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Relevance and electoralism in the study of political oppositions: the case of Morocco's radical left

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ABSTRACT

Relevance is a key concept in the study of political parties. This article argues that the conceptions of relevance used in the study of political oppositions in authoritarian settings need to be clarified and reformulated. More specifically, and in light of current knowledge on electoral authoritarianism, the notion of relevance must go beyond the electoralist conceptions traditionally used when studying democratic contexts. Drawing on the case of Morocco, the article highlights the obscuring effect that such conceptions can have. It then provides an alternative framework, adjusting the concept of relevance to the specificities of the context and the evolving nature of the actors operating within it. The case of al-Nahj al-Dimoqrati, a Moroccan radical-leftist opposition party, is used to illustrate the analytical power of the framework.

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Introduction

Recent years have seen a revival of scholarly interest in autocracies, accompanied by an expansion of the field to include electoral authoritarianism in its many forms. With authoritarian regimes' widespread adoption of a number of formal institutions and discourses associated with democracy, many new studies have focused on exploring their specificities and logics in non-democratic settings.¹ The study of political parties and oppositions under authoritarianism is one of the many strands associated with this recent resurgence. Previously understudied due to the prevalence of “executive-centric” perspectives and research programmes, political oppositions are recently coming to the fore as an object of study in both democratic and non-democratic contexts.²

In the case of non-democratic settings, the focus is mainly on political oppositions under authoritarian regimes that permit multiparty elections. Research on the topic has shown the many implications that elections can have for both autocrats and their opponents, and doubts have been cast on their democratizing potential.³ As

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for opposition parties per se, the focus has generally tended to be on parties that partake in the electoral process. With few exceptions, this literature has emphasized the role of “loyal” opposition parties and their interactions with incumbents, while obscuring the existence and activities of more radical (or anti-systemic) opposition actors that contest the authoritarian bases of those in power.

The exclusion of these actors is often legitimized in terms of their “relevance” (or lack thereof), a concept frequently operationalized in terms of electoral performance – explicitly or implicitly. While this approach can be justifiable when investigating various aspects of electoral authoritarianism and its functions, it is arguably ill-fitting for the study of oppositions in such settings. Indeed, such a framing often excludes segments of the political oppositions that are crucial when it comes to fundamentally challenging a given political system’s authoritarian foundations. Therefore, clarifying and adapting the widely used concept of relevance to the context of application and scope of research can help in avoiding such issues, and lead to a more thorough understanding of political oppositions under authoritarianism.⁴

As a region where various forms of authoritarianism prevail and endure, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) reflects this trend as well. This is often complicated by a notable tendency towards exceptionalism in studies of the region’s political systems.⁵ Thus, while political relevance tends to be conceived of in terms that exclude radical or anti-system actors, an exception is often made for those with an Islamist orientation. This is not to claim that radical or anti-system Islamist actors are irrelevant, but rather to point out that their non-Islamist radical counterparts are just as important in understanding the region’s authoritarian politics.⁶

Exceptionalism, coupled with a restrictively electoralist conception of relevance, is hard to justify, whether in relation to the existing literature on electoral authoritarianism or in light of the region’s political history. Here, too, a precise conception of relevance, adapted to the specificities of authoritarian politics, can be of use. Doing so would help scholarship on the region’s political oppositions avoid the pitfalls of exceptionalism and of taking authoritarian institutions at face value.⁷

The article draws on the case of Morocco to highlight these issues and develop a framework that provides for a clearer and more inclusive conception of relevance, one that is better adapted to the study of political oppositions under electoral authoritarianism both in the MENA and beyond. Morocco is one of the longest-running multiparty systems in the region and considered to be a partly free country with some degree of electoral competition, despite the weaknesses of its elected institutions. This set of characteristics is not unique to Morocco or the MENA. In fact, beyond claims of exceptionalism, the Moroccan case post-1996 shares many similarities with other authoritarian cases beyond the region, particularly in terms of the increased representation of oppositions within their parliaments.⁸ Thus, the importance of going beyond conceptions of relevance that exclude extra-parliamentarian oppositions is as applicable to Morocco as to other authoritarian regimes. Fruitful application of the adapted context to the case of Morocco would then be indicative of potential insights to be gained by making the concept travel and adapting it to reflect the specificities of various authoritarian political fields and the dynamics of oppositions politics within them. This article makes three related contributions to the literature. First, it connects work on the politics of the MENA with the wider disciplinary research agenda on political oppositions and electoral authoritarianism, in line with calls for Area Studies scholarship to engage with wider social-scientific theoretical frameworks.⁹ Second, it provides a theoretical framework that helps address the issues of conceptual

clarity and democracy bias currently affecting studies of authoritarianism.¹⁰ Finally, by drawing on the understudied case of a radical Moroccan opposition party, and through an analysis of its positions as stated in its organizational publications and by its leadership in interviews, light is shed on an obscured section of that country's political opposition.

The article is structured as follows. It begins by reviewing the concept of relevance, from its seminal operationalization by Giovanni Sartori¹¹ to its use in connection with Mogens N. Pedersen's¹² "party lifespan" model in numerous studies of minor and radical political parties. Second, these concepts are connected to examinations of political opposition in authoritarian contexts, highlighting their inherent electoralist biases. In the third section, a clarified conception of relevance and an adjusted framework for the study of political oppositions under authoritarianism are introduced. The framework's analytical and heuristic power is illustrated through an analysis of the case of al-Nahj al-Dīmoqrāṭī ("The Democratic Way", hereafter *Annahj*), a Moroccan radical-left party that is often dismissed as irrelevant by electoralist standards. Finally, the article concludes by emphasizing the importance of conceptual clarity and bias awareness when studying political oppositions in non-democratic settings, highlighting the negative effects that such issues have on the wider fields of authoritarianism and democratization studies.

