Safety-Valve Elections and the Arab Spring: The Weakening (and Resurgence) of Morocco’s Islamist Opposition Party

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What purpose do elections serve in authoritarian states? Scholars often describe these elections as “safety valves” to contain opposition groups. Though we often use this safety valve terminology, it remains an abstract concept without sufficient empirical testing. In a study of the 2009 local elections in Morocco, I show how this safety-valve process played out in real politics. This article makes the case that the Moroccan regime undertook activities in an effort to weaken the Justice and Development Party (PJD), an Islamist opposition party. Using 20 original interviews and over 100 Arabic primary documents, I delineate the ways in which regime elites manipulated electoral rules and formal institutions, especially loyalist political parties, in an attempt to undermine the Islamists’ power between 2007 and 2010. I also examine how Arab Spring unrest turned back many of these efforts, empowering the PJD to secure a sweeping victory in the 2011 parliamentary elections. I conclude by discussing how scholars may reconsider safety-valve elections in authoritarian regimes as sequenced processes rather than one-time events. This case study of Morocco generates a new theory of safety-valve elections testable in other contexts.

Keywords authoritarian elections, Islamism, Justice and Development Party (PJD), Morocco, Party of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM)

After practicing terrorism in the 1970s and 1980s, Islamists in the Moroccan Justice and Development Party (Parti de la Justice et du Développement or “PJD”) gave up political violence and began competing in elections.1 In its first electoral contest as an independent political party, the 2002 parliamentary elections, the PJD garnered 13% of valid votes cast. The Islamist party’s power slightly decreased after the 2007 parliamentary elections when it captured 11% of valid votes. By 2009, however, the PJD’s electoral support had significantly declined. The party won only 5.5% of valid votes in that year’s local elections, finishing fifth overall.2 Why was this Islamist opposition party so successful during the first years of the 21st century and what

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explains its sharp decline in the 2009 local elections? How, then, did popular protests from the Arab Spring help the PJD regain its footing by the November 2011 parliamentary elections to secure the biggest electoral victory of its political history at 27% of valid votes?

Formal political institutions within democratic states differ from those within authoritarian regimes. While interest groups, political parties, and elections serve to aggregate citizen preferences in democracies, such institutions often serve other functions within authoritarian regimes. Rather than representing their members’ interests as in democracies, professional associations are managed in authoritarian states to ensure they become incorporated into pro-regime coalitions. Media laws, which protect journalists in democracies, defend regime interests by permitting forums for citizens to release discontent within state-specified limits. Within this vein, political parties are allowed to generate an impression of pluralism, but are not afforded sufficient freedom to challenge a regime’s authority.

Elections in democracies also differ from those in authoritarian regimes. Elections have occurred with increasing prevalence in the Middle East since 1980, despite the fact that most states in the region remain non-democracies. With the exception of Tunisia following its recent revolution, nearly all Arab countries fall under the rubric of electoral authoritarian regimes. Electoral authoritarian regimes employ elections to support an “institutional facade of democracy,” which helps to sustain and legitimize their rule. By managing elections within their borders, Daniel Brumberg argues, authoritarian regimes create a “protracted cycle” whereby leaders “widen or narrow the boundaries of political participation” in response to political threats facing their regimes. This strategy has made authoritarian regimes especially in the Middle East “far more durable than once imagined.”

Scholars hypothesize that regimes use authoritarian elections to buttress their rule in three ways. First, they believe that authoritarian elections provide opportunities for regimes to distribute patronage, buying off the support of citizens and opposition alike. Second, scholars think such elections serve as spectacles whereby regimes assert their dominance through propaganda and other public displays. Third, scholars characterize authoritarian elections as opportunities for opposition movements to release political energy through “pressure-valve” or “safety-valve” elections. Jason Brownlee finds that this third theory, the safety-valve metaphor for authoritarian elections, “remains one of the most widely applied frameworks for comprehending voting” in Middle East politics.

Many political scientists support the safety-valve metaphor for authoritarian elections. Though we regularly use the term “safety valve” to describe authoritarian elections, the concept remains underspecified. In this article, I specify the concept and subsequently test it in an empirical case study of the Islamist PJD’s participation in the 2009 local elections in Morocco. I show precisely how authoritarian elections work as safety valves in real politics. I delineate the ways in which elites can use authoritarian elections to sideline opposition groups.

Authoritarian leaders use elections to direct, contain, and weaken discontent. This is “an attempt,” as Quintan Wiktorowicz explains, to “channel political participation into discrete, state-delineated political space” that regimes can subsequently manage to impose a ceiling on opposition groups’ power. Authoritarian regimes create nonviolent outlets to draw the opposition into formal politics and away from political violence. By giving opposition groups alternative channels to advocate for their beliefs, such as participating in elections, regimes develop nonviolent vehicles
through which opponents think (whether correctly or incorrectly) that they can attain their goals. Then, once these opposition groups have been incorporated into politics, regimes manipulate the electoral system and formal institutions to cap their power. Incumbent regimes thereby perpetuate the power asymmetry between themselves and their opposition.15

In the Middle East, regimes have used authoritarian elections as safety valves against Islamist groups. Several examples demonstrate how they have been employed to deflate Islamists’ power, rendering them tamed political actors.16 The 1987 Egyptian election, for instance, brought nearly 100 opposition deputies into parliament, giving Islamists an opportunity to release energy by expressing discontent within the legislature.17 Likewise, after the 1989 Jordanian parliamentary elections in which independent Islamist candidates secured an unexpected victory that threatened the regime, it set up new electoral rules in the National Charter of 1991 to integrate these Islamists into formal politics as a political party prior to the 1993 elections.18 The regime, as Schirin Fathi states, could then “manipulate (control/predict) electoral results” through redistricting that prevented Islamists from gaining too much power while preserving Jordan’s façade of a democratic system.19

In addition to parliamentary elections on the national level, authoritarian regimes often use local elections as successful safety valves. Regimes allow “decentralization and democratic openness at the local level,” as Martha Brill Olcott and Marina Ottaway argue, to reinforce their rule by creating safety valves for the opposition to “express its discontent without affecting the government” on the national level.20 Islamists may express their discontent within local governments, but such calls for reform may not trickle up to regime leaders.

