FIELDWORK BRIEF

MIGRATION AND THE POLITICAL ELITE IN MOROCCO

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the context of the MIGRADEMO project, this report presents selected descriptive findings from our research on the extent to which members of Parliament link their international migration experience to their outlook and work in their homeland parliaments. A core component of this research is 17 semi-structured interviews with returnees who were elected to the Moroccan Parliament in the past two terms. Our preliminary analysis suggests that for these politicians, living abroad influenced their opinions, facilitated the acquisition of specific knowledge, and provided valuable connections through a host of different experiences. Some of these politicians also link their migration experience to their parliamentary activities, but also reflect on the obstacles they face in diffusing the ideas and skills they acquired during their time spent abroad.

INTRODUCTION

Recent studies on transnational migrant practices have uncovered how migrants influence democratic participation in their home countries through the remittance of both money and newfound ideas about democracy from afar or through return. The MIGRADEMO project seeks to unpack these processes at different levels, including the political elite, civil society, and households in regions with high levels of outmigration. This brief focuses on **members of the Moroccan Parliament who have returned from abroad**. Our research addresses a gap in the existing literature, which is mostly quantitative and focused on heads of state, by examining how the migration experience of these politicians influenced their perspectives and activities both within and outside the Parliament.

Our research team conducted, coded, and analysed **17 semi-structured interviews** with Moroccan returnee members of Parliament (7 women, 10 men). As the chart indicates (Fig. 1), the study attempted to target a broad range of Moroccan politicians by including returnee former and current members of Parliament affiliated with different national parties.

The fieldwork took place both online and in person in various locations, including **Rabat, Fez, and Salé**, between **January and March 2023**.

The initial identification of Moroccan politicians with a migration background was particularly challenging due to the limited biographical information available on the website of the Moroccan Parliament, as well as other official channels. To overcome this obstacle, our researcher carefully reviewed the lists of candidates elected for the 2016-2021 and 2021-2026 legislative terms, checking their online profiles to find out more about their previous experiences. After this exploratory phase, we contacted Moroccan returnee members of Parliament via email, social media platforms, and phone calls. Other sampling methods also included networking and snowballing.

17 INTERVIEWEES
(7 WOMEN, 10 MEN)

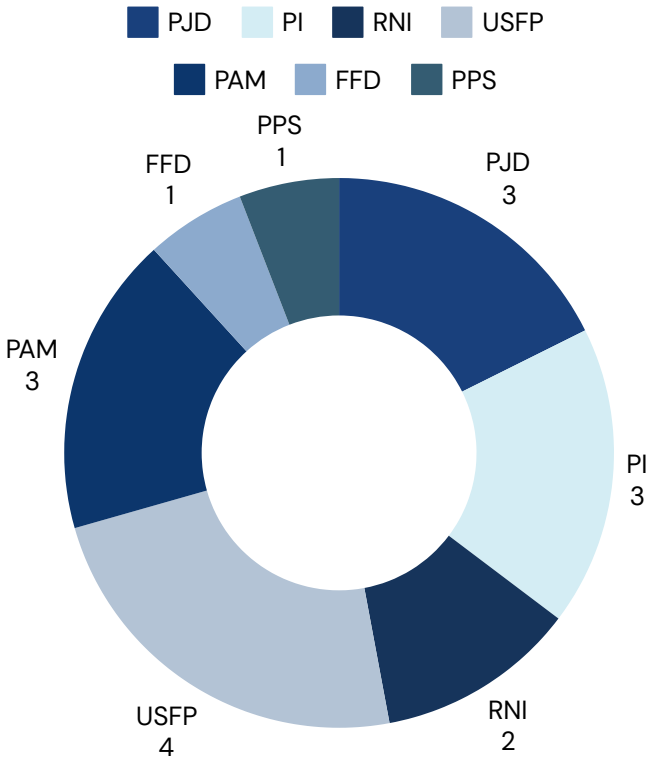

Fig. 1. Interviewees and party distribution. The acronyms stand for *Parti de la justice et du développement*, *Parti de l'Istiqlal*, *Rassemblement National des Indépendants*, *Union Socialiste des Forces Populaires*, *Parti authenticité et modernité*, *Front des Forces Démocratiques*, and *Parti du progrès et du socialisme*.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MIGRATION EXPERIENCE

Most of the interviewees moved abroad to pursue **higher education**, especially master's degrees. While some interviewees decided to join traineeships or other work opportunities abroad after graduation abroad, most of them considered their **time abroad as a temporary experience** and therefore returned to their home country right after completing their studies.

Among the reasons for returning to Morocco, several participants mentioned **patriotic sentiments**. Additionally, some interviewees expressed their desire to share the knowledge they gained abroad and contribute to the improvement of their country.

Although their stay abroad generally had a limited timeframe and was strictly conditional on fulfilling a specific purpose, the **duration** varied, sometimes extending over several years. France was the most common **destination** for the interviewees, likely due to the linguistic aspect, colonial history, and strong ties between the Moroccan and French education systems.

> ***[Y]ou don't go to France and Europe just to study, you live there, you have a social life, [...] every day you learn the codes of this society, [...] and this environment being very different from ours, it has left its mark on my DNA and there are many automatisms that [...] have also influenced my current and past way of functioning in my country***
>
> Interview with a returnee member of Parliament

(RE)SOCIALISATION ABROAD

The members of Parliament interviewed linked their migration experience to changes in their outlook. This change can be attributed to several mechanisms.