Relevance and lifespan

Relevance is a key notion in the literature on political parties and party systems. Since its first deployment by Sartori, the concept has been at the centre of several studies on the topic. According to Sartori, a political party is considered relevant if it holds either "coalition potential" or "blackmail potential".¹³ This definition is both specific and fluid enough to be productively adopted and adapted to a variety of political contexts.

Through his lifespan model, Pedersen has contributed to the development of the concept, with relevance situated within a framework that accounts for the dynamic development of political parties over time, along with the contextual factors affecting it. It conceives of parties as going through a number of analytically-significant thresholds through their existence: The thresholds of declaration, authorization, representation, and relevance. This model draws principally on studies of liberal-democratic settings, often focused on Western Europe. One of the earliest applications of the model beyond that geographic context was Hanna Herzog's study of the Israeli party system.¹⁴ Herzog drew on Pedersen's original model but modified it to better fit the specificities of her case, particularly when it came to the importance of minor parties within Israeli electoral politics.¹⁵ Her argument highlighted the necessity of adjusting the notion of relevance to a system's idiosyncrasies and strongly advocated for the relevance of minor parties. Minor parties, given their position at the edge of the party system, can inform us about the "social boundaries of the political culture"¹⁶ and the shifts they undergo.¹⁷ Table 1 summarizes Pedersen's and Herzog's models, with a detailed discussion in the third section of this article.

Although it originated in the 1980s, the lifespan model has proved to be very durable and widely used. Both as an analytical framework and as a heuristic device, Pedersen's model and its thresholds have been drawn upon by recent studies of political parties – particularly those deemed minor – from across the ideological spectrum and in a variety of cases. It has been used in the study of populist parties such as VOX¹⁸ or the Five Star Movement,¹⁹ and to analyse European green parties' grassroots

Table 1. Lifespan Threshold Model and Its Proposed Adaptation.

	Pedersen (1982)	Herzog (1987)	Proposed criteria for radical actors in authoritarian contexts
Threshold of declaration	Intent to participate in election (p.6)	All groups that apply for registration (p. 320)	All groups that <i>organize publicly</i> with the aim of participating in the political field
Threshold of authorization	The party is authorized legally to participate in elections		The party is authorized legally to participate in elections. But legalization does not mean an end to coercion/repression, and, in some cases, it can be rescinded by the incumbent.
Representation threshold	Legally defined minimum percentage of vote required for earning a seat (p.7)	More nuanced conception of relevance given the specificities of the list system in the case at hand (p.323)	Electoralist representation criteria not adapted for most authoritarian systems, especially when it comes to radical opposition parties
Threshold of relevance	Sartori's conception of relevance; coalition and/or blackmail potential	Parties making it to this stage can be relevant in multiple ways, by reshaping "the normative boundaries of the system" or initiating "new patterns of political competition" (p.326)	Expanded Sartori's conception of relevance: coalition potential applies to extra-institutional opposition coalitions; blackmail potential includes boycotts, other forms of delegitimization

Source: Author's own compilation.

politics²⁰ and professionalization,²¹ Of particular interest to this article, the framework is also fruitfully applied to the study of radical-leftist parties in Europe.²²

Despite this wide scope of application, the lifespan model has remained limited to relatively liberal and democratic Western settings.²³ It has not been applied to the study of parties in authoritarian settings. This study seeks to rectify that: it takes Pedersen's lifespan model, adapts it to the specificities of a non-democratic party system and uses it to reconceptualize the notion of relevance in a flexible, dynamic manner. This will help adjust expectations when it comes to the study of radical opposition parties under authoritarianism.

Relevance and biases in the study of political oppositions under authoritarianism

Political parties' significance or lack thereof within Moroccan politics is a debated question. While perspectives on the topic may vary, some important empirical and theoretical issues affect both sides of the argument. Theoretically, the notions and standards of success used by scholars in their assessments of political parties in Morocco have certain limitations to them. First, relevance is rarely explicitly conceptualized or connected to pre-existing theoretical debates. Second, notions of success or failure suffers from a "democracy bias",²⁴ and a related "electoralist bias". These issues lead to some serious problems at the substantive level, as most analyses tend to virtually ignore so-called "radical" and "minor parties",²⁵ especially those that contest the fundamental tenets of the political system and often boycott elections. This is particularly the case for the more radical leftist parties in both authoritarian and democratic settings.

This electoralist bias is problematic on several levels. First, in line with the aforementioned democracy bias, it fails to recognize the specificities of the political field in authoritarian settings by focusing uncritically on institutional similarities at the

surface level. Second, it dismisses the perspectives of actors who adopt a political strategy that might not be in line with the precepts of liberal-democratic practice. Third, especially when it comes to MENA politics, the previous points are often suspended when the otherwise electorally irrelevant radical political actor in question is aligned with ideological orientations that are supposed to be particularly compatible with some essential traits of the population (e.g. various forms of Islamism).²⁶ Other types of radical political orientation are required to justify their relevance and worthiness of study by meeting the standards of an “electoralist” political strategy that they, as radical political actors, consider unproductive.²⁷ This is not to dismiss actors who adopt electoralist strategies which can be fruitful, but they cannot in and of themselves be a *sine qua non* of political oppositions’ relevance in authoritarian settings.

