

Web Commentary

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The 2007 Moroccan Parliamentary Elections Results and Implications

By Amr Hamzawy

Morocco conducted elections to the lower chamber of the parliament, the House of Representatives, on September 7. Thirty-three political parties and thirteen independent electoral lists contested the chamber's 325 seats. (Thirty seats are reserved for women based on a quota system introduced prior to the previous parliamentary elections, which were held in 2002.) Eighteen parties ran candidates in at least 50 percent of the country's ninety-five electoral districts. Five parties were represented in almost every district: the two governing parties (the Socialist Union of Popular Forces and the Independence Party—Istiqlal), the main Islamist opposition party (the Party for Justice and Development—PJD), the Popular Movement, and the National Rally of Independents.

Voter Apathy and Popular Disenchantment

Local and international monitoring groups confirmed that the elections were conducted in a fair and transparent manner. However, there were a number of reports on violations that involved vote buying, in both urban and rural areas. Remarkably, voter turnout plunged to a historical low of 37 percent, down from 51 percent in the 2002 elections and 58 percent in 1997. Poor participation marred the process despite significant get-out-the-vote efforts by the government as well as political parties and civil society organizations. Government agencies and various nongovernmental organizations conducted voter education programs, especially in impoverished urban areas, and leading political parties announced detailed electoral platforms several weeks before the elections and publicized them heavily. Most platforms tackled the economic and social needs of the population, and, at least in the case of the Socialist Union, the Independence Party, and the PJD, concrete policy measures were included. Despite all these efforts, Moroccans' waning level of interest in electoral politics persisted.

It appears that the inability of the House of Representatives to play an active role in policy implementation has resulted in a growing disenchantment with parliamentary politics that has dimmed prospects for broader participation in the political process. Wide segments of the population have come to see the parliament as a failed institution that can do little to solve their pressing economic and social problems. It is worth noting that Morocco has sustained one of the highest unemployment rates in North Africa over the past two decades. Continuous efforts to alleviate poverty have had little real effect on the welfare of the

country's poor. Major cities such as Casablanca, Rabat, and Marrakech have literally become encircled by rings of dilapidated settlements extending into the rural heartland that breed social illnesses such as religious extremism, juvenile criminality, and illegal migration by young people to the developed countries of the West.

Since 1998, many formerly hopeful Moroccan citizens have become increasingly skeptical about the capacity of the various Moroccan political parties to carry out meaningful socioeconomic reforms. In a remarkable turn of events that year that ended decades of political upheaval, the former opposition parties, the Socialist Union and the Independence Party, were asked by the late King Hassan II to form a coalition government. The two parties, operating in coalition with royalist and regional parties, have constituted the core of every Moroccan government since then. Nonetheless, little has come out of this transformation. The popular hopes of substantive reforms set in motion in 1998 have diminished greatly. The Socialist Union and the Independence Party did well enough in the 2002 elections to cling to leadership of their coalition regime: The Socialist Union won fifty seats in the House of Representatives and the runner-up Independence Party forty-six. The two parties' popular appeal was shrinking, however, as the decline in voter turnout (51 percent, down from 58 percent in 1997) and the rise of the Islamist PJD demonstrated.

Since Muhammad VI ascended to the throne in 1999, a sustained process of political opening has been occurring in Morocco. The political sphere has become more diverse, and safeguards for human rights have strengthened remarkably. General restrictions on press freedoms and repressive measures against individual journalists, apart from a few exceptional cases in the last few years, have gradually decreased. In what is an unprecedented step for the Arab world that has thus far remained unmatched, Morocco has also embarked on the difficult road of examining its repressive recent past. The National Commission for Reconciliation and Justice was established in 2003 to lead collective governmental and nongovernmental efforts to come to terms with the repression of the last few decades and to do justice to its victims.

However, improvements in the conditions of the political process have stopped short of addressing two central impediments to democratic transition in Morocco, the concentration of power in royal hands and the absence of credible checks and balances. Under King Muhammad VI, the monarchy has continued to be the key player in the Moroccan political system, depriving the legislature of any real oversight powers. In addition, the national electoral system, which is based on proportional representation, always produces a fragmented parliament that is easily checked by the monarchy. The concentration of power in the Moroccan system has also reduced the government to the role of executor of policies designed by the king, with no decision-making powers. Two major outcomes of these structural deficiencies have been diminished parliamentary credibility and weaker political parties. In this context, voter apathy becomes a form of protest by the majority of Moroccan citizens against a seemingly pluralist process that has left the monarchy untouched as the final arbiter of the system.

