

# Morocco's Political Centre in a Hybrid System

Between Party Pluralism and Monarchical Influence



## In a Nutshell

Morocco's political parties operate within a hybrid system in which elections and parliaments exist yet key strategic decisions remain closely aligned with the monarchy. Within this framework, the political centre plays a pivotal role, ensuring stability while making use of its limited scope for policymaking within the parameters set by the monarchy.

Istiqlal and the Rassemblement National des Indépendants (RNI) have been part of a governing coalition since 2021 and – as system-loyal centre-right parties – shape the political agenda. Istiqlal emphasises tradition and moderate reform, whereas the RNI prioritises technocratic modernisation and economic development. Both parties are partners

of the European People's Party (EPP) and pursue a pro-Western orientation.

The governing coalition faces the challenge of meeting societal expectations – particularly those of an increasingly frustrated younger generation – without overstepping the structural limits of the system. Protests and declining party engagement point to a growing distance from the political elite.

The parliamentary elections scheduled for September 2026 are set to take place against a backdrop of ongoing fragmentation and likely also low voter turnout. For the political centre, the challenge remains to safeguard stability while simultaneously regaining public trust.



**Steven Höfner** is Head of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's Morocco Office, based in Rabat.

### *Overview of the Moroccan party landscape*

- Istiqlal (centre-right)
- Mouvement Populaire (social-liberal)
- PAM (liberal)
- PJD (Islamists)
- PPS (left-wing)
- Rassemblement National des Indépendants (RNI, centre-right)
- Union Constitutionnelle (liberal-conservative)
- USFP (social democrat)

### **A hybrid system: Monarchy is dominant, parliament is consulted**

In the Kingdom of Morocco, democratic structures coexist with an omnipresent monarchical dominance. The political system is regarded as a hybrid form of governance<sup>1</sup> in which parliaments and elections exist while the King and his entourage (the *Makhzen*) set the guiding principles of policy.<sup>2</sup> Centrist parties – above all, the long-established Istiqlal (Independence Party) and the economically liberal Rassemblement National des Indépendants (RNI) – play an important role within this framework as reliable partners to the monarchy. Acting from within a joint governing coalition, they will face a further test with the parliamentary elections in 2026, however.

Formally, since the constitutional reform of 2011 – which was enacted in the wake of the so-called Arab Spring – the Kingdom has been a constitutional monarchy with an elected parliament and an elected government.<sup>3</sup> In practice, however, power remains heavily concentrated in the Palace. Key sovereign portfolios such as foreign affairs, the interior, the military, and

religious affairs are formally part of the government cabinet, yet their heads are appointed directly by the monarch; thus, they are regarded as politically non-partisan. Although the 2011 Constitution granted parliament and government additional powers,<sup>4</sup> their room for manoeuvre remains narrowly circumscribed. Strategic direction and key senior appointments continue to be decided at the Royal Palace. This situation has given rise to an inherent tension: Elections are held regularly and are largely free, yet their primary function is to determine which party is best situated to implement the royal agenda most effectively. The overarching guidelines of state policy – from major development plans to foreign affairs – are, however, formulated through the King's speeches and initiatives. Party politics is therefore not the visionary force in the country, but at best a manager of the royal agenda.

Centrist parties – above all, Istiqlal and the RNI – play significant roles within this system. Precisely because radical or anti-monarchical forces remain marginalised in Morocco, the moderate, system-loyal parties effectively form the centre of party politics. Istiqlal and the RNI are regarded as key pillars of the party system and maintain close ties with the European centre-right family. Both parties have been official partners of the European People's Party (EPP) since 2018. But how do Istiqlal and the RNI conduct politics under conditions of limited parliamentary power? And how is the political centre preparing for the parliamentary elections in September 2026?

### **A unique electoral system as a guarantor of pluralism – and fragmentation**

One crucial instrument through which the Moroccan system is steered is electoral law. Over the years, the system has been designed to allow