In the case of Morocco, the current radical left is rooted in the experience of the Moroccan Marxist Leninist Movement (hereafter MMLM). The MMLM was a dynamic opposition group among students and intellectuals, radical in its critique of the monarchic regime and of the more traditional leftist parties. Despite its significance at a critical juncture for Moroccan politics, the MMLM – even in its heyday of the 1960s to 1970s – never received much scholarly attention.²⁸ This trend has persisted and is even more noticeable in investigations of its more recent, post-Cold War political trajectory, with Annahj as one of the legal parties claiming its legacy.²⁹ Dismissals of the MMLM as irrelevant can only be justified based on a very narrow view of the political – therewith holding electoral results³⁰ to be the central yardstick by which a political actor’s relevance should be measured. The general lack of attention given to the MMLM in the scholarly literature on Moroccan politics – particularly since the 1980s – is quite problematic, and reflects a wider trend in studies of MENA politics.³¹

Earlier works on oppositions in the region, such as William Zartman’s chapter on the complementarity of oppositions and incumbents,³² adopted more flexible conceptions of what constituted a political opposition actor, taking the specificities of the cases in question into account. Zartman argued against conceptions of oppositions that would be restricted to political parties, highlighting that “opposition exists through a spectrum of formality, from some internal and informal fractions through organised surrogates to formal parties and informal movements inside and outside the authorised political system”.³³

This sort of flexibility remains necessary for richer accounts of political oppositions in the MENA and beyond. In fact, more recent studies from the early 2000s, such as Holger Albrecht’s examination of political opposition in Egypt,³⁴ adopt a similarly flexible conception. For Albrecht, political opposition can come in many forms – divided into tolerated and anti-systemic kinds, respectively. Furthermore, he introduces the idea “authoritarian opposition”. Defined as “opposition which was born and grew, which lived and developed over time in an authoritarian context without contributing to systemic changes”,³⁵ it is argued to be a contributor to the stability of authoritarian political systems. Thus, the exclusion of radical or anti-systemic actors from the analytical framework on electoralist grounds restricts studies to a set of political opposition actors who rarely seek to fundamentally alter the authoritarian nature of the system in place. In turn, this leads to flawed conclusions about the durability of the system and its contestation, providing an impression of durability and reinforcing discourses on the irrelevance of political parties in the literature.

Coming back to the case of Morocco, a significant part of the country’s opposition politics is often obscured hereby with problematic consequences. Willis, for instance, argues that ideology plays a very limited role for the Moroccan left, and concludes that

political debates in the Maghreb revolve around different topics than those in the West, implying that “the role of the state in the economy, the nature of the welfare state and regional economic integration” are not central issues for the opposition.³⁶ This exceptionalist claim cannot be sustained when one includes Morocco’s non-electoral leftist parties within the scope of analysis,³⁷ whose discourse is far more radical than that of their tamer oppositional peers.

More recent studies, such as Maghraoui’s analysis of the relevance of political parties in Morocco, correctly identify the problems with the institutionalized political field and the political parties participating in it.³⁸ He also rightly criticizes the relevance and role of elections within the Moroccan political system.³⁹ Yet, by maintaining an electoralist conception of relevance, Maghraoui fails to pay sufficient attention to extra-institutional political parties. Consequently, he ends up viewing ideology as passé and “irrelevant” to Morocco’s opposition politics, replaced by a “‘politics of consensus’ orbiting in general around palace politics and orientations”.⁴⁰ Specifically, Maghraoui’s conception of irrelevance points out parties’ lack of independence, their non-critical contributions to the debate about monarchic powers during the 2011 constitutional reform consultations, and their non-involvement in the large protest movements since then. These critiques are valid, but their scope is limited to the more traditional, electoralist opposition actors. Thus, opposition actors’ relevance being premised on electoralist criteria should, then, be critically reassessed to yield a richer and more complete perspective inclusive of opposition parties that are not “irrelevant” by the above standards.

Studies foregoing restrictive notions of relevance can bring precious insights on Morocco’s political oppositions. One example would be Casani’s study on cross-ideological coalitions between excluded Islamist and leftist actors.⁴¹ He brought to light an overlooked case of enduring secular-Islamist coalition, questioning previous studies’ scepticism on the matter. Given what is known about electoral authoritarianism, it is no surprise that serious opposition politics is taking place beyond the electoral game in Morocco. The alliance between irrelevant leftist and Islamist actors that do not participate in elections has forcefully demonstrated its relevance during the 2011 uprisings.

Relevance of political oppositions under authoritarianism: a theoretical framework

The importance of going beyond narrow understandings of the concept of relevance when it comes to minor and radical political parties has been identified as essential for a richer understanding of a given political system and its prospects for change.⁴² This is an even more essential analytical move when investigating oppositions in authoritarian political settings. Crude transpositions of traditional electoralist conceptions of relevance would, in cases such as Morocco, limit the scope of analysis to parties accepted by the monarchy that do not challenge the legitimacy of the existing rules of the game and its structural imbalances.

Thus, criteria for relevance must be constantly adjusted and questioned in accordance with the specificities of the political field analysed.. Ignoring minor parties, even within representative liberal-democratic systems, can obscure the changes affecting the boundaries of a given political system:

The study of minor parties can serve as a measuring rod in designating the spatial boundaries of the entire party system. As the main figures operating on the “borders” of the system, they

are relevant in the process of negotiation with the major and dominant powers in the political arena. Their exclusion or inclusion indicates where the social boundaries of the political culture of a given party system are established.⁴³

The effect can be more significant when dealing with purportedly “depoliticized”⁴⁴ authoritarian settings, where major political parties are arguably co-opted and do not challenge the fundamental tenets of the political system. A restrictive conception of relevance in such cases leads to the exclusion, or minimal inclusion, of radical opposition actors who maintain a more confrontational anti-systemic stance,⁴⁵ and have been shown to play a central role during periods of political tension such as the Arab uprisings of 2011.⁴⁶ As strategies of inclusion or exclusion are a standard way for authoritarian incumbents to manage opposition actors and structure the political field,⁴⁷ a critical understanding of relevance is required to go beyond their potential obfuscating effects.