To place full responsibility for the low voter turnout in the 2007 elections on the domineering position of the king misses the mark, however. The deficient performance of political parties, be they in the governing coalition or in the opposition, has greatly exacerbated the problem. Over the last ten years, the coalition governments led by the

Socialist Union and the Independence Party have failed to develop credible programs to resolve Morocco's severe socioeconomic predicaments. Worse, these regimes have been marked by corrupt practices that have jeopardized the historical legacy of the Socialist Union and the Independence Party as opponents of government corruption. The efforts of the parliamentary parties to reach a balanced distribution of power among the king, the cabinet, and the legislature have yielded no tangible results. The monarchy has systematically balked at introducing constitutional reforms in the areas pertaining to the decision-making powers of the cabinet—specifically those endowed in the office of the prime minister—and to the oversight powers of the parliament. The outcome has been a burgeoning mistrust of traditional political forces, which recent efforts by different parties at organizational and programmatic renewal have failed to contain.

But even the fresh and untainted PJD, which entered the Moroccan political scene in the mid-1990s and won forty-two seats in the 2002 parliamentary elections—up from the nine it took in its first electoral effort in 1997—has suffered somewhat from popular mistrust. To be sure, the PJD has benefited somewhat from its commitment to the opposition camp in the House of Representatives since 2002, avoiding the popular frustration that has been expressed toward the parties of the governing coalition. In addition, PJD members of parliament have become much more effective in recent years, focusing their legislative efforts on significant economic and social issues such as corruption, unemployment, and poverty. But the unimpressive track record of PJD-run municipalities has created an image problem for the party. Popular doubts have grown considerably about the ability of the PJD to translate its ideologically inspired opposition platform into meaningful policy measures were it to become the governing party, a challenge that Islamist opposition movements have been struggling with across the Arab world.

In fairness to the PJD, since 2002 the party has become less preoccupied with debates on ideological and religious issues, in contrast to Islamist political movements in Egypt and Jordan, for example. Under the leadership of Secretary-General Sa'd al-Din al-'Uthmani and the generation of young activists who joined the party in the late 1990s, the PJD has revamped its image in significant ways. The party has evolved into a venue for serious debates on public policy measures needed to address Morocco's social and economic problems. It has also reached out to liberal and leftist groups on the Moroccan political scene in an exceptional effort to normalize the image of the Islamist party and to build consensus on a national reform agenda. The PJD effected a remarkable breakthrough in 2005 with the endorsement of a new, more liberal version of the *mudawwana*, the code regulating marriage and family life. The revision of the *mudawwana* greatly improved women's social status and was opposed by more conservative Islamist elements. Moreover, in placing economic and social issues at the core of its 2007 electoral platform ("Together to Build a Just Morocco"), the party demonstrated that it was on a unique evolutionary trajectory relative to the rest of the Arab Islamist scene. The PJD has emerged as a pragmatic player committed to participation in pluralist politics and in constant search of real solutions to the persistent needs of the populace. Ideological assertions, including calls for application of *sharia*, have been gradually reduced to low-key objectives. Indeed, instead of referring to *sharia*—or to an Islamic frame of reference—the 2007 electoral platform of the PJD mentioned the "protection of Morocco's Islamic identity" as only one of its priorities. Yet it seems that these significant changes were insufficient to convince more Moroccans to vote in the recent elections.

Although the PJD has managed in recent years to develop stable and increasingly well-organized constituencies in urban centers, especially among the younger segments of the Moroccan population, its popular appeal has remained limited. Like Islamist movements elsewhere in the Arab world, the PJD has capitalized on the growing momentum toward Islamization in society. Islamist currents in vital social spheres—education, social services, media outlets, and youth activism—have been strengthening in Morocco since the 1970s. The Islamist momentum has gradually forced the expansion of the space given to the articulation of religious ideas in politics. However, in its efforts at constituency building, the PJD has failed to tap into the social capital accumulated and sustained by other Islamist organizations such as the Movement for Justice and Charity (*al-'Adl wa al-Ihsan*) of Sheikh Abdul Salam Yassin.

