to the legitimacy of the regime and state when they have failed to provide basic social services for all its citizens. Bouts of political reforms are a mere regime strategy to diffuse dissent and
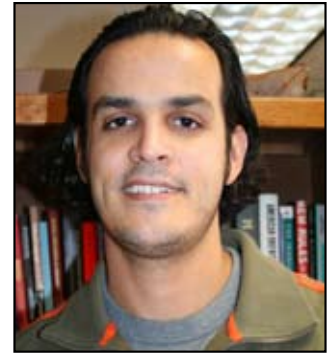
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1. Nick Pelham, "Islamists on the march," *The Middle East International*, Vol. 1, Issue 261, March 24, 2000, p. 16.

2. The Islamists' first resurgence was relatively recent and dates to the early 1970s with the emergence of Jam'iyat al-Shabiba al-Islamiya (Association of Islamic Youth), founded by Abdelkrim Moutii and Kamal Ibrahim in 1972. The Islamic Youth Association was a reaction to leftist and Arab nationalist ideologies which threatened to sweep Morocco's society during the tumultuous years of Nasser's pan-Arab propaganda.

opposition. These reforms are also instances that offered political space for protest movements, such as that of the Islamists to emerge.

Monarchical reforms promoted limited pluralism within a civil society which is probably among the most vibrant in the Middle East. Civil society, conceived in terms of formal organizations and structures, has made a substantial impact on policy-making especially in areas of women's and human rights. Associations such as the Association Démocratique des Femmes du Maroc (ADFM) and the Union Action Féminine (UAF) articulated discourses of women's rights and human rights, and adopted a "self-limiting framework" that is independent of political parties.[3] The increasing freedom of these associations translated into a parallel relative latitude of the press to tackle issues of human rights and political reforms and the emergence of the Berber/Amazigh discourse. Such associations increasingly contest the state's hegemony in the public sphere. The state response was to address rather than to suppress these issues. Accordingly, the strategy of the state was to reassert its hegemony in the public sphere and to channel these discourses within state councils. The creation of the Conseil Consultatif des Droits de l'Homme (CCDH), for instance, was an attempt to co-opt the human rights discourse and to create a national consensus based on monarchical prerogatives.

Despite the relative freedom of civil society, democratic reforms have been lagging as the monarchy still dominates the institutional realm in Morocco. The ritualization of the political process has had a detrimental effect on any movement towards democratic governance. The sanctified leadership of the monarchy, with its rituals of power, is an amalgam of temporal and spiritual powers. In fact the amalgam of the religious and the temporal is institutionalized in the *bay'a* and Article 19 of the Constitution. All royal decisions are sacred since they emanate from the *Amir al-Mu'minin*, whose will is divine and whoever obeys his command "obeys God."[4] The synthesis between the religious and the temporal assigns primacy to the religious stature of the monarchy and sets it above all political changes. As one political official suggests, "the monarchy is the only constant in the political system and is set above all to arbitrate and mediate between the various sources of political conflict."[5] The monarch in Morocco dominates the constitutional edifice from the height of his spiritual rank. The resulting political picture is a monarchy that is above separate branches of government, which prompted Hassan II to once state that "the separation of powers does not concern in any case our [the monarchy's] supreme authority."[6]

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Rituals of power and the monarchy's religious status hinder any passage of meaningful democratic change in Morocco. As long as royal powers are unlimited and firmly anchored in religious terms, democratic reforms have a slim chance of taking hold in Morocco. Similarly, the monarchy is secure from any instability as long as it dominates the religious discourse and continues to utilize it, as it has for the past three decades, to clutter the public discourse and offset the ability of opposition forces to mobilize along religious lines.

The regime has been able to manage the political system through both institutional and socio-religious means, setting the monarch both as a spiritual and a temporal ruler. Institutionally, the regime has saturated the political party scene with pro-monarchical parties, which serve to fragment the political opposition. The politics of institutional manipulation are embedded in a pre-colonial authority structure that informs the political system with traditional

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3. James N. Sater. *Civil Society and Political change in Morocco* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 69.
4. King Hassan II in a royal speech in 1994 quoted in Tel Quel No. 125, (May 1-7, 2004), http://www.telquel-online.com/125/couverture_125_1.shtml.
5. Interview by author in Rabat, July 2006.
6. King Hassan II in a royal speech of August 13, 1978.

royal customs and modes of governance in Morocco. These modes have not ceased to develop and to coexist with modern state functions; the traditional structure has been preserved and cloaked in a modern institutional veneer. Manifestations of traditional modes of government are maintained through protocol anchored in a set of ancestral practices governing all aspects of life in the royal establishment. A severe discipline governs dress codes, the distribution of royal gifts (*hadaya*), even the manner of kissing the King's hand. Protocol is so important to the royal court that it has been institutionalized into a cabinet ministry in charge of royal protocol, which, among other practices, organizes and perpetuates the spectacular annual practice of allegiance or *bay'a*.