In a technical sense, if one were to grant that a focus on legally defined political parties was justified in studies of the Moroccan opposition, then the lack of attention to the MMLM would only be valid prior to the 2004 first National Congress and the legalization of Annahj. However, even if this premise were to be accepted, the conception of relevance applied would still be too restrictive and dismissive of ideological parties and their more general analytical pertinence. It would also be an unwarrantedly rigid conception that ignores the dynamism of opposition actors’ organizational forms and strategies.⁴⁸

Pedersen’s notions of party lifespan and thresholds,⁴⁹ though developed for European liberal-democratic settings, can be reformulated to fit the authoritarian context and argue for the relevance of radical parties in Moroccan opposition politics (see Table 1). The model adapts Sartori’s classic relevance concept by disaggregating the different stages of a party’s “life” and specifying applicable thresholds for determining their relevance at each point in time. Herzog, analysing the Israeli political system and the role of minor parties within it, adjusted Pedersen’s criteria to account for both the categorical and strategic specificities of the case. Since its inception, Pedersen’s model has remained widely used in the literature on various types of parties, and in different contexts. Applications of the model can be found for cases ranging across the ideological spectrum, but generally limited to relatively liberal-democratic European settings Table 2.

To adapt Pedersen’s criteria to authoritarian contexts, some modifications are necessary. First, the threshold of declaration is to be redefined in a manner that does not emphasize electoral participation. A similar adjustment was applied by Herzog when adapting the model to the specificities of the Israeli system. In that

Table 2. Proposed Adaptation of the Lifespan Model.

Proposed criteria for radical actors in authoritarian contexts	
Threshold of declaration	All groups that <i>organize publicly</i> with the aim of participating in the political field
Threshold of authorization	The party is authorized legally to participate in elections. But legalization does not mean an end to coercion/repression, and, in some cases, it can be rescinded by the incumbent.
Representation threshold	Electoralist representation criteria not adapted for most authoritarian systems, especially when it comes to radical opposition parties
Threshold of relevance	Expanded Sartori’s conception of relevance: coalition potential applies to extra-institutional opposition coalitions; blackmail potential includes boycotts, protests.

case, the focus shifted from plans for electoral participation to the application for registration as a party. Likewise, the criteria are here reformulated to account for the idiosyncrasies of authoritarian politics. Authorization is dependent on the assessment of the incumbent rather than a clear set of rules and constitutes a central tool used to shape the political field.⁵⁰ Thus, the threshold must focus on the opposition actor and their *public* claims to organize and openly join the political game (institutional or extra-institutional), regardless of whether these claims are recognized or rejected by the incumbent.

The threshold of authorization is similarly revised. In authoritarian contexts, legal party status does not guarantee access to the rights it supposedly grants. Coercion or repression can be used regardless of official legal status. Relatedly, the latter is often easily reversible by the incumbent. This precarity is reflected in the proposed criteria.

When it comes to the threshold of representation, fundamental changes are required. Pedersen's approach that limits itself to the legally required "minimum number of votes required to obtain a seat in the legislature".⁵¹ Herzog nuanced and expanded that conception: Minor parties can win votes and some limited gains that they then leverage in negotiations and deals with the larger parties.⁵² These conceptions are not productive when assessing political oppositions under authoritarianism. Organizational membership can be one way of evaluating actors at this threshold. But that would exclude those who do not prioritize explicit membership growth and pursue political strategies differing from their more moderate peers'. Instead, it would be more enlightening to assess organizations at this stage vis-a-vis the goals that they set for themselves in their strategic documents. In some cases, these could indeed be electoral goals; alternatively, they could be extra-institutional mobilizational activities, as in the case of radical opposition actors' efforts organizing, supporting or politicizing various protest movements or labour unions.

The final threshold in the model is that of relevance. For Pedersen, this is defined in classic Sartorian fashion: coalition and/or blackmail potential. Herzog expands the criteria to include the reshaping of the political system's boundaries, and the introduction of novel political strategies. For authoritarian contexts, there are a few distinctions that must be considered. First, the representation and relevance thresholds are not as clearly distinguished, and may merge into a single threshold in some cases. A radical opposition actor, including via their decision to not partake in the electoral game, can be viewed as holding blackmail potential. Boycotts can be a powerful card that targets the legitimation gain that is sought by authoritarian regimes through elections and referenda.

Similarly, for oppositions in authoritarian settings, government/ruling coalition potential is not a reliable measure of relevance. In many cases, it is but an indication of co-optation mechanics at work, which severely hurt an opposition party's image even when it manages to maintain an autonomous and credible oppositional identity. Moreover, this is usually not an option for radical opposition actors in authoritarian settings. Thus, it is necessary to expand the concept to include opposition coalitions, particularly when they are founded on a cross-ideological anti-systemic stance that manages to pose a serious challenge to the incumbent. The boundary between this threshold and the preceding one can be porous and blurry, as in some cases it might reflect a quantitative evolution rather than a primarily qualitative one. The following table summarizes the proposed modified model:

Thresholds and relevance: the case of Annahj in Morocco

To highlight and argue for the relevance of the MMLM as a radical-left party and opposition actor in Morocco, this section will analyse its trajectory in line with the proposed modified version of the lifespan model. The first “declaration of intention to participate threshold” was quickly crossed following MMLM activists’ release from prison in the mid-1990s.⁵³ As mentioned by Mustafa Brahma during an interview with France 24, efforts at rebuilding the movement began within weeks of his release.⁵⁴

National meetings were held to discuss and settle the issue of organizational form in those years. By 1997, the decision had been made to apply for party status. The process was contentious, as the authorities placed several hurdles in their way. The party-to-be kept insisting on its regularization, holding frequent committee meetings in this semi-legal situation while authorities kept rejecting their demands – and occasionally dispersing their committee meetings.⁵⁵

The move towards seeking legal recognition and party status was decided due to both internal and external factors. Internally, the party’s founders and potential members would not be able to operate in secrecy as they were known to the state. There was also a sense of urgency related to the maintenance of the MMLM’s political capital in the face of organizational dispersion and the challenges to their political identity inherent in a radically shifting global (collapse of the socialist camp, triumphant liberalism) and local (NGO-ization, transitology discourse) political and ideological environment.⁵⁶ Also, there was a recognition among the founding members that the political-opportunity structures had changed, providing an opening that made legal, public-facing political activities possible and strategically appealing despite the regime’s enduring authoritarian nature.⁵⁷