The first mechanism concerns **political engagement abroad**, which was generally limited for most participants despite their subsequent involvement in national politics upon their return. Participants mentioned time constraints as one of the main obstacles, as they often had limited availability for activities beyond their academic commitments. Among the exceptions, there are examples of how one participant followed Mitterrand's electoral campaign as an observer in the early '80s and another one supported several associations in her country of study, which allowed her to meet local ministers and other politically engaged individuals.

The second mechanism identified is **civic engagement**, which often overlapped with the interviewees' involvement in Moroccan social affairs from afar. For instance, one participant decided to run for the elections of a diaspora-led student association while studying abroad. This experience helped her learn how to conduct debates and acquire a crucial skill for her political future.

The third mechanism involves **exposure to foreign media**. Some interviewees ascribe their change of outlook to the access to local information and communication channels. In this regard, TV programmes played a crucial role in providing constant updates about local politics and transmitting valuable skills (e.g., on public speaking).

Lastly, the resocialisation process was also facilitated through the **social relationships** the interviewees developed during their time abroad, some of which they continued to nurture upon their return. Many of these interactions involved members of the Moroccan diaspora and, occasionally, other immigrant communities. However, interviewees rarely refer to socialising with the host country's national population.

MIGRATION AND PERCEPTION OF GENDER EQUALITY AND IMMIGRATION

Participants acknowledge the influence of their migration background on various topics, such as gender equality and immigration.

Regarding **gender equality**, most returnee members of Parliament linked their stay abroad to their recognition of the ongoing challenges faced by women in Morocco and their welcoming of further change. Regarding gender equality, some returnee members of Parliament linked their stay abroad to their recognition of the ongoing challenges faced by women in Morocco and their welcoming of further change while others stated that their experiences abroad only reinforced desire of gender equality. For example, one participant mentioned the greater freedom and safety she experienced as a woman in France and advocated for similar improvements in Morocco.

Political affiliation intersects with the interviewees' views on how migration influenced their perceptions of gender equality. While those from left-wing parties generally said that they had a pro-gender equality stance before migrating, some con-servative participants reflect on the fact that they became more supportive of an egali-tarian perspective after their time abroad. However, the very idea of a tension between political affiliation and perspectives on gender equality was also challenged. For example, one interviewee argued that conservatism does not pose a barrier to respecting and fulfilling women's rights.

The migration experience also changed the interviewees' views on **immigration**. Several returnee members of Parliament recount that they developed a greater sensitivity to the plight of migrants crossing Moroccan borders and gained a deeper understanding of the reasons behind their journeys. However, they often distinguish between the immigration they witnessed abroad and the immigration taking place in Morocco. Some interviewees acknowledge that Morocco is currently grappling with the challenges of transitioning from primarily being a source of emigration and a transit country to becoming a new destination country. This includes attracting migrants from different cultures and backgrounds, which poses disparities and cultural challenges.

MIGRATION AND THE ENTRY INTO POLITICS

Interviewees often acknowledged the positive impact of their migration experience on their political opinions, but they rarely referred to their time spent in a foreign country as a direct determinant of their decision to engage in Moroccan national politics. Still, their migration experience may have contributed to **reinforcing other pre-existing motivations**, such as the desire to change the situation in their home country.

Several research participants reflected on how their migration experience, especially if linked to an educational path pursued abroad, was an **asset for their political career**. Indeed, according to some interviewees, this experience facilitated their election and their positioning within their parties. In some cases, the time spent abroad is considered a unique form of expertise within their party, as fellow party members tend to view them as qualified interlocutors on, for instance, the topic of migration.

Yet, while none of the interviewees consider their migration background a direct disadvantage, some do not believe it played an important role in the **candidates' selection process** conducted by the party leadership and in their subsequent political careers within the party itself.

Some participants highlight how their skills and knowledge rather than their time abroad led them to prestigious roles within or outside the party. Some interviewees also give the impression of downplaying the impact of their migratory background, in order to not be perceived as part of a privileged elite, distant from the reality of Moroccan socio-political affairs.

LINKING MIGRATION EXPERIENCE WITH PARLIAMENTARY ACTIVITY

The interviewees reflected on how their migration experience influenced their **parliamentary activities**. Some politicians developed a keener interest in politics in other countries, expressing their willingness to emulate positive dynamics observed abroad at the national level.

For instance, one participant joined a parliamentary commission that, among other topics, focused on media and public debate, striving to promote some of the practices learned abroad in this sector. Some interviewees became members of specific **parliamentary commissions** due to their migratory **experience** in particular countries. In a similar vein, interviewees highlighted how their migration experience, as well as the knowledge acquired during their studies abroad, influenced their initiatives in terms of **legislative proposals** and **parliamentary debates**.

However, not all returnee members of Parliament could detect such an impact. One participant argued that, while the time spent abroad may inspire one's political agenda, parliamentary questions should always adapt the Moroccan context.

Returnee members of Parliament reflected on their willingness and experience with sharing the knowledge and skills gained abroad during their parliamentary activity.

Fig. 2. Photo taken by our research team in Rabat, showing the entrance to the Moroccan Parliament.

That said, some of the interviewees also reported **obstacles to the diffusion** of these ideas and skills. One interviewee noted the significant differences between political ideologies and mechanisms in Morocco and Europe, which makes it challenging to adapt foreign concepts and instruments to the local parliamentary dynamics and social context. Other participants referred to the need to align with the overall policy stance of their party and other members of parliament, thus limiting individual initiatives.

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