The institutional organization of power and the supremacy of the King are codified in the Moroccan Constitution. Article 19 of the Constitution, for instance, identifies the King as the guarantor of independence, unity, and the continuity of the state. The King is also the protector of the faith and the Constitution. This effectively presents the King with absolute power over all aspects of the state apparatus. King Hassan, for instance, often reminded his subjects of his position: "It is necessary that your King, protector of the Constitution and defender of everyone's liberties, can at all times control and conduct the affairs of the state."[7]

Royal power is absolute as the monarch presides over the Council of Ministers and possesses vast discretionary powers over the Parliament. Politicians both within the government and those in the opposition accept these powers. The latter only oppose the performance of the government in the different policy fields; the King remains "the supreme institutional power."[8] In almost all of the interviews I have conducted throughout the years in Morocco, there is a near consensus that the Parliament and the government collaborate with royal power as political instruments necessary to exercise the monarchy's power. The monarchy is viewed as necessary to maintain the cohesiveness of the political system. The Parliament, while officially subject to popular elections, is a mere institutional rubber stamp. It does not play a legislative role since all laws emanate from the palace or are made in the name of the King.

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 Management of the political system is apparent in Morocco's divided political environment and electoral contests. In such an environment, loyalist and radical political elites have different interests and divergent mobilization costs. Loyalists help maintain the system in exchange for royal benefits and access. In contrast, radicals take advantage of popular discontent in order to mobilize support.[9] The monarchy also relies on its traditional and religious capital to dominate the public discourse. Such capital is part of the historical authority of the *makhzen* [ruling elite] and its patrimonial legitimacy. The Alaoui dynasty has governed Morocco since the 17th century through a solid religious authority anchored in an alleged lineage to the Prophet Muhammad, a strong tribal alliance, and a ruling class that was created and strengthened to preserve the continuity of monarchical authority. The legitimacy of the monarchy in the political culture in Morocco always has been accepted as a principle and, as such, it is a mere reformulation or renewal of this authority. This authority has developed through the period of state building and has shaped the current political landscape in Morocco. As a result, the monarchy has fostered a set of political practices — adjusted in turn by Muhammad V, Hassan II, and currently by Muhammad VI — that meet the needs of a modern state and allow for the effective concentration and application of power.[10] Such practices are not solely institutional; they also are symbolic, drawing on cultural themes with great legitimacy within Moroccan society.

Faced with the tremendous legitimacy of those symbols, Islamists had no alternative but to moderate their dis-

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7. Royal address on December 11, 1965.
8. Interview by author in the Moroccan upper house of councilors, July 15, 2006.
9. Ellen Lust-Okar, "Divided They Rule: The Management and Manipulation of Political Opposition," *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (January 2004), p. 161.
10. John Waterbury, *The Commander of the Faithful: The Moroccan Political Elite* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1970).

course and change their strategies. The Islamists' challenge to the territory of the sacred in Moroccan culture proved unsuccessful when faced with the monarchy's skillful use of its symbols of power. The use of rituals of power has undercut any Islamist claim to a religious mandate over society in Morocco. Morocco in this respect is unique in the Arab Muslim world because religious authority rests squarely on the shoulders of the monarch. In Egypt, for instance, the religious institution was established, stabilized, and politicized in al-Azhar. This difference is apparent in both countries' histories with respect to Islamism. In Egypt, for instance, Islamists take on the religious state through its Ministry of Religious Affairs, while in Morocco, no such institutional mediation exists. Abdessalam Yassine, head of the 'Adl wa al-Ihsani party, for example, directly rebuked the King of Morocco in his famous 1974 letter "Islam or the deluge."

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The regime has adopted several measures in its efforts against the Islamist movements: confinement, suppression, and co-optation. How the state treats the movements depends on the movements' acceptance of the political agenda as set by the monarch. Political parties illustrate the different ways in which the Moroccan regime has been able to placate dissent and opposition. In most of the post-independence era, Moroccan political parties engaged the state in cycles of contest and *entente*. Historical trends in party politics in Morocco greatly inform the current travails of state-party politics.