The party only crossed the authorization threshold in 2004, after eight years of refusal to yield on the part of the authorities. It required a strong mobilization campaign, which included sit-ins outside the Ministry of Interior, and the support of other leftist parties for Annahj to finally be allowed to submit its application for party status. Many of those demonstrations were violently repressed by the security forces.⁵⁸ According to Abdallah el Harif, the first secretary general of Annahj, it was after a meeting with Yassine Mansouri, then head of the Direction Générales des Affaires Intérieures,⁵⁹ that the party’s application was accepted by the Ministry of Interior. The party was then allowed to hold its inaugural national congress in the same year, and el Harif, as its national secretary, was invited to speak on Moroccan television. This was interpreted by him as the state attempting to gauge its public positions.⁶⁰ This early goodwill was not to last long, however, as the party would face many administrative hurdles in organizing its future congresses and activities.

Authorization can be denied or rescinded in both official and unofficial ways, which reflects the shifting nature of the political system’s boundaries. While Annahj was not banned, it needed many years of mobilization to finally obtain legal administrative recognition. Other parties with different orientations have been denied that recognition in recent years,⁶¹ often on the basis of arguments in line with Morocco’s political parties law. Such was the case with the Parti Démocrate Amazigh (Moroccan Amazigh Democrat Party), its application was rejected in 2007 for being explicitly based on an ethnic category. Recognition can also be reversed, as in the case of Al-Badil al-Hadari. This Islamist party with leftist tendencies was authorized in 2005, after a hunger strike by its members. It then participated in elections and did not hold political views as

radical as those of Annahj. Nevertheless, it was banned a few years later, with its leadership jailed on terrorism charges. Despite their subsequent release, the party remains inactive – even though the authorities afterwards declared that there was no official ruling banning its activities.

As an opposition actor with some of the most radical positions on key issues for the country's monarchy, both its members' near-decade of repression and the later legalization of their party are indicative of Annahj's core relevance. Similarly, the Royal Cabinet reaching out to them for consultations on the Sahara matter, a key political issue, indicates that their relevance was to some degree recognized by the palace, even during this consolidation phase.⁶² On the other hand, the denial of access to public channels and the various forms of repression that affected the party over the years, since its authorization in 2004, indicate that it was also perceived as a threat. Repression is not free, and its costs are to be understood in relation to its impact on the self-presentation of the country as “democratizing” at the time.⁶³ Thus, repression too is indicative of an actor's relevance, particularly as part of the opposition and as a perceived threat to the incumbent.⁶⁴

The next threshold, that of representation, is the most intrinsically marked by electoralist bias. However, it is here conceived of in a manner that is adapted to the Moroccan setting and to the comparative insignificance of elections and their limited fairness. Particularly for opposition actors seeking radical change. As Annahj falls within that category, it unsurprisingly advocates and campaigns for a boycott of the electoral process.

It is worth noting that Annahj does not view electoral boycotts as an immutable position. Bringing up Lenin's positions on electoral participation, Annahj explicitly its willingness to participate in unfree and authoritarian elections if they offered an opportunity to mobilize and advance its cause. For Annahj's, participation should be conditioned on the strength and popular rootedness of the party and on the objective realities of the political situation, and the opportunities that the latter presents for the advancement of their democratization goals.⁶⁵

At this threshold, one potential way to assess the relevance of a radical opposition party that boycotts elections could be the size of its membership base. This measure can be analytically useful, but its application would be problematic for assessing anti-systemic actors' relevance. In fact, even Sartori has drawn a sharp distinction between size and relevance, particularly in reference to European Communist parties.⁶⁶ In authoritarian settings, anti-systemic opposition political actors should not be weighed in the same way as other parties. The latter avoid repression by accepting the tenets of the political system, and membership of them can often be viewed as an appealing career choice with social-mobility potential.⁶⁷ The costs associated with membership of a radical opposition organization,⁶⁸ partisan or otherwise, should be accounted for when assessing size, as they imply a higher level of commitment.⁶⁹ Membership is often used to argue for the strength and relevance of some radical actors in the Moroccan context, such as al-Adl Wa al-Ihssan (hereafter AWI), but focusing on that excludes organizations prioritizing political strategies other than mass membership.

Beyond electoral success and membership, it could be argued that measures of representativity at this threshold should be adjusted to the stated political strategy of the opposition party in question. Parties with a non-electoral orientation often have different roadmaps and goals that they seek to achieve. Party documents usually

include a listing of those goals and a self-assessment of their performance vis-à-vis achieving them.

In the case of Annahj, two main goals can be identified: “mass work” (al-‘Amal al-Jamahiry)⁷⁰ and the creation of opposition alliances or fronts, respectively. Both reflect dimensions relating to the model’s final threshold, which assesses the alliance potential of a party. For Herzog, the focus was on government coalitions. This is not applicable to the Moroccan case, as government coalitions lack coherence and have been a central co-optation mechanism for opposition parties.⁷¹ As Szmolka argues “The process of PJD cooptation reached its peak when this Islamist party was allowed to lead the coalition government”.⁷²

The final threshold in the lifespan model is that of relevance. In conceptualizing this, Pedersen⁷³ draws on Sartori, who focuses on a party’s coalition or blackmail potential.⁷⁴ The history of elections and government formation in Morocco highlights this conception’s inadaptability to the case.⁷⁵ Instead, when examining oppositions in a non-democratic setting, the concept must be adjusted to critically account for the shape of the political field, its boundaries, and their strategic use by incumbents. Without diverging excessively from the original conception, the coalition/blackmail potential can be centred on the opposition itself, rather than the authoritarian government and its institutions. This means that coalition potential can be assessed by including opposition parties, as well as their alliances with actors who might be excluded from it (e.g. unions, political and social movements). Similarly, blackmail potential should be adapted to the reality of the case (i.e. the incumbent determines governing coalitions directly and indirectly).