Yet, in other cases, governments have not effectively utilized local elections as safety valves. After the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) won 55% of votes in the 1990 local elections in Algeria, the regime changed the electoral rules by introducing a two-ballot system meant to disadvantage the Islamists in the 1992 parliamentary elections. Due to the “ill-conceived drafting of the electoral law,” the new institutional arrangement unexpectedly “magnified the success” of the Islamist party allowing them to capture 188 of 232 parliamentary seats in the election’s first round.21 The regime canceled the election’s second round, prompting a 10-year civil war resulting in over 200,000 deaths. An effective formula of manipulated political institutions and electoral rules could not be devised for holding safety-valve elections while also protecting the interests of incumbent regime leaders.22

How Did the 2009 Local Elections in Morocco Act as a Safety Valve?

Morocco, a hereditary monarchy led by King Mohammed VI, has held local and parliamentary elections since 1963, but it neither meets the minimum standards for democracy nor exhibits sufficient internal competitiveness to be considered a competitive authoritarian state.23 Even though Morocco is an authoritarian regime, it does provide a space for political parties to operate, which has led to the formation of over 30 rightist, leftist, socialist, communist, and Berber-allied political parties.24 These parties include opposition groups, like the Islamist PJD, as well as loyalist political parties—often created by the regime. King Hassan II, the former king, for instance, facilitated the founding of the Front for the Defense of Constitutional Institutions (le front de défense des institutions constitutionnelles or “FDIC”) in
1963 under the leadership of his Minister of the Interior and close advisor, Reda Guedira. The FDIC integrated three different loyalist political parties into one royalist front.\textsuperscript{25} It was “a heterogeneous coalition of palace personalities and traditional notables” formed to “undercut support” for opposition socialist movements that had threatened regime stability, according to Clement Henry.\textsuperscript{26} Even Guedira himself, as John Waterbury explains, “did not pretend that the FDIC was any more than a device to forestall” the opposition.\textsuperscript{27}

When the FDIC collapsed in 1965, the former king encouraged his brother-in-law, Ahmed Osman, to found the National Rally of Independents (RNI) in 1978 for the same purpose.\textsuperscript{28} In fostering this “state-managed pluralism” with loyalist political parties and controlled elections, Daniel Brumberg contends the Moroccan regime has developed a “safety valve” that “releases steam while enhancing its capacities to divide the opposition.”\textsuperscript{29}

For the 2009 local elections in Morocco, the safety-valve process occurred in five steps from 2007 to 2010. First, formal electoral rules were changed in a manner that disadvantaged the Islamist PJD. These changes made it difficult for the PJD to win elections outside urban areas. Second, a new loyalist political party—the Party of Authenticity and Modernity or the “PAM”—was formed to counterbalance against the PJD. PAM founder Fouad Ali al-Himma, like Reda Geudira and Ahmed Osman before him, had close proximity to the palace as former Deputy Minister of the Interior from 1999–2007. He was also the special political counselor and childhood friend of current King Mohammed VI. The PAM benefited from unenforced formal electoral rules that would have otherwise impeded the creation of this palace party.\textsuperscript{30} There was little uncertainty that “the PAM was the voice of the master,” as one former PAM activist asserted. “It was the king’s party and everybody knew it.”\textsuperscript{31}

Third, corruption laws were selectively enforced against the PJD. These corruption allegations, emerging against PJD local officials, were meant to tarnish the Islamist party’s public image prior to the 2009 local elections. Fourth, Himma’s PAM muscled the PJD out of multiparty coalitions the Islamist party had formed to come to power in local governments across the country during the 2009 local elections. Fifth, the PJD’s reputation was further damaged when the Interior Ministry and the PAM took advantage of scandals related to the 2009 elections to embarrass PJD officials. By this time, few could doubt that, as Farid Boussaid explains, the monarchy was employing the PAM as a “bulwark against the rise of the PJD” as it had been using past loyalist political parties against socialist opposition movements in the 1960s and 1970s.\textsuperscript{32}

Although the PJD had become known by voters as the most ideologically consistent and organizationally effective political party in Morocco during the 2007 parliamentary elections, these regime activities were used to weaken the Islamist party.\textsuperscript{33} These actions associated with the 2009 local elections sought to gradually deflate the Islamist party’s political power, preventing potential mobilization against the regime.

Such efforts to restrain the PJD’s political power had failed by 2011, however. Unrest emerging from Morocco’s Arab Spring overturned the regime’s strategy to weaken the Islamist party. Though the monarchy had invested considerable resources to use political institutions to undercut the Islamist party, these activities proved to be unsustainable in the face of popular protests and mass uprisings demanding more reform.
To describe how authoritarian elections work as safety valves, this article employs qualitative process-tracing. This methodology reveals the micro-level interactions between political actors that cause a phenomenon. Process-tracing shows causal mechanisms through collecting the "finest level of detail observable," thereby recreating "the sequencing of happenings leading up to an event." Such methods contribute to political science by discovering deeper, more precise causal relationships.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. In the first section, I describe the origins of the PJD and how it became the most organized Moroccan political party before the 2007 parliamentary elections. In the second section, I explain the five factors between 2007 and 2010 that weakened the Islamist party’s power before, during, and immediately after the 2009 local elections. This specifies how safety-valve elections work in Morocco. In the third section, I outline how unrest from Morocco’s Arab Spring defeated these efforts to restrain the Islamist party’s political power. Finally, I discuss broader implications of this case study for scholars of authoritarianism.

**From Terrorism to Elections: Origins of the Justice and Development Party**

Abdelkrim Mouti, a high school administrator, founded the PJD’s organizational predecessor *al-shabiba al-Islamiyya* (the Islamic Youth) in the early 1970s. The Islamic Youth, according to Michael Willis, had a “clandestine and subversive status” outside of formal politics, expressing a “confrontational attitude” toward the monarchy that was both “belligerent and critical.” Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Mouti encouraged his Islamists to engage in political violence to establish an Islamic state. Through the group’s newspaper, *Al-Mujahid*, he called upon its members to adopt a “new revolutionary line” following Khomeini’s 1979 revolution, including “an orientation towards a military option and coups against the political system.”

