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# Belief and the Ballot

By accommodating, and not attacking, political Islam, Morocco is laying the foundations of a modern, Muslim democracy

**A**S THE MIDDLE EAST GRAPPLES WITH how to democratize while also including the Islamist movements that have become increasingly popular in the last three decades, Sept. 7's parliamentary elections in Morocco offer some useful insights. A poll two years ago indicated that 47% of Moroccans would vote for Morocco's Islamist Party of Justice and Development (PJD). That 47% turns out to be a curiously recurrent statistic. In 1991, the Algerian Islamic Salvation Front won the first round of elections with 47%, an outcome that plunged the military into panic and the country into a bloody civil war. This July, Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) was victorious in parliamentary elections, winning 47% of the vote. While the Turkish generals are uneasy with the AKP's success, there's no reason to think that its rise will lead to open confrontation or violence with secular forces.

In Morocco, the PJD seeks to emulate the Turkish rather than the Algerian model. If King Mohammed VI allows the PJD's evolution to continue—the party is currently the main opposition to a ruling coalition largely composed of nationalist and socialist parties—this may be good for Morocco and establish a pattern for other Arab countries to follow.

The monarchy has permitted the PJD to engage in political activity since 1997. It is an Islamist group that, like the Palestinian Hamas organization, has historical and ideological links to Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood movement. Long ago, the PJD leadership decided that the Algerian Islamists got it all wrong when they chose an outright confrontation with the army. Instead, they admire the wise persistence and incrementalism of Turkey's Islamists,

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and they have demonstrated as much by their own integration into mainstream Moroccan politics. In the 2002 and 2003 parliamentary and municipal elections, for example, they accepted, albeit grudgingly, the regime's diktat to limit the number of districts they contested. They managed to elect 42 representatives to the parliament and to capture four municipalities in the local elections. In both instances, some of the PJD candidates publicly attacked the regime, but the party itself did not.

Why should the Islamists put up with electoral manipulation? Because the founders of the Islamist movements that combined to form the PJD made the strate-

the legislative elections. In the four municipalities the PJD runs, Shari'a law has not been enforced. The PJD has understood that the electorate demands good governance, not banning alcohol or imposing a particular dress code on women. No liquor shop has been closed, no woman has been forced to wear the veil. This suggests that if the party eventually gains power, Morocco and Western critics would not necessarily have to fear an Islamist party.

That is not to say that the way forward is simple. The PJD has to struggle for Islamic support against its Islamist competition, the Sufist-grounded Justice and Charity movement, whose leader, Abdessalam Yassine, refuses to recognize the monarchy's legitimacy and believes that the PJD props it up by participating in elections.

It's unlikely that the PJD will translate its promising opinion survey results into a parliamentary majority in this election. Extensive gerrymandering may leave the Islamists with the highest number of seats but without enough to form the next government. Will the monarchy nudge other parties to form a governing alliance with the PJD? It might be a smart



**Dress sense** Though conservative, the PJD does not dictate garb

gic decision that participating in politics, with the prospect of reaching power one day, was better than remaining oppositionists on the sidelines.

The PJD's strategy seems to be vindicated by its growing popularity and the relaxed attitude of Morocco's Western allies toward it. For example, in May 2006 Saad Eddine el-Othmani, the PJD secretary general, toured think tanks and met congressmen in Washington in a visit coordinated with the State Department. According to an American official, the trip was intended to show that the U.S. could do business with this kind of Islamist.

And it should. The PJD is among the most transparent political parties in the country. Its financial accounts are audited by a certified firm. It publishes an annual report on its parliamentary activity and organizes caucuses to select candidates for

move. It would bolster the King's image as a reformer, while in reality he would retain all the levers of power. But that would not necessarily be a good deal for the PJD. The monarchy is famous for co-opting its political opponents by allowing them to enjoy the trappings of power without real clout. Being in opposition allows the PJD to build its base without appearing to be doing the monarchy's bidding. It may be true that the Moroccan regime has postponed constitutional reform that would signal clear commitment to democratization. Nonetheless, its strategy of accommodating, rather than attacking, political Islam should be closely followed throughout the Middle East and the West. ■

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