In this political landscape, Moroccan political parties are largely factionalized and exercise no meaningful opposition. State-party relations illustrate two distinct features: first, it is apparent that the state has penetrated the party scene in all previous electoral contests in Morocco. Within Morocco's political system, the state bestowed political favors and in some cases brought loyal parties to power such as the Gathering of National Independents (RNI) in 1977, the Constitutional Union (UC) in 1984, and the Social Democratic Movement (MDS) in 1997.[11] The second characteristic of Moroccan parties is their lack of ideological and political clarity, as the regime has exacted its hold over the rules of the political game.

In the midst of this menu of state manipulation of the political system, Moroccans have become increasingly cynical and apathetic when faced with the futility of reforms and electoral contests. The September 7, 2007 legislative elections continued this trend of public cynicism and party fragmentation. The elections failed to bring about any meaningful change to Moroccan politics, as many had anticipated. Thirty-three parties contested the elections, with the results giving a slight edge to the old nationalist party Hizb al-Istiqlal with 52 of the 325 seats (16%) in the House of Representatives (lower house). The Islamist Party of Justice and Development fell below most estimates, including those of its own leadership, winning a mere 47 seats. The nationalist Hizb al-Istiqlal swapped cabinet portfolios with the incumbent Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP), which saw its number of seats fall from 50 in the outgoing House of Representatives to 36.

The June 2009 communal elections continued on the path of state manipulation in Morocco (For party performance and voter turnout statistics for the 2007 and 2009 elections, see the Appendix). The elections produced two results with tremendous ramifications for the political and political party scene in the Kingdom. The first of these results was the rise of the Party of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM) as a new actor in the country's multiparty landscape. The second result was the success of the state's dual strategy of placating the Islamist Party of Justice and Development (PJD) and spurring voter turnout, which was embarrassingly low in the legislative elections of 2007. However, this success indicates that state's political management style of the opposition continues to reign supreme in Morocco.

Nowhere was this management more apparent than in the PAM's meteoric ascent in the Moroccan political scene. Less than one year after its founding, the party of "the tractor" has taken control of more than 6,000 seats out of the

11. Muhammad Darif, *al-Nasaq al-siyasi al-Maghribi al-mu'asir: muqaraba susiyu-siyasiyah* (Casablanca: Afriqiya al-Sharq, 1991), p. 70.

22,000 contested in the communal elections of June 12, 2009. The party boasts organized political machinery and heavy recruitment in the ranks of businessmen and local notables. The close ties of its architect, Fuad 'Ali al-Himma, to Muhammad VI have served to cement its status as the party of *Sidna* ("our lord"); a fact that al-Himma himself advanced during the 2008 partial elections, when he stated that the people should vote for the PAM and "not disappoint *Sidna*." The PAM's PR machine has been more careful with what it has divulged since then. However, the PAM's aura as the party of the monarch has had a lasting effect, especially in the minds of Moroccan voters still largely loyal to the monarchical institution.

The PAM is the brainchild of al-Himma — though some say it's that of the palace — whose life and formative political experiences have been thoroughly informed by his palace education alongside Muhammad VI and an equally crucial technocratic background in the Ministry of the Interior. 'Ali al-Himma has mastered the core principles of the political game in the Kingdom, namely the division of national politics, electoral engineering, and the inundation of the party scene with palace-loyal parties in the name of the state's stated goal of "rationalizing the party system" in Morocco.

Despite initial setbacks in the elections of 2008, when the party suffered humiliating losses in the major cities of Marrakech and Fes, the PAM managed to regroup and infiltrate the electoral scene in an impressive fashion in the communal elections of 2009. The party waged a ruthless campaign in the whole Kingdom, benefitting from a large number of candidates who switched their affiliations in favor of the party of "the tractor," the symbol of the Party of Authenticity and Modernity.

In personal interviews, some of these candidates suggested a commitment to a new era of party politics in Morocco. Previously, parties were largely seen as ineffective and out of touch with the electorate, serving their own narrow and localized interests; the PAM, while still fuzzy in its ideology, has been successful in communicating a sense of change in the ranks of its loyalists. One candidate suggests a dynamic change in favor of the party's alignment with the objectives set by the state for regionalization. Such plans are aligned with the late King Hassan II's project for decentralization and increasing the role of Morocco's provinces.

