

The Return of Liberals to Power in the Moroccan General Elections

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Brief Analysis

With influential billionaire Aziz Akhannouch announced as the new head of government, the former Moroccan prime minister and his party—the PJD—are grappling with a significant loss of power.

In power since 2011, the Justice and Development Party (PJD) has [collapsed](https://www.medias24.com/categorie/elections-2021/) (<https://www.medias24.com/categorie/elections-2021/>), dropping from 125 seats in the outgoing Assembly to 13. It is far behind its main rivals, the National Rally of Independents (RNI) with 102 seats, the Authenticity and Modernity Party (PAM) with 87 seats, both liberal, and the center-right Istiqlal Party (PI) with 81 seats out of 395 total.

The setback suffered by the Islamists was predictable; the PJD was at the end of the road in these elections. Its withdrawal from the management of Covid-19 in favour of so-called sovereignty ministries such as Finance, held by the the RNI, had alarmed the Moroccan people. The PJD also failed to oppose the rapprochement initiated by Mohammed VI with Israel, with the aim of obtaining U.S. recognition of its sovereignty over the Western Sahara.

But this defeat is above all a sign of the rise in power of the RNI, led by the influential billionaire Aziz Akhannouch, who is now tasked with forming a new government. The PJD was aware of the threat of the RNI, accusing Akhannouch of "flooding the political scene with money." Former head of government and ex-secretary general of the PJD Abdelilah Benkirane had likewise broadcast on September 5 an inflammatory video against the billionaire, stating that the latter "has no culture, no ideology, no historical past, no political party."

Electoral Successes

The RNI made a spectacular surge from 37 seats in 2016 to 102 seats this year, followed by PAM, which was founded by the current royal advisor Fouad Ali El Himma and won 87 seats—decreasing somewhat from the 102 seats it won five years ago. The RNI will be strongly represented not only in the lower house, but also in the communal and regional councils, far exceeding PAM, which has maintained its second position on the podium.

PAM's decrease can be understood in light of the new electoral quotient that limits the score of the major parties. This time, PAM was not able to win more than one seat in any one constituency, as had been the case in 2016. Yet PAM leader Abdellatif Ouahbi characterized (<https://leseco.ma/lapolitique/elections-legislatives-les-lecons-dun-scrutin-inedit.html>) the results as "very positive despite the period that the PAM has gone through which was marked by problems and disputes of an organic nature." Regarding the third-largest party, Istiqlal, the secretary general of the party, Nizar Baraka who won hands-down in the district of Larache seems satisfied with the verdict of the ballot box.

The First Secretary of the Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP), Driss Lachguer, likewise expressed satisfaction at his party's position and in "the rise" of his party's seats, having resurfaced after an extremely poor showing in 2011 and 2016. It has won just 34 seats, but this nevertheless represents 70% increase compared to the previous legislature. The USFP, which has been shaken by internal disputes, has tried as much as possible in recent years to turn the page to better understand the future.

The Popular Movement (MP), which won 28 seats in the legislative elections, remained stagnant at 28 seats, failing to return to the electoral weight it possessed before 2007. The party members were counting heavily on the new electoral quotient. This certainly enabled them to maintain their position, but it did not allow them to achieve their expected score.

The MP is trailed by the Party of Progress and Socialism (PPS), which managed to win 22 seats, a sharp rise from the past, despite the abject failure of its secretary general. Like Al-Othmani, PPS secretary general Nabil Benabdellah was defeated in Rabat. These progressives will finally be able to form a parliamentary group in the lower house.

The major winners RNI and PAM are moderately liberal parties seen as having close ties to the palace. The third surprise is that the nationalist-conservative, right wing Independence Party (PI) has jumped to 81 seats from 46 in 2016. The results are to the great pleasure, no doubt, of King Mohammed VI, who closed the Islamist parenthesis opened with the Arab Spring in 2011 in the polls.

The king, Mohammed VI, has appointed Akhannouch to form a government for a five-year term, succeeding Al-Othmani. In 2011, Morocco adopted a new constitution that gave broad prerogatives to parliament and the government. However, decisions and directions in key sectors continue to come from the king's initiatives.

The Minister of Agriculture since 2007, RNI head Akhannouch played a key role in the previous government, controlling important portfolios such as the economy, finance, and industry. On Thursday, he hailed "a victory for democracy" and "an explicit expression of the popular will for change. "The PJD, for its part, described the election results as "incomprehensible, illogical and not reflecting the party's position on the political scene. "

The PJD responds

The PJD probably only became aware of what was coming for it at the last moment, a week before the official launch of the election campaign. On August 25, when the filing of candidacy declarations closed, it discovered that it had not managed to recruit candidates in all the constituencies, as the legislative elections were coupled with the municipal and regional elections.

The extent of the disaffection was confirmed in the cities that had allowed the PJD to make a difference in the two

previous legislative elections. While the Islamist party was supposed to rely on a loyal and mobilized electoral base, the PJD suffered a huge setback from a lack of voter turnout.