The Islamic Youth practiced terrorism during this period. In 1975, Mouti and several Islamists carried out the assassination of a Moroccan socialist leader, Omar Benjelloun. Later, in 1984, Hakim Bilqasim and other Islamists in the Islamic Youth were arrested when they sought to smuggle arms from Algeria. The Islamists had also distributed pamphlets in Casablanca in support of food riots, which had left 60 dead. The U.S. ambassador described the 1984 riots as byproducts of “deeper dissatisfaction among young people drawn to Islamic fundamentalism.”

Other Islamist opposition movements sprang from this dissatisfaction in Moroccan society. Like the Islamic Youth, many used violence to pursue their objectives. The Moroccan Combat Group launched a series of bombings against targets in Casablanca and other cities. In 1994, the group kidnapped and murdered two tourists in Marrakesh. Salafia Jihadia, a branch of al-Qaeda in the Maghreb, launched an attack in 2003 in Casablanca, resulting in 45 deaths. The group has also been blamed for the recent March 2011 bombings in Marrakesh.

Other Islamist organizations, such as the Justice and Charity Movement (*al-'Adl wa al-Ihsan*), call for the Moroccan monarchy’s abolition and claims to pursue it by nonviolent means alone. Although the group’s leader, Sheikh Abdesslam Yassine, rejects terrorism in his writings, the monarchy has apprehended Justice and Charity activists for violent activities such as illegal arms smuggling in 1995 and for torturing a police informant in 2010.
Despite their opposition to its rule, the monarchy saw Moroccan Islamists during this time period as useful counterweights to militant socialism, whose adherents had sought to assassinate former King Hassan II in 1971 and 1972. The regime also viewed the Islamists as a source for fighters in the guerilla war against the Soviets in Afghanistan, encouraging 600 of them to train in al-Qaeda camps in the 1970s and 1980s.\(^{43}\) In the late 1980s, Abdelilah Benkirane became the Islamic Youth’s leader and cooperated closely with a monarchical loyalist, Abdelkrim al-Khatib. Khatib administered the royal office that funded Moroccan Islamist fighters en route to Afghanistan. “Moroccan Islamists who went to Afghanistan,” as Moroccan expert Mohamed Darif explains, “passed through Khatib’s office and traveled under his patronage.”\(^{44}\)

After his experience working with Islamists, Abdelkrim Khatib received permission in 1992 from the monarchy to integrate Benkirane’s Islamist activists into a small secular political party, the Popular Democratic and Constitutional Movement (\textit{Mouvement Populaire Démocratique et Constitutionnel} or “MPDC”). The number of Islamist activists within the party gradually increased until it made up the organization’s governing council, which subsequently voted to change the MPDC’s name to the PJD in 1998. Now established as a new and independent political party, the PJD co-opted over 200 smaller Islamist organizations that had been active in Morocco since the 1970s.

The Moroccan Islamists, as Michael Willis writes, had secured a “long-standing objective,” a “political party of their own.”\(^{45}\) Moreover, the regime likely reasoned that the 600 Moroccan mujahideen returning from Afghanistan now had a party with which they could identify rather than turning to violence to advocate for their policy interests. The PJD remains the only legal channel for Moroccan Islamists, who might otherwise support violent groups, to participate in elections and the political system.

**A Better Party: The PJD and Its Political Party Rivals**

Despite its violent origins in the Islamic Youth, today’s PJD has turned away from terrorism and uses formal politics to advocate for change. The PJD’s senior leadership includes current secretary general Abdelilah Benkirane, former secretary general Saadeddine Othmani, vice secretary general Lehcen Daoudi, vice secretary general Abdullah Baha, and former parliamentary bloc leader Mostafa Ramid. Ramid, the party’s most outspoken leader, directs the PJD’s Casablanca office whereas Benkirane, Othmani, and Daoudi lead its Rabat headquarters. The party’s rank-and-file membership includes urban professionals, petit bourgeoisie, and religious voters. Its supporters sympathize with the Reform and Renewal religious movement with which the PJD shares organizational linkages.\(^{46}\)

Although the Islamist party has renounced terrorism, it still shares an ideological lineage with Islamist groups in the Middle East that have employed political violence to promote their causes. The party adopts a \textit{marji’iyya Islamiyya}—or an Islamic frame of reference—influenced by Said Qutb, Hasan al-Banna, and other Islamist political philosophers to understand crises surrounding them.\(^{47}\)

In contrast to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, however, who rally around the slogan \textit{Islam is the solution}, the PJD “doesn’t say Islam is the solution,” according to Lehcen Daoudi.\(^{48}\) “We have a genuine economic and social program,” he
emphasized. “We have an Islamic frame of reference, but when we take up our mission that is scientific. The Islamic frame of reference is one thing, while the measures to implement it are something else.” The PJD’s Islamic perspective has helped it develop a clear and consistent ideology criticizing social crises, such as alcoholism and abortion. Party leaders maintain citizens can ameliorate these problems through closer adherence to Islamic values, which has allowed the PJD to brand itself to voters as a Muslim version of the German Christian Democratic Party.

The PJD competes against 30 other political parties. Given Morocco’s 60% illiteracy rate, these parties use creative symbols during campaigns to make themselves identifiable and appealing to voters. The Independence Party uses a scale, representing justice, law, and order. The PJD has chosen a picture of an oil lamp radiating light. The lamp symbolizes the party’s commitment to knowledge, transparency, and economic development (i.e., the “light” portion of the lamp symbol) and its dedication to traditional social values (the “antique” part). Other parties have chosen more ambiguous symbols: one is left scratching his head upon hearing that the National Democratic Party and the Democratic Covenant Party, respectively, use the symbols of an umbrella and a minivan to inspire supporters.

Despite these attempts to cue voters, apathy towards these political parties has grown. In 2001, one year before the PJD began its first electoral campaign as a fully independent political party, only 19% of Moroccan poll respondents said that they had either “a great deal” or “quite a lot of trust” in their political parties. According to PJD vice secretary general Abdullah Baha, the parties have become “similar in their discourse and names and citizens have difficulty distinguishing between them, weakening their trust in the parties.”