The PAM experience is not unparalleled in the history of party politics in Morocco and is indicative of the extent of state penetration in the party landscape. the PAM echoes two previous palace experiments to manage the political system and party opposition in the aftermath of independence. The first was the creation of the Front for the Defense of Constitutional Institutions (FDIC) in 1963, led by palace loyalists and local notables. The second was Ahmed Osman's National Gathering of the Independents (RNI) in 1978. Both parties defended the institution of the monarchy and managed to weaken the leading opposition parties, Istiqlal and the USFP. Muhammad VI seems to have resorted to his father's playbook as parties continue to alienate the electorate amidst the lack of a clear ideological vision that guides political participation.

During the electoral campaign, there were reports of thousands of irregularities. This is nothing new in the patrimonial and clientelistic political process in Morocco. Communal campaigns were rife with violations related mainly to the use of unregulated money. Some candidates went door to door armed with Qur'ans and wads of cash. After the targeted resident swore an oath of allegiance to a particular candidate on the Qur'an, they received up to 250 Dirhams (approximately $30).

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Even the process of party negotiations for the leadership of city and county councils involved corrupt practices. Behind closed doors, ideological shifts were rampant. No party was firmly committed to an ideological vision: In Marrakech, for instance, the dominant mayor of the city, 'Umar al-Jazuli of the CU party, was uprooted by the PAM's candidate Fatima Azahra al-Mansuri, the second female mayor in Morocco. In Casablanca, the former mayor 'Umar al-Bahraui of the Popular Movement party faced a damaging coalition between the Islamist PJD and the PAM. In the

new political landscape, all roads to governance go through the PAM, further consecrating its dominant status in domestic politics. The PAM seems destined towards a legislative victory in 2012 and 'Ali al-Himma will perhaps serve as the future prime minister of a government bound to be ineffective in the absence of meaningful political reforms.

While the PAM emerged as the major victor of the communal elections, other parties stood close behind. The governing Istiqlal Party came in second with 5,292 seats (19% of the total). The RNI, which forms part of the ruling coalition, won 4,112 seats (14.8%) and placed third. The USFP was fourth with 3,226 seats (11.6%), while the Popular Movement came in fifth with 2,213 seats (8%). The Islamist PJD won a meager 1,513 seats with 5.5% of the vote. This was expected, as the PJD did not contest many of the rural areas — covering only 18% of rural party lists — and focused on the major urban centers where it has traditionally enjoyed support from professionals, university professors, and students. PJD emerged as a leading urban political party in the Kingdom, winning the mayoral elections in Meknes and Temara. PJD won most of the party lists in urban centers of more than 35,000 people, ahead of the USFP and Istiqlal.[12]

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The PAM is firmly set on an inevitable course towards an eventual government takeover in the 2012 legislative elections. However, though the party's officials do not lack in ambition, they still have to navigate through a complicated environment rife with competition from less-loyalist palace parties. Its biggest rival today, and that of the state, remains the Islamist PJD. Abelillah Ben Kirane, Secretary General of the PJD, does not spare the PAM his direct criticism (and often vitriol). Just recently, PAM founder 'Ali al-Himma threatened a lawsuit against Ben Kirane for calling him a "terrorist and extremist."

In the final analysis, electoral contests in Morocco have merely served to cement the supremacy of the state electoral machine. In Morocco's system of "manipulated pluralism,"[13] the monarchy continues to rule over a consensus among the elite and society on its perennial role in both spiritual and temporal realms. The regime positions itself above the political system in a striking duality of perception between regime and state. Elections continue to be instances of power projection by the regime and serve as a juncture for defining the contours of new political landscapes with the complicity of weak opposition forces. The PJD and the PAM, formally in the opposition, support the state in a symbiotic relationship in which the state and the opposition reinforce each other and where "neither uses the other, but each serves the other's interests in performing its own role."[14] This is not unique to Morocco. Scholar William Zartman asserts that in Egypt and Tunisia, for instance, the limited power of the opposition and its weakness *vis-à-vis* the state forces it to comply with state goals, which explains the stability and durability of Arab regimes.[15]

Morocco is undergoing dramatic changes linked to rapid urbanization and industrialization. These modernization pressures already have engendered changes in Moroccan society. Customs have undergone drastic transformations and the younger generation seems to be rebelling against the previous cultural framework. The rise of ultraconservative Islam is also a byproduct of these changes. In the aftermath of the 2003 Casablanca bombings, Muhammad VI vowed to rein in radical clerics and to counteract their rhetoric with more moderate discourse. The government embarked on a large and sweeping reorganization of the country's 32,000 mosques in order to promote a government sanctioned Islam and to "shield Morocco against the perils of extremism and terrorism."[16] The monarchy still seems secure and immune from any significant dangers to its longevity. However, it still has to deal with certain pressing

12. See *Tel Quel*, No. 378, June 20, 2009.

13. William Zartman, "Opposition as Support for the State," in A. Dawisha and I. W. Zartman, eds., *Beyond Coercion: The Durability of the Arab State* (London: Croom Helm and Instituto Affari Internazionali, 1988), pp. 61-87.