pluralistic elections while preventing any single party from achieving a dominant majority that could diminish the influence of the Palace. Morocco has a long-established multi-party system, and particularly during the reign of King Hassan II (1961 to 1999), the party landscape became fragmented – partly due to the Palace’s deliberate fostering of the creation of new parties. Most recently, the 2021 electoral reform – which was implemented immediately before the latest parliamentary elections – had a decisive impact on the composition of parliament.<sup>5</sup> Among other changes, the threshold of three per cent was abolished, thereby making it easier for small parties to enter parliament. Even more significant was the change in the method used to allocate seats: For the first time, seats were calculated no longer based on the votes actually cast, but rather based on the number of registered voters in each constituency, regardless of how many people had actually voted. This unusual calculation method – which is unique to Morocco – reduces the effective value of each vote and particularly disadvantages large parties with high voter support. The implications of this change are considerable: Since the divisor (i.e. the number of registered voters) is now much larger than the number of votes actually cast, the number of seats that a high-vote party can secure is substantially reduced. Therefore, it is almost impossible for any party to win more than one seat per constituency, no matter how overwhelming its share of the vote there may be. When it comes to distributing parliamentary seats per constituency, it is the sequence of results that is important. If the party with the most votes cannot win more than one seat, the remaining seats are distributed among the next-ranking parties. The largest constituencies in densely populated urban districts have six seats, which are typically shared among as many parties. However, the majority of Morocco’s constituencies – particularly in rural areas – have only two or three seats. In order to emerge as the election winner, a party therefore needs strong results nationwide, particularly in regions with a rather traditionalist electorate. In this electoral system, no political force can secure significantly more than 100 of the 395

seats. This effect is further reinforced by low voter turnout (50.35 per cent in 2021<sup>6</sup>).

The 2021 parliamentary election resulted in an even more fragmented legislature. The previously governing Islamist party – the Justice and Development Party (PJD), which had been the strongest force in 2011 and 2016 – fell dramatically, from 125 to just 13 seats. Instead, the winners were the liberal-conservative centre parties: The RNI came first, with 102 of 395 seats, followed by the Palace-aligned Authenticity and Modernity Party (PAM), with 87 seats, and Istiqlal, with 81 mandates. The fact that the RNI won more than 100 seats despite the electoral system underscores the party’s overwhelming nationwide victory.

### **Doubts as to the impact of one’s own vote contribute to low voter turnout and political disengagement.**

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From the perspective of state power, the electoral system achieves its purpose by ensuring pluralism and preventing a concentration of power, particularly at the extreme ends. The diversity of the party system is most visible in cities, where up to six parties per constituency can realistically hope to secure parliamentary seats. More extreme positions are also represented in cities, however, both on the left and within the Islamic-conservative spectrum. While these groups can expect to win seats in their strongholds, they are no more successful than other parties elsewhere. The fragmentation of the party landscape – which is often criticised as a weakness – is, in fact, an implicit guarantee of stability. By preventing any single party from dominating government action, the King remains indispensable as a non-partisan arbiter. For voters, however, this comes at a cost: Many citizens doubt that their vote can bring about fundamental change, which contributes to low voter turnout and political disaffection.

Against this backdrop, Istiqlal and the RNI must repeatedly assert themselves as actors of the political centre.

### **The centrist parties: Pillars of political operations**

Within Morocco's party spectrum, Istiqlal and the RNI represent the traditional elite – in contrast to more ideologically distinct forces such as the Islamist PJD and the left-wing parties. Istiqlal and the RNI are considered system-loyal, meaning they accept the monarchy as the supreme authority, operate within its framework, and stand ideologically for economically liberal policies with a socially conservative bent. International observers regard these parties as being well-networked and representing a distinctly pro-Western course. As partners of the EPP, they participate in the European debate and advocate greater international engagement for Morocco.

Their true test, however, lies in their domestic role within the state-party relationship. Despite

their proximity to the Palace, Istiqlal and the RNI must prove their relevance by mediating between the needs of the population and the directives of the monarchy. In a sense, they function as a buffer within the hybrid system, lending democratic legitimacy to the political arena and giving societal interests at least a partial voice.

### **The Parti de l'Istiqlal was founded in 1944 during the struggle against the French Protectorate.**

*Istiqlal – Tradition, loyalty to the monarchy, and a renewed profile*

The Parti de l'Istiqlal is Morocco's oldest political party. It is the only Moroccan party to be a member of both the Centrist Democrat International (IDC-CDI) and the International Democracy Union (IDU). Through these memberships,



Elected government under royal supervision: Prime Minister Aziz Akhannouch is seen speaking at the annual meeting of the World Bank and IMF in Marrakesh in October 2023, with a portrait of Mohammed VI in the background. Photo: © Anadolu Agency, Imago.