Citizens see the parties as ideologically incoherent, disorganized, and corrupt. As Mustapha Safar, a political journalist, explains: “Moroccans vote for individual candidates rather than party platforms, not like in America. The party itself is meaningless, only a grouping of individuals.”

The Islamist PJD is the exception. Its members are seen as more disciplined than activists in the other parties. The PJD’s effectiveness, according to PJD member of parliament Abdelkader Amara, comes not only from its superior “internal organization” but also from its motivated “organizers,” who take their political mission seriously by launching modern campaigns to attract voters.

Even non-PJD sympathizers agree with this opinion. “In terms of having a large constituency that they communicate with, or being what a modern political party should be,” as USAID-Morocco Governance Director Ted Lawrence says, “the PJD is the closest of any of the existing Moroccan parties.” In focus groups conducted with Moroccan voters prior to the 2007 parliamentary elections, the National Democratic Institute found that the PJD had the clearest political branding. Moroccan voters could easily identify the PJD’s symbol, leadership, and policy proposals. Additionally, as the National Democratic Institute’s director Jeff England noted, the focus group participants regularly characterized the party as nichane, translated as morally straight in Moroccan Arabic dialect. “Most of the parties are accused of corruption and lying to voters,” the focus group report relays, “with the exception of the PJD.”

Before the 2007 parliamentary elections, these characteristics of ideological consistency, organizational effectiveness, and moral integrity boosted the Islamists’ popularity. Polling predicted a large victory for the PJD at 47% of voters favoring it to the six other major parties. In the two years following the 2007 elections, however, the PJD’s rising political support would be undercut.
Changing the Game’s Rules: Manipulation of Formal Electoral Rules

The first factor that slowed the Islamist party’s growth prior to the 2009 local elections was a package of electoral reforms introduced in late 2008. These changes established a two-tier system for the local elections that created a party list for candidates within cities with a population over 35,000 while still retaining a candidate-centric system in lower population areas. As a result of the reforms, 85% of municipalities were classified as “rural” zones under the candidate-centric procedures, which were disadvantageous for Islamist candidates. This two-tiered arrangement prevented the PJD from winning in rural and village electoral districts, buttressing the local pro-monarchy notables that often lead parties within these regions.

The second factor that weakened the PJD during the 2009 local elections was that Fouad Ali al-Himma took advantage of unenforced formal electoral rules to create a loyalist political party, the Party of Authenticity and Modernity (or “PAM”). After winning a parliamentary seat as an independent candidate in the 2007 elections in his home district of Rahamneh, Himma began building the political party under the auspices of an anti-Islamist social movement called the Movement for All Democrats. He subsequently established the PAM as an official political party in August 2008.

Himma founded the PAM with the intent to weaken the Islamist PJD. Ali Belhaj, a PAM leader, explained: “Because the other parties were so underdeveloped, the PJD was more efficient and was taking more and more power. We thought that this was dangerous. The PJD was becoming powerful not because of its popularity but because of the emptiness of the rest of the parties. Nature hates emptiness. The PJD filled this emptiness, and the PAM wanted to be there with a modern, secular vision to fill that emptiness instead of the Islamists.”

In the process of building the PAM, Himma benefited from the fact that laws against the practice of candidate headhunting—known as transhumance—remain unenforced. This allowed Himma to recruit established politicians to his new political party. Five separate parties merged to form the PAM, in addition to some notable political celebrities, such as Ilyas el-Omari, a former Marxist who had been imprisoned for five years during the 1980s for supporting Berber separatism. “The PAM is a party of opportunists,” Ihsan al-Hafizi, a political journalist, said. “They left their parties to get closer to Himma, who they think is close to the king. Some of these senior politicians, especially the former Marxists and human rights activists, sat in jail for years for their beliefs.”

*Transhumance* translates from French as “grazing” (i.e., as in grazing sheep). In Morocco, it describes how politicians switch from one party to another to “graze” for opportunities to access patronage. Typically, a politician leaves one party for a second one that he perceives to be closer to the *makhzan*, the monarchy’s special preserve of state enterprises and licensing agencies, which distributes clientelist privileges. *Transhumant* politicians, as the 1996 Moroccan constitution stipulates, cannot compete in the elections immediately following a switch of parties. This legal ban on transhumance is intended to stabilize the political party system by establishing penalties for politicians who do not remain loyal to their parties. The PAM is only the latest of many political parties created through *transhumance*. It built Reda Guedira and Ahmed Osman’s parties that were used to combat socialist movements in the 1960s and 1970s.
The third step taken to sideline the PJD was the selective enforcement corruption laws meant to tarnish the PJD’s public image of moral integrity. One incident involved the PJD mayor of Meknes, Aboubakr Belkora. In February 2009, five months prior to the local elections, Belkora was removed from his position under accusations of mismanagement and corruption. The Auditor General of the Moroccan Interior Ministry’s Agency for Territorial Administration had conducted an audit of local governments, citing Belkora for permitting his wife to construct a building that violated the housing code. Similar accusations of low-level corruption have been lodged against PJD vice mayor of Salé Jamaa el-Moatassim, who was imprisoned, as well as PJD officials in Marrakech.

Such corruption pervades local governments in Morocco. The Interior Ministry, however, appeared selective in which cases of local corruption it chose to prosecute. It seemed to target PJD officials and did not consistently pursue cases against all politicians identified within the annual report. Responding to the allegations, Lehcen Daoudi described the Belkora affair as “purely political” and “inappropriate” given the approaching local elections.68

In the period leading up to the 2009 local elections in Morocco, formal electoral rules were changed, ignored, and selectively enforced. This had the effect of prearranging the electoral environment against the PJD. It would face difficulties retaining and expanding its support base. Despite these obstacles, the PJD continued to campaign to maximize its electoral potential. Given these developments, however, the party faced an uphill battle on election day.