Drawing on the history of political oppositions in Morocco, it can be argued that non-participation in the electoral process should be viewed as a potentially effective blackmail strategy, particularly when combined with significant opposition coalitions. These two adjusted views of coalition and blackmail potential are strongly supported by a historical analysis of the Morocco’s opposition politics. The formation of opposition party coalitions (Koutla al-Wataniya and Koutla al-Dimoqratiyya),⁷⁶ and their use to boycott and critique the legitimacy of the Moroccan political system and its rules, has been one of the most successful strategies in extracting concessions from the monarchy.⁷⁷ The other successful one has been when a coalition of opposition actors comes out in support of a strong protest movement, as with the 20th February Movement (M20F). In that context, other actors such as the Democratic Left (DL) parties, adopted a boycott position vis-à-vis the constitutional process and the elections.

As a radical opposition actor, Annahj has been consistently pursuing alliances both with other leftist actors and beyond – such as with the Islamists of AWI, for instance. As the opposition group with the largest membership base and a highly organized actor, AWI is the most important non-leftist opposition force in Morocco. Since its inception, Annahj has sought and formed alliances with parties from Morocco’s DL, while also trying to regroup more radical and Marxist factions and individuals within its own ranks. That period was characterized by more flexible ideological positioning on the part of Annahj,⁷⁸ which indicates the high value that the party placed on creating coalitions and regrouping the left, in its radical and democratic manifestations, into a united opposition coalition. Annahj’s first “regrouping” attempt saw some moderate success, especially in terms of integrating other Marxist and radical factions within the newly formed party, but it did not achieve its original goal of creating an enduring formal coalition with the democratic-left parties. While the latter went on to form their own formal coalition without Annahj, strong links endured regardless.

Beyond the left, Annahj cultivated and maintained strong relations with AWI. They held several joint meetings; and through this exchange, their visions for democratic change, despite ideological differences, have come to align. Annahj views AWI as an ally in the struggle against authoritarianism, as part of a “front” against the regime.⁷⁹ Past that stage, both actors envision a democratic system wherein they would compete for the realization of their respective political visions electorally.

These opposition coalitions were important in their active support of a number of significant protest movements, such as the M20F, the Rif Hirak since 2017, and the Moroccan Social Front since 2020. Members of Annahj played a significant role in the M20F’s general assemblies. They were prominent in many cities, especially in the capital, Rabat, and they played a key role in shaping the movement’s trajectory. In the Hirak, the party played a central role in mobilization and advocacy for the movement beyond the Rif region, a position that contrasts with that of parliamentary opposition parties.

In civil society, the fact that members of Annahj are at the helm of the internationally-recognized Moroccan Association for Human Rights (Association Marocaine des Droits Humains, AMDH) is another factor that allows the party to have an outsized influence on public debate in Morocco, and to mobilize a wide network of supports abroad when needed.⁸⁰ They also played key roles in the Forum des Alternatives Maroc, linking Moroccan civil society to international and regional networks, particularly through the World Social Forum.

Members of the party have also held significant positions within the main labour union, the Union Marocaine du Travail (UMT), heading the main opposition faction within it with control over significant federations (agriculture, education).⁸¹ Similarly, they also had a significant presence within the other major unions, such as the Confédération Démocratique du Travail (CDT).⁸² This influence grants actors from Annahj an influence on a number of social dialogue processes between the unions and the government.

In terms of results, the 2011 protests led to significant constitutional concessions. While Annahj was by no means the only actor supporting the M20F, it played a key role in supporting its growth along with other radical opposition actors. Beyond the involvement of party members, this support also involved more material and logistical aspects, such as the provision of safe spaces for the movement to meet and hold its assemblies. This is in stark contrast with other political parties’ non-involvement and opposition to the movement, which has been a key argument levelled against their relevance.⁸³ Furthermore, the AMDH, along with the UMT and CDT, played a central role within the National Council created to support the movement.

Annahj is also active in numerous local struggles. Its members provided support to various social and labour causes, with varying degrees of success. In Casablanca, for instance, their involvement in support of informal settlement’s housing rights, by radicalizing the protesters, led to the creation of a neighbourhood commission that would later increase its reach to cover the totality of the city, gaining recognition as an official partner from the authorities.⁸⁴ Similar dynamics can be found in support of various local and labour causes.

Overall, the above analysis, across the different thresholds of its lifespan, demonstrates that Annahj has a non-negligible degree of relevance as an opposition party. This is particularly noticeable in its efforts at unifying Morocco’s radical opposition actors, on the left and across ideological divides. It is also displayed in its involvement in organizing diverse opposition coalitions and supporting protest movements, be they political or more social in nature.

Conclusion

This article set out to critically examine the applications of the concept of relevance in studies of political oppositions in authoritarian settings. It has shown that there was a need for a clarification of the concept when investigating oppositions in electoral authoritarian systems, in ways that do not exclude radical and anti-systemic parties merely due to their non-participation in elections. The relevance of such actors was demonstrated to be obscured in large part due to the electoral bias inherent in traditional conceptions of relevance, originally formulated for liberal-democratic settings. Transposing these concepts without adapting them to the specificities of authoritarian polities risks limiting the scope of such studies to co-opted parts of the opposition, thus falling for the institutional mimicry that authoritarian regimes engage in. This, in turn, undermines our ability to fully understand and account for various key processes in which opposition parties tend to play a significant role, such as democratization or authoritarian survival.

To rectify this, and based on a review of ongoing developments in studies of political parties' relevance, this article provided a conceptual framework that is more adapted to the specificities of opposition parties within electoral-authoritarian systems. Structured along the lines of Pedersen's lifespan model, this framework is flexible enough to be used in the study of political opposition parties across various forms of authoritarian political systems beyond the Moroccan case, opening the way for more systematic comparisons.