14. Zartman, "Opposition as Support for the State," p. 62.

15. Zartman, "Opposition as Support for the State," pp. 84-85.

16. Ilhem Rachidi, "Morocco tempers Islamists." *The Christian Science Monitor*, July 19, 2004, http//: www.csmonitor.com/2004/0719/p07s01-wome.html.

issues in order to ensure its rule.

Chief among these issues is the process of liberalization that should extend beyond just securing the survival of the monarchy. No real democratization can take place without limiting the monarch's widespread role in the polity. This would foster a new political culture based on participation rather than blind parochial allegiance. However, recent crackdowns on the freedom of the press is of concern, as several journalists have felt the brunt of the country's repressive press code. In August 2009, Ahmed Benchmesi of the French weekly *Tel Quel*, and its Arabic sister publication *Nichane,* suffered the state's prior-restraint action ahead of a much anticipated public opinion poll on the King. More recently, the Arabic daily *Akhbar al-Yawm* was investigated and closed for publishing a cartoon depicting the newly married Prince Moulay Ismael on a wedding platform (*'amariya*), and a partially complete Star of David on the Moroccan flag in the background. In late January, Abu Bakr Jama'i's long and tumultuous battle with the state came to a crushing end, when his *Journal Hebdomadaire* was ordered closed for unpaid taxes.

In the final analysis, Morocco's current challenges lie in its ability to grant more civil liberties, in particular granting more space for the press to act as watchdog for governmental excesses without fear of state retribution. The recent clamp-down on journalistic freedom is troubling and is a step backward in the long awaited process of political reforms. Such reform should also strengthen the representative institutions of the government and provide a modicum for political parties to exercise a true opposition role. Currently, parties remain locked in an endless and futile quest for plurality victories in limited electoral contests and ineffective weak coalitional governments. The PAM has so far positioned itself at the helm of major political and electoral success in Morocco's fragmented party scene. It remains to be seen whether its pro-palace ties could affect its ability to promote much of what it has campaigned for in terms of good governance, transparency, and accountability.

APPENDIX: MOROCCO'S 2007 LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS

Chamber	House of Representatives	
Date of Election	September 7, 2007	
Voter Turnout	37%	
Number of Seats Available	325	
Length of Legislative Term	5 years	
	Number of Seats	**Percentage of Seats**
Independence Party (PI-*Istiqlal*)	52	16
Justice and Development Party (PJD)	46	14.1
Popular Movement (MP)	41	12.6
National Assembly of Independents (RNI)	39	12
Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP)	38	11.6
Constitutional Union (UC)	27	8.3
Party of Progress and Socialism (PPS)	17	5.2
National Democratic Party PND-Al Ahd (Union PND-Al Ahd)	14	4.3
Front of Democratic Forces (FFD)	9	2.7
Democratic and Social Movement (MDS)	9	2.7
Union PADS-CNI-PSU	6	1.8
Labour Party (PT)	5	1.5
Environment and Development Party	5	1.5
Party of Renewal and Equity (PRE)	4	1.2
Socialist Party (PS)	2	0.6
Moroccan Union for Democracy (UMD)	2	0.6
Citizens' Forces (FC)	1	0.3
Alliance of Liberties (AL)	1	0.3
Citizenship and Development Initiative (ICD)	1	0.3
Party of Renaissance and Virtue (PRV)	1	0.3
Others	5	1.5

APPENDIX: MOROCCO'S 2009 LOCAL ELECTIONS

There were more than 30 parties contesting the 2009 elections; below are the results for the top five. A complete list is available at: http://www.map.ma/eng/sections/politics/local_elections__fin/view

Top five:

Parti Authenticité et Modernité – 21.7%

Parti Istiqlal – 19.1%

Rassemblement National des Indépendants – 14.8%

Union Socialiste des Forces Populaires – 11.6%

Mouvement Populaire – 8%

Voter Turnout is: 52.4%