

Arab Reform Bulletin نشرة الإصلاح العربي

Arab Reform Bulletin

March 2008, Volume 6, Issue 2

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Morocco: The PJD between Inclusion and Cooptation

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The disappointing showing of the Party of Justice and Development (PJD) in the September 2007 parliamentary elections in Morocco has sparked questions about the party's future course. Observers wondered whether the Islamist PJD, having won only 46 of 325 seats (despite widespread expectations that it would take at least 70) would resort to the strategies employed by other Islamist groups, such as boycotting elections, abandoning political participation, or even engaging in clandestine activities. Foreign observers speculated over the fate of Secretary General Saad Eddin al-Uthmani and potential threats to his position from the party's radical wing.

A few months down the road, the PJD has made clear its commitment to the democratic path, resisting the temptation to withdraw from politics to signal its grievances over the political and electoral process. Moreover, the PJD has begun an internal dialogue to revise its position on key issues, leading to renewed focus on demanding real constitutional reforms and questioning the government's laxity in combating electoral corruption.

The PJD's response is partly due to the party's interpretation of its electoral loss. First, the party believes that several factors conspired against an electoral victory. Voter turnout was low: only 37 percent voted, 19 percent of whom spoiled their ballots. Electoral districts were redrawn in an attempt to limit the party's electoral chances. New voter registries were only slightly revised but not fully updated, and voter registration cards were not well distributed. Last but not least, vote buying and electoral violence remained unchecked. These factors weakened the party's electoral showing, but did not diminish its popularity. In the end, the PJD still gained the largest number of votes (more than 520,000), though not seats. It was not invited to join the government formed by the Istiqlal Party; from the point of view of the PJD, this saved the party from participating in a weak government with a limited capacity to implement a political program.

According to the party's assessment of its electoral performance, the PJD lost more than 10 seats as a result of an administrative and political conspiracy against it in certain districts and of the party's

inability to cover all voting precincts (more than 38,000). The PJD may also have lost votes due to voter concerns regarding the party's religious identity and its reluctance to state clearly its willingness to serve in government.

Apart from the elections themselves, many in the PJD believe that the low voter turnout is provoking widespread discussions in Morocco about the need to reclaim the integrity of the political and electoral process. This in turn could set the stage for a new wave of democratic reforms in which the PJD would want to participate. The party's commitment to pluralism and adoption of a moderate course in dealing with other political actors have thus enabled it to handle what many see as a psychological defeat.

Despite its ability to manage and explain this defeat, however, the PJD has nonetheless launched a process of internal critique and dialogue ahead of its planned conference in July 2008. Among the key questions the PJD must face is the relationship between ruling regimes and moderate Islamist movements, which are trapped between inclusion and cooptation. On the one hand, ruling regimes have resorted to gradual inclusion of Islamists in politics in an attempt to curb the popularity of radical Islamist groups. On the other hand, ruling regimes employ limiting tactics in order to combat the rising popularity of moderate Islamists and their potential threat to the balance of power.

In the past, the party has advanced a two-fold solution to the problem of inclusion versus cooptation: it participated in elections in a limited fashion but declined to join governments. The PJD participated in nearly half of the electoral districts in the 1997 parliamentary elections, 56 out of 91 districts in 2002, and only 18 percent of electoral districts in the 2003 municipal elections. It refused to participate in governments in 1998 and 2002, preferring a limited but effective parliamentary presence. This strategy expired with the September 2007 elections, in which the party ran candidates in all electoral districts and its leaders appeared ready to embrace governmental responsibility. In retrospect, it is clear that the Moroccan political context was not ready for such a transformation.

The return of constitutional reform as a priority in PJD rhetoric reflects a new attempt to overcome the inclusion/cooptation conundrum. Whether or not it will be adopted as the main response to the Islamists' perennial dilemma will become clearer at the upcoming party conference in July.

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