The framework's heuristic and analytical power was then demonstrated through its application to the case of Annahj in Morocco. The relevance of this understudied actor was clarified by tracing its evolution in line with the proposed framework. Simultaneously, the obfuscating effect of purely electoralist conceptions of relevance was established.

Future research might draw on this revised model to explore other political oppositions within authoritarian settings. This would likely lead to an expansion of the field and the generation of new insights about authoritarian politics. As such, what was previously obscured by ill-fitting notions of relevance can now better come to light.

Notes

1. See Brancati, "Democratic Authoritarianism"; Pepinsky, "The Institutional Turn in Comparative Authoritarianism".
2. See Helms, "Political Oppositions in Democratic and Authoritarian", 1–2.
3. Franklin, "Political Party Opposition to Noncompetitive Regimes"; Morgenbesser, "The Menu of Autocratic Innovation"; Chang and Higashijima, "The Choice of Electoral Systems"; Reny, "Autocracies and the Control".
4. Conceptual clarity in studies of authoritarianism is identified as a necessity to advance the field in Schlumberger, *Authoritarian Regimes*.
5. Hinnebusch, "Authoritarian persistence, democratization theory"
6. It can also contribute to a better understanding of the rise of Islamist actors and its connections to authoritarian survival, as in Sallam, *Classless Politics*.
7. Especially in relation to autocratic regimes' tendency to engage in "institutional mimicry" Schlumberger, "Puzzles of Political Change".
8. See for instance Berman "Policing the Organizational Threat" use of the V-Dem dataset to highlight the similarities between Morocco and other authoritarian cases. See also Wiebrecht's findings on increased opposition participation in authoritarian legislatures post-1990, in "Between elites and oppositions"
9. See the "Area Studies Controversy" discussion in Bank and Busse, "MENA Political Science Research".

10. Schlumberger, *Authoritarian Regimes*, 1:18.
11. Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems*, 2005.
12. Pedersen, "Towards a New Typology".
13. Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems*, 267.
14. Herzog, "Minor Parties".
15. Beyond minor parties, the study of new parties also draws on the approach. E.g. Krouwel and Lucardie, "Waiting in the Wings"; Bolleyer and Bytzek, "Origins of Party Formation".
16. Herzog, "Minor Parties", 327.
17. For a recent investigation of some of Herzog's insights applicability to the British case, see Sloan, "Can We Feel Their Presence?"
18. Barrio, Oger, and Field, "VOX Spain".
19. Vittori, "Which Organization for Which Party?"
20. Rüdig and Sajuria, "Green Party Members".
21. Thompson and Pearson, "Exploring Party Change".
22. March, *Radical Left Parties in Europe*; Bankov, "Red Belts' Anywhere?"
23. Since Herzog's attempt, few studies have gone beyond that scope. E.g. Kestler et al., "Timing, Sequences and New Party"; Fell, *Taiwan's Green Parties*.
24. See Levitsky and Way, "The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism", 51–2.
25. For instance Willis, "Political Parties in the Maghrib"; Bennani-Chraïbi, *Partis politiques et protestations*; Maghraoui, "On the Relevance or Irrelevance".
26. See Cavatorta et al., "Political Parties in the MENA", 10–11.
27. An opinion validated by many studies on authoritarian elections' democratizing potential, as reported by Gandhi and Lust, "Elections Under Authoritarianism". See also Schedler, *The Politics of Uncertainty*.
28. A notable exception would be Bouaziz, *al-Yasār al-maghriby al-jadyd*.
29. Annahj claims specifically the heritage of Ila al-Amam, one of the three main organizations constituting the MMLM. The Democratic Left parties (the Parti Socialiste Unifié, Federation de la Gauche Democratique) have connections to 23 Mars, the other main component of the MMLM, through the Organisation de l'Action Démocratique et Populaire. The latter was a political party that joined the Koutla in pushing for constitutional reforms in the 1990s. Parties in that tradition resort to boycotts occasionally, particularly of legislative elections, when they deem participation unproductive. On the MMLM, see Bouaziz *al-Yasār al-maghriby al-jadyd*. On the Koutla and its political trajectory, see Bouaziz *Aux origines de la Koutla*.
30. Transpositions of electoralist relevance standards developed for democratic cases ignores the significant literature indicating their fundamental differences to authoritarian elections. For a review of the topic, see Gandhi and Lust, "Elections Under Authoritarianism". See also, Gandhi, *Political Institutions under Dictatorship*.
31. The radical Left has remained understudied in the region until a recent resurgence of interest. See for instance Bardawil, *Revolution and Disenchantment*; Guirguis, *The Arab Lefts*.
32. Zartman, "Opposition as Support of the State".
33. *Ibid.*, 63.
34. Albrecht, "How Can Opposition Support Authoritarianism?"
35. *Ibid.*, 390.
36. See Willis, "Political Parties in the Maghrib", 16–17.
37. The numerous writings produced by Annahj or the Democratic Left parties during that period would dispel that impression.
38. Maghraoui, "On the Relevance or Irrelevance", 2–3.
39. *Ibid.*, 19.
40. *Ibid.*, 9.
41. Casani, "Cross-Ideological Coalitions".
42. Herzog, "Minor Parties".
43. *Ibid.*, 327.
44. Vairel, "La transitologie, langage du pouvoir".
45. Anti-system is used here in the narrower sense proposed by Sartori: "An anti-system party would not change – if it could – the government but the very system of government". *Parties and Party Systems*, 2005, 132. In Cappocia's more elaborate typology, the concept is