In the last two decades, the followers of Sheikh Yassin have advanced to the forefront of the movement toward Islamization in Morocco, focusing their activism on proselytization and the provision of social services. Because of its rejectionist attitude toward the monarchy and its leadership's claim that the whole political system is corrupt and therefore cannot be reformed gradually, the Movement for Justice and Charity has boycotted politics since its inception in the 1980s. Prominent figures in the movement have systematically criticized the PJD for its participation in parliamentary politics and accused the party leadership of being submissive to the monarchy. The popularity of the fundamental opposition rhetoric of Justice and Charity among Islamist constituencies has kept the PJD from mobilizing wide segments of the disenfranchised population. Despite conflicting accounts regarding the voting behavior of the members of Sheikh Yassin's movement and its sympathizers in previous parliamentary elections, the voter turnout in 2007, as well as the PJD's limited gains, demonstrates that a considerable majority of Islamist constituencies boycotted the elections.

Election Results: A Surprising Outcome?

The results of the 2007 parliamentary elections surprised many observers. The liberal conservatives of the Independence Party finished the race in a leading position, with fifty-two seats (and 16 percent of the popular vote), followed by the PJD, which secured forty-six seats (14 percent of the popular vote). The Popular Movement and the National Rally of Independents finished third and fourth, with forty-one and thirty-nine seats, respectively. The party that formerly held the most seats, the Socialist Union, was reduced to possession of just thirty-eight.

The fall of the Socialist Union was widely expected because of a series of internal conflicts and splits within the party as well as the poor record of the governing coalition. However, the strong showing of the Independence Party, the Socialist Union's longtime coalition partner, is puzzling. Two factors can be mentioned here; the appeal of the Independence Party to traditionally religious constituencies in Morocco and the party's strong networks of support in some rural areas.

The PJD's results also came as a surprise. Prior to the elections expectations were high regarding the Islamists' potential gains, especially against the background of Western and domestic polls predicting an unstoppable rise of the PJD. During the final phase of the election campaign, the party leadership expressed high optimism, stating publicly that seventy to eighty seats were within reach and that the party would be the strongest bloc in

the parliament. The fact that the PJD added only four additional seats in 2007—going up from 42 in 2002 to 47—has stunned its leadership. Initial statements by prominent party figures were characterized by an angry tone and harsh accusations of vote buying by other parties; however, it seems likely that the party will accept the outcome of the elections as legitimate.

Most probably, the election results will lead to a new governing coalition led by the Independence Party, in which the liberal-inclined Popular Movement and the National Rally of Independents, along with a few junior partners, will participate. Whether the Socialist Union would stick to its strategic alliance with the Independence Party or change to the opposition banks continues—four days after the elections—to be unclear. And although initial statements by the leadership of the Independence Party left the question of whether the PJD would be asked to join the governing coalition unanswered, it is likely that the Islamists would remain in the opposition in the new parliament. Indeed, the PJD's modest showing in the elections seems to have spared both the monarchy and traditional political forces the painful task of including the party in the new government, which would have been necessary had it finished the race in the first position. Prior to the elections, contradictory signals were reported to be coming from the palace with regard to the inclusion of Islamists in government. Until election day, traditional political forces, especially the Socialist Union and—despite ambiguous statements by some of its leaders—the Independence Party sustained a rejectionist attitude with regard to the prospect of building a coalition government with the Islamists.

The outcome of the 2007 parliamentary elections in Morocco does not change the country's political scene fundamentally. The grand narrative of political continuity amid slow gradual liberalizing reforms has once again proven persistent. However, the unprecedented low voter turnout, symbolizing as it does a growing mistrust of politics, represents a challenge to both the monarchy and the political parties. There is a clear paradox in Moroccan politics; even as the country has taken significant steps toward opening up the political sphere and gradually expanding the scope of pluralism, popular interest in electoral politics has been decreasing as the election results attest. Unless the monarchy and political parties, traditional forces and Islamists, work out a consensus regarding the empowerment of the parliament and the cabinet as well as minimizing the concentration of power in royal hands, voter apathy is likely to grow.

Amr Hamzawy is a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment and a noted Egyptian political scientist who previously taught at Cairo University and the Free University of Berlin. Hamzawy has a deep knowledge of Middle East politics and specific expertise on the reform process in the region. His research interests include the changing dynamics of political participation in the Arab world, the role of Islamist opposition groups in Arab politics, with special attention both to Egypt and the Gulf countries.

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1779 Massachusetts Avenue, NW ■ Washington, DC 20036
202-483-7600 ■ Fax 202-483-1840
www.CarnegieEndowment.org