Istiqlal represents the Moroccan perspective in the international networks of centre-right parties. Founded in 1944 during the struggle against the French Protectorate, the party remains an enduring part of Morocco's national history. Istiqlal led the independence movement and provided the first post-1956 government leaders, thereby becoming a formative force in early state politics. In the 1960s and 1970s, it came into rivalry with King Hassan II, however, who did not tolerate competing centres of power.<sup>7</sup> During this period, left-wing factions split off (e.g. the precursor to today's Social Democratic Socialist Union of Popular Forces, the USFP), while Istiqlal itself remained largely conservative-nationalist.<sup>8</sup> Under King Hassan II, the party experienced phases of opposition and co-optation: at times marginalised, at others included in government coalitions depending on the Palace's calculations. This capacity for political survival and adaptation has allowed Istiqlal to mature into a kind of state-bearing institution – always system-loyal while also maintaining its own distinct profile.

Ideologically, Istiqlal emphasises social justice within a market economy framework and is traditionally deeply rooted both in the urban middle class and in rural communities. During the ten-year rule of the Islamist PJD from 2011, Istiqlal initially participated as a coalition partner but withdrew from the coalition in 2013. From 2017 onwards, Istiqlal underwent a personnel renewal when Nizar Baraka assumed leadership: A moderate technocrat and grandson of the founding father, Allal al-Fassi, Baraka restored the party to the forefront of national politics. Under his leadership, Istiqlal made significant gains in the 2021 elections, rising from 46 to 81 seats, and has since been a key pillar of the government as the third-largest party.

Despite its participation in government, Istiqlal consciously maintains an independent profile. The party presents itself as a values-oriented centre-right force, pursuing both economic development and social equity. In autumn 2025, for example, Istiqlal published a comprehensive economic policy statement calling for a stronger welfare state, for measures to protect household

purchasing power, and for greater sovereignty in key sectors such as health, energy, and water.<sup>9</sup> The paper additionally contained indirect criticism of the governing styles of its coalition partners, the RNI and the PAM. In so doing, Istiqlal demonstrated two things: firstly, its technical competence and programmatic substance, and secondly, its determination to distinguish itself from its coalition partners despite being in government. This balancing act – that is, governing while remaining independent – is something Istiqlal has mastered exceptionally well due to its long experience.

Overall, Istiqlal today appears as a modern anchor of tradition: firmly rooted in Morocco's history while also striving to adapt to new challenges. Istiqlal's constructive, moderate stance makes it an indispensable factor within Morocco's power structure. This dual anchoring – that is, both patriotic and tradition-conscious on the one hand while open to moderate reforms on the other hand – makes Istiqlal attractive to many centrist voters. However, even Istiqlal encounters systemic limits: On issues touching the royal agenda, the party strictly follows the line of the Palace. While this aligns with its monarchist orientation, it also demonstrates that even a long-established party in Morocco can never act fully autonomously.

### **The RNI brings together economic elites, technocrats, and figures from established families.**

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*RNI – Technocratic, business-friendly, and a key power broker*

The RNI represents a political centre force created by the establishment. In many respects, it serves as a counterbalance to Istiqlal: Where Istiqlal draws on an 80-year history, the RNI was only founded in 1978 (i.e. one year after the 1977 parliamentary elections) as a coalition of independent MPs and prominent figures in order to

secure a Palace-loyal parliamentary majority. The party's founding in 1978 was spearheaded by then-Prime Minister Ahmed Osman, a brother-in-law of King Hassan II. From the outset, the RNI brought together economic elites, technocrats, and figures from established families. Adopting a centrist-liberal image, it quickly became the largest parliamentary faction (holding 141 of 264 seats in 1978). In this way, the RNI initially served as the Palace's main vehicle for channelling political power.<sup>10</sup> During the 1980s, the party experienced highs and lows: In 1981, a faction split off (later known as the National Democratic Party, PND – a precursor to today's coalition partner, the PAM), and in 1984, the RNI lost many seats to the newly formed Union Constitutionnelle – another Palace-initiated “administrative party”.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, the RNI remained a constant player in shifting coalitions.

Under King Mohammed VI (reigning since 1999), the RNI's role as a state-supporting party has been further consolidated. It had previously participated in the historic government change of 1998 (“gouvernement de l'alternance”) under the first left-leaning Prime Minister, Abderrahman Youssefi of the USFP,<sup>12</sup> and later formed part of the technocratic cabinets of the early 2000s. The RNI's reputation as a reliable majority-maker in Moroccan politics was further reinforced in 2013, when Istiqlal left the coalition with the Islamist PJD and the RNI stepped in to secure a parliamentary majority for the PJD government.<sup>13</sup> After the 2016 election, the RNI acted shrewdly behind the scenes: It initially blocked the formation of a government by the election-winning PJD (under Abdelilah Benkirane) through maximalist demands, eventually engineering a coalition composition more to its liking under the more conciliatory PJD Prime Minister Saad-Eddine El Othmani. This episode of the so-called blockage in 2016 to 2017 highlighted the influence of the RNI, even though it was only the third-largest party at the time.<sup>14</sup>