In contrast, the RNI began campaigning very early. RNI launched the program "100 days, 100 cities" in November 2019, designed to engage with the populations of Morocco's small and medium-sized cities. This long campaign regularly updates its Facebook page and has spent 300,000 dollars. On social networks, the party has bet on a program in line with these issues.

In light of their failure at the polls, the PJD leadership took "full political responsibility" and submitted its resignation on Thursday afternoon, September 9. Included in these resignations is Saad-Eddine Al-Othmani, the secretary general and head of the outgoing government, who failed to be re-elected as a deputy in his constituency in Rabat. Abdelilah Benkirane, former head of government and former secretary general of the PJD, had called on Mr. Al-Othmani to resign from the leadership earlier in the day, saying, "after learning of the painful defeat our party has suffered, (...) the party's secretary general [should] take responsibility and submit his resignation." According to a separate statement, the party will now switch to the opposition, its "natural position."

Observers are wondering whether the abject failure of the party at the polls will trigger the party's implosion. The next few days will be very difficult for the PJD, as the extent of the fall came as a real surprise for the most informed or pessimistic internal observers, who did not expect its electoral weight to be so diminished. The PJD's debacle will have a major impact on its future, especially as it will not even be able to form a parliamentary group in the House of Representatives.

Participation on the rise, but remains low

The electoral campaign in Morocco was particularly dulled by the constraints imposed by the fight against Covid-19 and the disaffection of part of the electorate towards the political class, leading to fears of a high abstention rate. Even so, the Ministry of the Interior announced a national voter participation rate of 50.35%, compared to the 43% of the previous elections, in part due to the inclusion of the more popular local elections for the first time. Another lesson is that the choice of holding a double vote on the same day - the deputies of the House of Representatives and the communal and regional elected officials - proved to be disappointing. However, turnout was relatively high in the southern regions of the country, which include the disputed Western Sahara territory.

It is also the first time that the distribution of seats in the House of Representatives will be calculated on the basis of the number of registered voters, not the number of voters. This new method of calculation is expected to disadvantage the large parties, to the benefit of the smaller parties. Only the PJD was opposed to it, saying it was "wronged".

Even so, there were more than 3 million new registrants compared to those on the 2016 electoral rolls, since the electorate is close to 18 million registrants, up 14.5% (17,983,490) from 15,702,592 in 2016.

Another factor to note is the increase in the average number of candidates for each seat. On average, there were five candidates for each seat in the communal elections, 15 for the regional councils and 17 for the House of Representatives.

Female candidates also increased—representing 34.17% of the total number of candidates running for positions to the House of Representatives, 30% of the total number of candidates for the communal elections and 40% for the regional elections.

“Victory of democracy in the kingdom”

After the elections, all political parties will have to adopt a pact based on the report designed and presented by the king last May. The "New Development Model" (NMD) aims to curb the massive inequalities in the country. The report recalls that "the wealthiest 10% of Moroccans still have 11 times more wealth than the poorest 10%." After the economic hardships of the Covid period, the World Bank has predicted that Morocco's GDP will increase by **4.6% in 2021** (<https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2021/06/342823/world-bank-expects-moroccos-gdp-to-reach-4-6-growth-in-2021>) and 3.4% in 2022 (<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/123031623861349683/pdf/Morocco-Economic-Monitor-Building-Momentum-for-Reform.pdf>)—a figure that Mohammed VI hopes to double by 2035.

PAM leader Ouahbi characterized the elections as "the victory of democracy in the kingdom." In contrast, PJD's Saad-Eddine Al-Othmani pointed to the failure to deliver the election reports known as PV in some polling stations. He has now argued that this prevents the confirmation of the real results of the elections and to know the real results of the electoral process.

Yet the head of the observer mission of the association Cercle Eugène Delacroix, which brings together several French elected officials, noted the mobilization efforts of voters for this triple ballot. Moreover, the mission of the League of Arab States, which took part in the elections observation said that **this triple election** (<https://www.lesiteinfo.com/maroc/elections-au-maroc-ce-que-pense-la-ligue-arabe/>) was held "in accordance with the provisions of the legal framework of the electoral process and international standards and obligations," stressing that "these elections have allowed voters to freely perform their electoral duty." It also emphasized that no violation that could fundamentally affect the results of these elections was found, and expressed satisfaction with the preparation and organization of the electoral process which, according to the statement, was conducted in a calm and orderly manner. The Arab Parliament likewise said that the elections were held in neutrality, transparency, discipline, fluidity and security.

The director of Gender Concerns International, Sabra Bano, also praised Morocco for taking up the great challenge of organizing three elections on the same day despite the exceptional circumstances linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, and thanked the authorities for facilitating the mission of the international observers.

The ball is now in the camp of the RNI to conduct negotiations for the formation of the next government coalition. The president of the RNI party stated in a September 9 press briefing: "We are ready to work with confidence and responsibility with all parties that share with us their visions and their programs," and emphasized that the guiding principle is to present the alternative to which the Moroccans aspire. The party's electoral program will be the basis for negotiations with other political parties to build a strong and homogeneous majority. According to Akhannouch, the present government formation needs to make a "break with the past." ❖

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