Triumphant Tractor, Laggard Lamp: The June 12, 2009 Local Elections

Himma’s PAM, sporting its tractor logo, garnered 22% of local government seats and came in first according to the gross number of votes cast on election day. The PJD received 5.5% of seats in fifth place, trailing the Independence Party (20%), the National Rally of Independents (14%), the socialist USFP (12%), and the Popular Movement (8%). Current PJD secretary general Benkirane downplayed the party’s weak electoral performance by emphasizing their strong showing in several key large cities, especially Tangier, Casablanca, and Rabat. A consensus developed that the Islamists had underperformed and the PAM had surged in popularity. “The PJD had had electoral ambitions in Tangier, Meknes, Kenitra and other cities,” as one journalist described. “But, the PJD came back from hunting without success. For this hunting trip, they hadn’t taken the right bullets—one does not hunt a wild pig with the bullets to be used for pheasant.”69

The political parties began negotiating to form coalitions to rule Morocco’s local governments. Local governments are formed around a majority coalition of two or more political parties that subsequently elects the city’s mayor and city councilors for a six-year term. Mayor Mohammed Sajid of the Constitutionalist Union, for example, headed Casablanca’s local government from 2003–2009, supported by a coalition of the National Rally for Independents, the Independence Party, and the PJD. Following the 2009 local elections, all political parties scrambled to gain a position within their city governments’ coalitions. Given its poor electoral results, the PJD fought hard to secure positions within local governments, fixing its eyes on forming coalitions in cities with populations over 35,000 where it had achieved the most electoral success.
On June 17, 2009, Benkirane announced a decision from Rabat headquarters that his party would seek political alliances with the socialist USFP. Despite being ideological rivals, he said the Islamists and socialists shared a commitment to democracy and anti-corruption. The two parties, in a joint statement, emphasized that they sought to create a “strong and cohesive alliance” to come to power and administer local governments. The parties set the tone for this alliance in Rabat where the Islamists and socialists entered into a partnership, backing socialist candidate and former Finance Minister Fathallah Oualalou for mayor.

Mustapha Khalfi, editor of the PJD newspaper, At-Tajdid, explained the motivation behind the Islamist-socialist alliance. “We have a close relationship with the leftists,” he said. “Morocco faces two major problems: corruption and democratic development. Our alliance with USFP is not an alliance based on ideology, but on common values—fighting corruption and protecting democracy.” Given that socialist ministers in Prime Minister Driss Jettou’s previous administration (2002–2007) had tried to ban the PJD following the May 2003 terrorist attacks in Casablanca, however, the irony of a new political alliance between the two former enemies was palpable to both analysts and ordinary citizens alike.

Outside Rabat, the PJD showed even less ideological consistency than the surprising instructions from headquarters to ally with the socialist USFP. PJD local candidates, in desperation, began entering into coalitions with political parties of all ideological stripes—socialists, rightists, leftists, monarchy loyalists, and non-loyalists. As Lehcen Daoudi explained, the regime-sponsored electoral re-districting laws have “forced the PJD to limit its electoral map, submitting candidates for only 40% of districts. The only real competition is for victory in the big cities.” He emphasized that the PJD would seek alliances with any political party regardless of ideology to compensate for the Islamists’ weak electoral results in the countryside.

In the northern city of Tetouan, the Islamists formed an alliance with the socialists and elected an Islamist candidate for mayor, Mohamed Ida Ammar. In Settat, a city 30 minutes south of Casablanca, the PJD built a ruling coalition with National Rally of Independents and the Popular Movement. In the coastal resort town of Agadir, the PJD joined forces again with the socialists. In Fès, PJD candidates supported the Independence Party and its mayor Hamid Chaabat, who had previously described the Islamist PJD as a “cancer” he wanted to “excise” from the Moroccan body politic.

These ideologically contradictory alliances were criticized as “illogical,” “unnatural,” “tossed salad-like” and, simply, “strange.” One observer characterized the alliance between the Islamists and socialists in Agadir as akin to a partnership between “the Prophet Mohammed and the Israelis.” The Islamist party had drifted away from its traditional ideological moorings. It abandoned its cohesive Islamic frame of reference for political pragmatism after failing to secure the votes it needed to control local governments.

The PAM went on the offensive against the PJD during this period of ideological contradictions. The PAM sought to botch the PJD’s efforts to assume governing responsibilities after the 2009 local election. It used its perceived closeness to the monarchy to convince other parties to break their alliances with the PJD in cities both large and small. It robbed the Islamist party of governing authority it had won through electoral mandates. The PAM wanted to marginalize the Islamist party that had grown too powerful via the ballot box.
In Tangier, the PJD garnered 10 seats in the local government compared with 9 for the National Rally of Independents, 6 for the Popular Movement, 4 for the Independence Party, and 4 for the PAM. Several smaller, local parties also received between 4 and 6 seats. Though PJD leaders in Tangier were overjoyed by their party’s electoral mandate, they needed cooperation from two other parties to form a coalition of 22 seats to capture the city hall. They began negotiations with the National Rally of Independents and Popular Movement, who indicated they would form a coalition with the Islamists. Working backdoor channels, the PAM formed an alliance comprised of five parties that outmaneuvered the PJD and shut it out of its leading position in Tangier City Hall. Himma had appeared in Tangier in person, encouraging the parties to exclude the PJD from power and support the PAM’s candidate. In a statement on the loss of their coalition, the Islamists described the affair as a “betrayal of a charter of hope and reform” for the city of Tangier.  

A similar story unfolded in Casablanca’s local government. As in Tangier, the PAM moved to exclude the PJD from the coalition. It formed an alliance with the Constitutionalist Union and the Popular Movement, rallying behind mayor Mohamed Sajid’s re-election campaign. Though Sajid had allowed the PJD to join the city hall’s previous coalition, he turned his back on the Islamists and allied with Himma’s party. Disgruntled by Sajid’s shift in loyalties, PJD representatives staged a midnight protest at Casablanca city hall where coalition negotiations were being held. They asserted their electoral right to be included in the governing coalition. The protest devolved into an aggressive shouting match with PJD members “not respecting rules of politeness” and hurling “street language” and “personal insults” at Himma and PAM candidates. This conflict culminated in the shattering of the glass ballot box used to collect votes. “It’s al-Himma who put us in this terrible situation,” one PJD representative shouted across the city council chamber during the scuffle. 