Aziz Akhannouch – a billionaire entrepreneur in the energy and agribusiness sectors – took over the RNI's leadership ahead of the 2016 elections, investing heavily in the party and its

professionalisation, with strategic areas such as communications being significantly expanded. As a result, the RNI positioned itself as a kind of performance-oriented party. In his 2021 campaign, Akhannouch promised comprehensive social reforms alongside major investments. He additionally positioned himself as a symbol of economic competence and closeness to the royal household – a combination that inspired trust among many voters. In fact, the RNI emerged as the clear winner of the 2021 election, displacing the PJD from the head of government.

### **Sensitive political questions are decided outside parliament.**

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For the RNI, however, this also meant being fully in the spotlight: The party has since borne primary responsibility for governing and is expected to deliver results. However, the success of the RNI has always depended heavily on its leadership personalities. This makes the party vulnerable because it is currently perceived as a party of the wealthy and powerful and is criticised by the opposition for lacking empathy for ordinary citizens, with Akhannouch – one of Morocco's richest men – embodying the close ties between money and politics. Criticism of Akhannouch and his administration steadily grew, and looking ahead to the 2026 parliamentary elections, he increasingly appeared to be a burden on the party's campaign capacity. In January 2026, Akhannouch announced that he would not run for party chairmanship again, and at a party congress in early February, he was succeeded by Mohamed Chaouki, the previous parliamentary faction leader. Despite his political office, Chaouki remains largely unknown outside RNI networks. Therefore, the move involves a certain degree of risk since he will have to defend the party's top position as the lead candidate in the elections. Thus, the RNI now faces the dual challenge of convincing broad segments of the population of its policy approaches while also mobilising support for a new lead candidate. Rising living



Call for change: With the protest movement “Generation Z 212”, Morocco’s youth is positioning itself as a driving force for structural reforms in the education and healthcare systems, as well as for the determined fight against corruption, inflation, and unemployment. Photo: © Anadolu Agency, Imago.

costs, the aftermath of the 2023 earthquake,<sup>15</sup> persistently high youth unemployment levels (over 20 per cent<sup>16</sup>), and stark regional disparities in development all present a serious test for Morocco’s currently largest party.

In summary, the RNI today stands for renewal rooted in continuity: As a project supported by the Palace, it has played a key role in shaping the political landscape. Many of its ministers are experienced technocrats and business leaders who advance reforms, albeit always in coordination with the royal cabinet. The limits of power are clearly perceptible even for the RNI’s top leadership: On core issues, the King sets the agenda. This has recently been evident in major projects such as preparations for the 2030 FIFA World Cup, the expansion of green hydrogen, and policy on the Sahara,<sup>17</sup> where the government has acted primarily in a supporting capacity. In this way, the party fulfils its principal role within the hybrid system – that is, the reliable administration of the development path defined by the King. Should it fail in managing social tensions or in addressing allegations of corruption, however, it too risks the fate of a governing party punished at the ballot box.

### Between influence and constraint: Political centre under pressure in 2026

Although Istiqlal and the RNI play a central role in Morocco’s parliament and government, they repeatedly encounter the structural limits of the system. Parliamentary debates do take place, but sensitive political issues are decided outside parliament. The centrist parties have accommodated themselves to this reality; over the longer term, however, this situation carries the risk of gradual erosion. If citizens gain the impression that elected representatives can effect little real change, the legitimacy of the entire political class declines.

This risk is particularly evident in the growing political disaffection among young people. Many young Moroccans feel unrepresented by the established parties and complain of a lack of meaningful participation.<sup>18</sup> In autumn 2025, frustration erupted in the protest movement “Generation Z 212”, in which primarily young adults demonstrated against corruption, unemployment, and shortcomings in both education and healthcare.<sup>19</sup> The protests were directed explicitly at the government – including Prime Minister Akhannouch – and at the political parties, but



not at the monarchy. Unlike during the so-called Arab Spring in 2011, the system itself was not called into question.<sup>20</sup> For Istiqlal and the RNI – as governing parties and part of the political establishment – such developments represent a serious challenge. On the one hand, these parties must respond to citizens’ legitimate social concerns and offer solutions; on the other hand, they must also respect the structural limits inherent in the system. This situation illustrates the delicate balancing act of the system: It seeks to involve the population sufficiently in order to safeguard stability but not to open up to such an extent that uncontrollable dynamics might emerge.