- used in reference to both the ideological and relational forms of anti-systemness “Anti-System Parties”, 24. It must be underlined that Cappocia’s ideological anti-systemness notion is devised in reference to democratic regimes.
46. Baylocq and Granci, “« 20 Février ». Discours et Portraits”; Dahbi, “Meso-Level Interactions”.
 47. Lust-Okar, *Structuring Conflict*.
 48. Heibach and Transfeld, “Opposition Dynamism under Authoritarianism”.
 49. Pedersen, “Towards a New Typology”.
 50. Lust-Okar, *Structuring Conflict*.
 51. Pedersen, “Towards a New Typology”, 7.
 52. Herzog, “Minor Parties”, 323–6.
 53. For an overview of the MMLM trajectory prior to that phase, see Bouaziz, *al-Yasār al-maghribiy al-jadyd*
 54. Ḍayf wa masyra.
 55. Video interview with Abdallah el Harif, first national secretary and key founder of Annahj; Ḥiwār.
 56. These included the increasing temptation of reformist-liberal views of democratic change, and the deep involvement of potential members in civil society and labour unions at the expense of overtly political engagements; Ḥiwār. It should be noted that these worries were not unfounded, as a number of figures from the MMLM were coopted by the monarchy.
 57. al-Nahj al-dīmoqrāṭī, “‘Aham almarāḥil”. See also, Ḍayf Wa Masyra; Ḥiwār.
 58. See for instance “Annahj «rentre dans le rang»”.
 59. Mansouri became head of the DGED (Direction Generale Etudes et Documentation, Morocco’s external intelligence agency) in 2005. An important figure in Morocco’s security apparatus, Mansouri was also a classmate of King Mohammed VI.
 60. Ḥiwār.
 61. Earlier examples would be the bans of the Parti Communiste Marocain (1959, 1964) and its short-lived revival as the Parti de la Liberation et du Socialisme (1969).
 62. al-Nahj al-dīmoqrāṭī, “Biša’ n da’ watinā limusāhama”.
 63. Various studies on policing and repression in Morocco and beyond highlight this dynamic. For Morocco, see Berman, “Policing the Organizational Threat”. For an earlier study on Jordan, see Moss, “Repression, Response, and Contained Escalation”. For a non-MENA case, see Chen, *Social Protest and Contentious Authoritarianism*; Su and He, “Street as Courtroom”. For non-authoritarian settings, see della Porta, *Social Movements, Political Violence*.
 64. See Reny, “Autocracies and Control of Societal Organizations”.
 65. See al-Nahj al-dīmoqrāṭī, “Alwaḍ’ al-syāsy al-rāhin”. Participation without popular strength is cautioned against as leading to cooptation risks without much gain, with the case of the National Movement parties provided as examples.
 66. Sartori distinguishes between relevance and size, viewing the latter as “tangential”. *Parties and Party Systems*, 2005, 267.
 67. Either by being elected to a position, or by inclusion in the remunerated staff of elected figures from the party. Illustrations of these dynamics can be found in Bennani-Chraïbi, *Partis politiques et protestations*. See also, for an overview of the changing recruitment processes and membership of the USFP, Bennani-Chraïbi, “« Hommes d’affaires » versus « profs de fac »”.
 68. Beyond exposure to repression, membership of radical opposition organizations such as AWI or Annahj, or even less radical ones such as the Democratic Left parties, is a longer and more demanding process than admission into other Moroccan parties.
 69. Connections between repression and participation are well established in the literature on social movements. For instance, see McAdam et al., *Dynamics of Contention*.
 70. This allowed Annahj to hold significant sway within other organizations (Labour unions, civil society).
 71. See for instance Szmolka, “Inter- and Intra-Party Relations”.
 72. Szmolka, “Bipolarization of the Moroccan Political”, 6.
 73. Pedersen, “Towards a New Typology”.
 74. Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems*.
 75. For recent studies illustrating the point, see Daadaoui, “Of Monarchs and Islamists”; Desrous, “Authoritarian Resilience and Democratic Representation”. For a longer-term historical perspective, see Bouaziz, *Aux origines de la Koutla*; Bendourou, *Le régime politique marocain*.

76. For a detailed overview, see Bouaziz, *Aux origines de la Koutla*.
77. Concessions are conceived here as significant changes made to the constitution and the electoral system, partially meeting oppositional demands. Participation and blackmail in the electoralist sense was historically unsuccessful in Morocco, as was the case under the first constitution of 1962: as the opposition exercised its blackmail power within the institutions, King Hassan dissolved the parliament and suspended its activities from 1965 until 1971. See Dahbi, “The Historical Emergence and Transformation”. The same tactic was also attempted after the 2011 constitutional changes by the Islamist Parti de la Justice et du Développement (PJD). The party came first in the elections and was entitled to head and form the government, but it faced significant hurdles from the monarchy, making it unable to form a functional coalition, leading to a five-months-long “blocage” that only ended when the ex-prime minister Abdelilah Benkirane relinquishing his position. The PJD then endorsed many unpopular policies, costing it over 90% of its parliamentary seats in the next elections.
78. For instance, the party did not define itself explicitly as Marxist-leninist, instead using the vocabulary of scientific socialism, which was shared other parties on the left. The party did not officially define itself as Marxist-Leninist until its fifth congress in 2022.
79. Makhzen refers to the monarchy’s networks of influence and power, within the state apparatus and beyond.
80. On the political significance and connections of the AMDH, see Hivert and Marchetti “Numérisation marginaux politiquement importants?”
81. Abdelhamid Amine, key opposition figure within the union national secretariat, was also leading member of Annahj and president of the AMDH. Khadija Ryadi, also a member of Annahj and the UMT, followed him as president of the AMDH for two terms (2007–2013). She received the prestigious U.N Prize in the field of Human Rights in 2013.
82. Mustapha Brahma, national secretary of Annahj until 2022, was a member of the CDT executive committee.
83. Maghraoui, “On the Relevance or Irrelevance”, 17–18.
84. Bénit-Gbaffou and Oldfield, “Claiming Rights in the African City”.

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