The uncouthness was not limited to PJD local activists, however. PJD leaders’ statements during the Casablanca city hall conflict also reflect the party’s increasing desperation during the 2009 local elections. “Mayor Sajid bows to al-Himma, and not to God,” as Mostafa Ramid proclaimed. Benkirane accused Himma of “practicing terrorism against the citizens” and “seeking to make the PAM the state’s party in a one-party state.” 

In smaller cities, the PAM exerted direct coercive pressure to weaken the PJD’s efforts to form coalitions. The PAM applied “pressure from above” on political parties to break their alliances with the PJD. In the area of Ibn Ahmed, for example, the PAM expelled one of its members from the party for entering into an alliance with the PJD. “By establishing coordination with the PJD,” the PAM local party official “had gone against Fouad Ali al-Himma’s decisions.” The PAM leadership accused him of exhibiting “disloyal party behavior” and acting “unilaterally” against the “decision of the majority.” The PAM had commenced an “operation of cleansing and purification of the party” to expel members who had built alliances with the Islamists.

The Politics of Embarrassment: The Aftaati Affair in Oujda

Political coercion against the PJD intensified in the city of Oujda. Situated 25 miles from the Algerian border, this city became the center of a national scandal in the days following the 2009 local election. The PJD had captured the highest number
of seats during the election, moving to form a coalition with the Popular Movement. Under pressure from Himma, however, the Popular Movement defected from its alliance with the PJD, pledging support for a coalition led by the PAM.

The Moroccan Interior Ministry, meanwhile, had taken more direct actions to spoil the PJD’s strategy to gain control of Oujda city hall. Two PJD campaign activists were attacked by police authorities. One of the two PJD activists, Noureddine Benbakr, suffered serious injuries. The dual Moroccan-French citizen fell into a temporary coma from blows to the head that caused hemorrhaging. While the “local security authorities were the authors of the aggression,” as Mostafa Ramid explained, the “central authorities, for their part, were certainly aware of what was happening and did not intervene to restore order.”

Himma reacted to PJD’s allegations of PAM complicity in the Oujda assault. Himma filed a libel suit against Benkirane, seeking to undermine his reputation among Moroccan voters. Through the media, he charged that the Islamist party’s secretary general had fostered “mistakes in public opinion” without providing material evidence. The most serious libel allegation stated that Benkirane claimed that “Fouad Ali al-Himma had resorted to using the state’s intelligence services to terminate alliances the PJD had formed with other parties in numerous cities, especially in the city of Oujda.” The libel suit also included complaints regarding insults Benkirane had used to describe Himma during the elections, such as “terrorist” and “exterminator.”

Meanwhile, back in Oujda, Noureddine Benbakr’s health remained in a precarious condition. His family feared they might lose him without surgery in France. Abdelaziz Aftaati, a local PJD chief in Oujda, contacted the French embassy asking for intervention on behalf of its dual-citizen. He sent a personal letter to the French ambassador, pleading for assistance in transporting Benbakr to Europe. Aftaati, with hindsight, described his actions as a “humanitarian initiative unrelated to the elections.” The ambassador, wanting to avoid impropriety, turned the letter over to the Interior Ministry.

Using the government-owned press agency, the Interior Ministry publicized the incident. They criticized Aftaati for his “irresponsible behavior.” Aftaati’s actions were not only “totally unacceptable and unjustified” from a legal standpoint, but they also were treasonous in that they sought to involve foreigners in a domestic political process “that only concerns Moroccans.” Another government statement characterized Aftaati’s conduct as “not acceptable or reasonable in any circumstance or from any political or moral perspective.”

The PJD’s secretariat general called an emergency meeting to respond. It released a statement emphasizing that the party recognizes that “electoral competition is an internal affair” and that it is “unacceptable under any condition or any pretext to request foreign intervention” during such a crisis. Defending his party, however, Benkirane maintained that the “administration of the city of Oujda had been taken from the PJD by force.” It was an “outrage,” like a scene from a “horror film.”

Yet, despite the PJD’s efforts to distance itself from Aftaati, the incident put the Islamists in the hot seat. One Arabic newspaper, al-Masaa, described the Interior Ministry as “targeting PJD party leaders” through the Aftaati affair, while also stating that “Himma’s fingers were not far away from the scandal.” Himma, speaking at a PAM press conference, demanded that the PJD “apologize to the Moroccan people” for the Aftaati affair, because the voters had trusted “its integrity and its
ability to represent them in politics. Now, Himma contended, the Islamists had violated the voters’ trust. He decried the “absence of any legal punishment against” the PJD for its actions and accused them of “bullying” and “discriminating” against ordinary Moroccans by using their “foreign nationalities as political cover.”

While neither PAM’s suit against Benkirane nor the Aftaati affair resulted in legal prosecution, the allegations damaged the PJD’s good reputation during the 2009 local elections. In this phase of Morocco’s safety-valve election, Himma, the PAM, and the Interior Ministry released statements in the media intent on diluting the Islamist party’s moral image among Moroccan voters.

**Fall of the Palace Party, Rise of the Islamists: Morocco’s Arab Spring**

Events before, during, and after the 2009 local elections highlight how regime elites sought to use electoral rules and formal institutions to manage the power of a rising Islamist opposition party following the 2007 parliamentary elections. They were especially reliant on a loyalist political party—Fouad Ali al-Himma’s PAM—that was created to weaken the PJD.

Since the 2009 local elections, the Arab world has undergone important changes. During the Arab Spring, youth, liberals, Islamists, and ordinary citizens have taken to the streets to demand political reform. In Tunisia and Egypt, unrest led to the downfall of the countries’ aging dictators, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak. Both Ben Ali and Mubarak had used authoritarian elections in the past as safety valves to control opposition groups and pacify citizen discontent. As the opposition intensified against their regimes, the dictators offered elections to placate protesters. In January 2011, Ben Ali forced his government to resign, declined to become a candidate in the next presidential elections, and agreed to hold parliamentary elections. Mubarak, in his last days, offered to organize new elections and not compete in the next presidential contest. Despite these statements, however, the protesters rejected the dictators’ promises for new elections and the demonstrations continued until both Ben Ali and Mubarak were driven from power. While it is difficult to know whether these elections would have been free and fair or safety valves to manage discontent, protesters had insufficient trust in the regimes to wait to see the results.