Another area of tension concerns internal participation and programme development within the parties themselves. Istiqlal and the RNI are seeking to modernise and to make themselves more attractive to new members. For example, Istiqlal has begun to involve its youth organisations more closely and to develop new formats for participation. The RNI has established around twenty subsidiary organisations addressing areas such as the economy, women, and youth, with the aim of engaging these groups more effectively. At the national level, however, party elites remain relatively distant, with decision-making processes often taking place within small circles. Morocco’s clientelist politics – that is, the distribution of favours through personal networks – further weakens traditional party identification. While Istiqlal is able to draw on a loyal core electorate (particularly in certain medium-sized urban milieus) and the RNI benefits from strong local leadership in some rural regions, the binding power of the parties remains limited. Many voters feel more closely attached to their immediate social environment – that is, to families, clans, and patrons – than to any party ideology. Against this backdrop, several factors are likely to shape the parliamentary elections scheduled for September 2026.

First, further fragmentation in parliament is to be expected. The electoral system – including the calculation method introduced in 2021 – is again likely to ensure that no party comes close to securing an absolute majority. Coalitions will therefore once more be necessary. For voters, this

means that they are likely to choose individuals and party lists deemed capable of forming coalitions, with a coherent programme of government playing a secondary role. Istiqlal and the RNI nevertheless benefit from a certain incumbency advantage: As governing parties, they can point to tangible achievements (e.g. infrastructure projects, social measures, and successful major events, such as the 2025 Africa Cup of Nations in football). At the same time, however, these parties bear responsibility for unresolved problems (including unemployment and inflation) and may be penalised for these at the ballot box.

Second, voter turnout is likely to be a decisive indicator. Will the parties succeed in mobilising voters, particularly young first-time voters? Or might it even suit the centrist parties – given the quotient rule – if turnout remains low? In public, Istiqlal and the RNI are seeking to counter such perceptions by focusing on issues relevant to young people and by potentially nominating fresh faces. For example, Istiqlal has announced that it will field more candidates under the age of 40 and step up its use of social media in order to reach younger voters. The RNI, for its part, may benefit from the popularity of some of its younger ministers. Ultimately, however, it remains questionable whether this will suffice to rebuild young people’s basic trust so long as deeper demands for genuine participation remain unmet.

Third, the role of the Palace in the run-up to the elections will be crucial, particularly regarding the traditional media landscape, which is largely steered by the Palace. The monarchy has no interest in engaging in an overt campaign in favour of any one party, however: Indeed, it is keen to preserve the image of a neutral arbiter. Instead, subtle influence is likely to be exerted in order to ensure that the post-election coalition arithmetic works out: Ideally, from the Palace’s perspective, loyal centrist parties would form the majority. The RNI-PAM-Istiqlal configuration has proven effective from the state’s viewpoint, thereby making its continuation likely. However, shifts within this bloc are possible. For instance, Istiqlal or the PAM could gain more weight and potentially provide the prime minister if they surpass the RNI in seats.

Fourth, the question arises as to how the opposition will perform. Can the PJD recover after its humiliation? Some signs suggest it could regain ground, attempting to present itself as a moral alternative to the governing parties. However, the PJD lacks coalition partners and new personnel. Meanwhile, the leftist forces are divided and show little capacity to form a coalition. Any surprise might come from the liberal spectrum: Parties such as Union Constitutionnelle and Mouvement Populaire are ideologically close to the current government, but could benefit from a desire for change, presenting themselves as a compatible renewal of the government.

Overall, there is much to indicate that Istiqlal and the RNI will remain central actors in the political system even after 2026. Both embody a political centre that guarantees stability and continuity in the Moroccan context while also juggling the population's expectations. Their significance lies less in enacting fundamental change than in managing gradual reforms under Palace supervision. Despite all the limitations of these parties, their achievements should not be underestimated: Indeed, the parties maintain parliamentary operations, contribute expertise to legislation, and serve as a transmission belt between state leadership and society. Without them, Morocco's system would either be entirely Palace-driven or leave dangerous gaps that radical forces could exploit.

Ultimately, the Moroccan monarchy aims to balance parliamentary forces so that reform projects can advance without endangering royal supremacy. Istiqlal and the RNI are useful to the royal household because both stand for predictability and a pro-Western orientation. If the gap between the youth and institutions continues to widen, however, even the political centre could falter. For now, though, the signs point towards continuity: The political centre in Morocco has learned to assert itself in a hybrid system, thereby making it indispensable to the stability of the system.

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