

## Arab Reform Bulletin نشرة الإصلاح العربي

*Arab Reform Bulletin*

June 2008, Volume 6, Issue 5

Michele Dunne, Editor

Intissar Fakir, Assistant Editor

### **Morocco: MAD about Renewal or Reform?**

**Andrew Ng**

Since the September 2007 parliamentary elections, Moroccan politics has been shaken up by the formation of the Movement for All Democrats (MAD), an association headed by a man formerly considered the number two in the regime, Fuad Ali al-Himma. Billed as a “national initiative open to all democrats, independent of their political loyalties,” the movement is widely expected to become a party before the 2009 local elections.

Anticipation of the movement’s strength has led most recently to the formation of two cross-party alliances, one aligned with Himma and one against. Though still a political independent, Himma helped orchestrate the four-party “Social Democratic Alliance” announced on May 29. Earlier that week, five parties wary of the MAD came together to form the “Coalition of the Left.”

While little noted outside of Morocco, the emergence of the movement carries notable implications for reform in the kingdom. As with presidential candidate Barack Obama’s rhetoric of “post-partisan politics” in the United States, the movement begs the immediate question of what a broad-based call to transcend the current political system can actually amount to. Under the motto of “renewing the bridges between the people and the elites,” the Movement for all Democrats has appealed for institutional and constitutional reform. But Himma himself has reportedly remarked in private that “reform will not come from the parliament.” The question for the reform-minded is whether the movement will channel its energy toward engaging and strengthening the parliament or bypass it in favor of reliance on Himma’s connections to the palace.

Himma packages himself as a man of the people who can effect change. Born in Marrakech to a school teacher, Himma was selected at random to attend the royal high school in Rabat with the then-prince Mohammad. Himma spent most of the 1990s in municipal and provincial politics in the rural area of Rhamna, which he now represents as an MP and refers to as “Morocco in miniature.” When Mohammad VI ascended the throne in 1999, Himma was assigned the post of Minister of State for the Interior. At the Interior Ministry, the responsibilities of the “vice-king” reportedly included the smear campaign against the king’s cousin Moulay Hicham Alaoui, who began publicly advocating for democracy. Himma also stands accused of organizing the protests against the weekly

*Le Journal Hebdomadaire* for its reporting on the Danish cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed in 2006.

Himma resigned his executive post in August 2007 to stand for parliamentary elections the following month. Rumors that he would be subsequently named prime minister proved false, and he instead assumed the presidency of the powerful Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defense and Islamic Affairs in parliament. He also mobilized a bloc of thirty-six MPs under the banner of “Authenticity and Modernity,” which became the core of both the MAD association and the four-party “Social Democratic Alliance.”

Since its formation the movement has been busy recruiting members and assembling working groups with the aim of preparing policy proposals. The movement compensates for what it regards as the failure of national elites to engage and mobilize citizens and civil society. In fact, the movement is stealing pages from the playbook of the moderate Islamist Party of Justice and Development (PJD), which broadened its appeal by cultivating a reputation as an uncorrupt and responsible party. In spite of its purported openness, however, the MAD has ruled out meeting with Islamists, including the PJD.

Ironically, the movement may well absorb some of the anger and alienation that expressed itself in the 37 percent voter turnout and alarmingly high rate of ballot spoilage in the 2007 elections. Himma’s castigation of national elites and parliament resonates with public opinion, while his association with the king actually works in the movement’s favor on balance by lending it credibility. In Morocco, where all major decisions and reforms are facilitated by the palace, the popular appeal of political institutions has corresponded to their proximity to the king. In a 2002 poll by Maroc 2020, 45 percent of respondents expressed a positive degree of confidence in the cabinet (the most important positions of which are royally appointed) versus 35 percent in the parliament and 27 percent in political parties.

Himma’s credentials with the king also carry some appeal because the reforms that the MAD emphasizes and Moroccans prioritize, principally economic ones, are perceived as detached from political reforms. In a national poll conducted last summer by 2007 Daba, Moroccans ranked “strengthening democratic practice” last out of twenty priorities for the incoming government; only 2 percent of respondents identified it as one of their top five concerns.

That the movement will simply renew the political system and not reform it is not necessarily a foregone conclusion, depending upon the movement’s vision for parliament. The more the MAD behaves like a royally-blessed association dismissive of parliament, the more it will reinforce the political status quo. The more, however, the movement builds up a grassroots network that puts the parliament to work and creates pressure among existing traditional political parties to step up—especially as it transitions from a movement into a political party—the less ironic its name will sound.

*Andrew Ng is a junior fellow in the Democracy and Rule of Law Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.*