Tunisia and Egypt’s revolutions have affected Morocco. The February 20th movement for change—a band of youth, leftist, and Islamist activists—organizes weekly protests in Moroccan cities. This opposition social movement is decentralized and leaderless with over 27 different websites proclaiming to represent the Moroccan demonstrators. In some northern cities, such as Tangier, Hoceima, and Larache, February 20th protesters have called for King Mohammed IV’s ouster and riots have become violent, leading to five deaths and the destruction of 33 public buildings in spring 2011. In general, however, the protesters have demonstrated peacefully, calling upon the king to implement political reform and reduce corruption.

Much public anger has been directed at the PAM, as the regime’s anointed political party. Protestors denounced the “thugs against equality,” targeting specifically the PAM’s Fouad Ali al-Himma and Ilyas el-Omari. As demonstrators announced “game over” and dégagé for Mubarak and Ben Ali in Cairo and Tunis, they chanted “the end” for the PAM in the streets of Rabat.

The PAM did not immediately feel the effects of the new political conditions. It behaved as it had prior to the beginning of the Arab Spring. Even after popular
protests had started in Tunisia and Egypt, Himma claimed that the PAM was aiming to secure 33% of votes in the upcoming November 2011 parliamentary elections. The loyalist party continued to use transhumance to draw in politicians to enlarge its ranks, attracting enough parliamentary members to become the second largest party in the legislature by late January 2011. Himma tried to reinvigorate his Movement for All Democrats social movement to reinforce his political party. He organized a special political conference to rally pro-regime elites a week prior to the beginning of the February 20th movement protests. Wanting to portray itself as on the side of reform, the PAM even petitioned the regime to open up investigations regarding police crackdowns that occurred against peaceful protesters in Casablanca.

As the protests against the regime accelerated, however, the effects on the PAM began to sink in. In parliament and a number of local governments, such as Rabat, Tangier, and Dora, PAM officials resigned from the party. They rejoined the parties they had initially left through transhumance or enrolled in other loyalist parties, such as the RNI or the Popular Movement. Leaders within these loyalist parties, moreover, asked their parliament members not to cooperate with the PAM in drafting laws in the legislature. Mohamed Laenser, secretary general of the Popular Movement, described PAM leaders as “not understanding the new phase of politics” that Morocco had entered.

The PJD has not directly participated in the February 20th movement’s popular protests against the regime and the PAM. Benkirane, the PJD secretary general, issued an internal administrative decision forbidding PJD members from joining the protests. He believed that the Islamist party could realize reform through political institutions by contributing to the drafting of the new July 2011 constitution.

The Islamists have, however, used the mass unrest against the PAM to their own advantage. Lehcen Daoudi, speaking for the PJD, said “everyone would become February 20th protesters if the PAM won the next parliamentary election.” He also threatened to lead the PJD’s parliamentary members into the streets with the February 20th movement protesters if the Interior Ministry implemented new revisions to the electoral rules, which the Islamists saw as making the system more undemocratic. Some, such as journalist Youssef Miskeen, speculated that “the powers that be would offer Himma’s head to satisfy popular anger coming from the streets.”

More problems appeared within the PAM as popular opposition intensified against the palace party. The party abruptly postponed its May 2011 national congress to discuss the parliamentary elections. PAM candidates criticized Illyas el-Omari, director of party headquarters, for not administering the office with professionalism and impartiality, leading to his dismissal. In some of the PAM’s regional offices, such as the Tetouan office, more resignations occurred because the “party had frozen” to a standstill in its campaign planning activities.

In an effort to distance himself from the February 20th movement’s protests and rescue his party’s reputation, Himma resigned from the PAM’s internal elections committee. He took a step back from party leadership, relinquishing control over campaign planning for the upcoming parliamentary elections. He also physically distanced himself from the situation by taking an unannounced business trip to the United States during the height of the popular protests. By September 2011, Himma announced that he would not seek a second term in the Moroccan parliament despite a petition from his constituents asking him to submit his candidacy for reelection.
Though Himma tried to fade into the background, his party’s problems did not cease. Other PAM leaders, such as Habib Belkouch, publicly emphasized that their party “could survive without Fouad Ali al-Himma.” Within the party, however, many PAM officials worried about their party’s future without him. They complained that they “had joined the party because of Himma’s presence,” and did not think they could win reelection without his support. New internal conflict emerged when a “war of promotions” began between PAM members competing to take over responsibilities of officials who had resigned from the party.

By early November 2011, Himma had resigned from the PAM altogether. He released a letter addressed to PAM leaders in the media, which stated: “I am informing you all that I am now out of the party. I definitively will never again enter into its affairs. No one try to call me.” He was quietly reposted to the position where he had started before 2007, as the king’s special political advisor at the palace.

With Himma gone from party politics and the PAM on the verge of collapse, a new strategy emerged to carry out the monarchy’s desire to see the PJD marginalized. Reminiscent of the 3-party royalist pact that created the FDIC in 1963, PAM leaders forged a new 8-party loyalist alliance called the Coalition for Democracy to prevent the Islamists from making large electoral gains in the 2011 parliamentary elections. This “war coalition to face the PJD” did not fare well in the elections. It could not take up the slack following the PAM’s failure.

The Islamists celebrated Himma’s exit from Moroccan politics and the PAM’s demise. “An old idea present within Fouad Ali al-Himma’s mind,” as Abdelilah Benkirane explained, “was to guarantee the perpetuation of the state and to keep rule within the king’s hands. He created a party to control the pace of Moroccan political life.” But, he continued: “With the Arab Spring, the party has become paralyzed. It’s gone with the wind. The Moroccan people didn’t put all their eggs in one basket. If they had, it would’ve been a disaster. The PAM is over.”

Though steps had been taken to weaken the Islamists between 2007 and 2010, the regime’s PAM project had proven incapable of withstanding popular demands for reform and democratization. While the PJD did not contribute to the February 20th social movement, it was a boon for the Islamists. It cleared the way for them to capture first place in the 2011 parliamentary elections. The Islamists now have before them an unprecedented opportunity to implement their policy preferences since their initial entrance into Moroccan party politics in the 1990s.

Conclusions

Rather than expressing voters’ demands as in democracies, elections play a different role in authoritarian regimes. They assist regimes in weakening their political opposition. As this case study of Morocco makes clear, this process works best when regimes successfully alter and enlist formal political institutions, such as political parties, electoral laws, and the media, to work in their favor. While some authoritarian regimes continue to use brute military force to break opposition parties, others have devised less intrusive ways to accomplish the same task through manipulating formal political institutions.

In tracing regime attempts to weaken Morocco’s Islamist opposition during the 2009 local elections, this article shows how this process works. This process sought to restrict the Islamist PJD’s strength, seeking to hinder its increasing...
political power within a four-year period between the 2007 parliamentary and 2009 local elections (i.e., 2007-2010). This article contributes empirical meat to fill out a skeletal theoretical concept—safety-valve elections—often referenced by scholars of authoritarianism.

In the end, however, underlying discontent with the absence of political reform overwhelmed the Moroccan regime’s attempts to manipulate institutional politics in its favor. The safety-valve system backfired. The regime overplayed its hand in depending on Fouad Ali al-Himma to create the PAM to undermine the PJD, eventually bringing about the loyalist party’s demise. The PJD rode this wave of discontent to electoral victory, entering government for the first time in its political history and selecting Abdelilah Benkirane as Morocco’s first-ever Islamist Prime Minister. Other PJD leaders also obtained high posts: Saadeddine Othmani ascended to Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mostafa Ramid became Minister of Justice, and Lehcen Daoudi was nominated Minister of Higher Education.

On a theoretical level, this case study benefits scholars of authoritarianism. It encourages scholars to look at authoritarian elections as one component within a larger network of regime activities used to weaken and contain the potentially violent political opposition. In this sense, the safety-valve metaphor could be re-conceptualized as a “process-based” phenomenon that unfolds in steps or phases rather than a one-time incident that occurs within a snapshot of time. Qualitative process-tracing, using field interviews and archival research, may provide the best methodological toolkit for conveying this sequenced phenomenon. While fears arise that process-tracing can “degenerate into an atheoretical enterprise” focusing on idiogetic description rather than testing hypotheses, this article hopes to have demonstrated that scholars can strike a reasonable balance between an interesting, detailed historical narrative and the theories they seek to verify.

Notes

1. Henceforth, I use the English translated names for the Moroccan political parties. I have, however, retained the parties’ French acronyms commonly used by scholars (i.e., the PJD and not the JDP).


15. Brownlee (see note 12 above), 5.


19. Schirin Fathi (see note 13 above), 892.


22. Ibid., 177.


31. Author interview, Reda Oulamine, former PAM member (December 11, 2010), Rabat, Morocco.


41. Ibid.
42. Ismail Rouhi, “Court Delays Hearing Case Regarding Imprisoned Justice and Charity Members until November 29,” Sabah [Arabic Newspaper], issue 3261, October 5, 2010, 1.
44. Author Interview, Mohamed Darif, Professor of Political Science, Hassan II University-Mohamadia (August 10, 2009), Casablanca, Morocco.
45. Michael Willis (see note 36 above): 69.
46. Willis (see note 36 above): 69–73.
49. Author interview, Lehcen Daoudi, PJD vice secretary general (July 20, 2009), Rabat, Morocco.
53. For an example of the picture, see the PJD’s website: http://www.pjd.ma/pjdstat/.
56. Author Interview, Mustapha Safar, Political Journalist at Sabah [Arabic newspaper] (June 18, 2009), Casablanca, Morocco.
57. Author interview, Abdelkader Amara, PJD parliamentary member (July 17, 2009), Rabat, Morocco.
58. Author interview, Ted Lawrence, USAID-Morocco Democracy and Governance Program Director (July 17, 2009), Rabat, Morocco.
60. Author interview, Jeff England, NDI-Morocco Country Director (June 24, 2009), Rabat, Morocco.
61. National Democratic Institute (see note 59 above), 51.
65. Author interview, Ali Belhaj, PAM secretary general member (August 4, 2011), Casablanca, Morocco.
66. Author interview, Ihsan Hafazi, Political Journalist at Sabah Arabic Newspaper (June 23, 2009), Casablanca, Morocco.
le Maire PJD de Meknès, Aboubakr Belkora, pour Mauvaise Gestion.” From *Al-Jarida* French-language Newspaper.


70. Ihsan Hafizi, “USFP Supports the PJD in the North,” *Sabah* [Arabic newspaper], issue 2860, June 20–21, 2009, 3.


73. Author interview, Mustapha Khalfi, Editor of Islamist Newspaper *Tajdid* (July 19, 2009), Rabat, Morocco.

74. Ahmed Hamoush, “The Justice and Development Party will ally with anyone in order to win in the city councils!,” *Masaa* [Arabic newspaper], issue 856, June 22, 2009, 8.

75. Abdelmajid Waradaani, “The USFP Benefits from its Alliance with the PJD in Tetoun,” *Sabah* [Arabic newspaper], issue 2858, June 18, 2009, 4.


77. For example: Nadia Boukili, “Alliances Outside their Logical Contexts,” *Sabah* [Arabic newspaper], issue 2861, June 22, 2009, 15.


79. Mokhtaaar al-Ramshie, “Samir Abdmoulay is the Mayor of the City of Tangier,” *Sabah* [Arabic newspaper], issue 2864, June 25, 2009, 5.


81. Ibid.


85. Ihsan Hafizi, “The PAM Expels its Advisors from Ibn Ahmed,” *Sabah* [Arabic newspaper], July 9, 2009, 3.


87. Bourfisi, “PAM threatens Benkirane” (see note 84 above), 3.


89. Ibid.

90. Ibid.

91. Ibid.


96. See the list: http://moroccansforchange.com/2011/03/31/how-many-feb20-movements-are-there-morocco-weve-got-a-list/.


116. Author Interview, Abdelilah Benkirane, Prime Minister of Morocco (July 7, 2011), Rabat, Morocco.