Local Elections in Morocco: A Bet on the Kingdom's Reforms

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Brief Analysis

Three upcoming rounds of local and upper house elections will test the reform process launched in the wake of Morocco's Arab Spring.

On September 4, Moroccans will go to the polls for regional and municipal council elections. On September 17, the new municipal councils will convene to select members of provincial councils. And on October 2, electoral colleges representing the regions and professional associations will vote for the House of Councilors (Majlis al-Mustasharin), the upper chamber of parliament. These rounds of voting mark the first elections since 2011, when the political upheaval of the so-called Arab Spring prompted the monarchy to launch a series of reforms, including constitutional revisions and legislative elections that brought the Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD) to power.

One often-overlooked component of these reforms was a proposed devolution of state authority to substate territories -- what Moroccan policymakers call "advanced regionalization" (*al-jihawiyya al-mutaqaddima*). This strategy would presumably grant greater autonomy to locally elected bodies and increase public accountability by better connecting citizens and local officials. Insofar as the upcoming elections will determine the makeup of these local governments and pave the way for their representation in parliament, they constitute an important test of the ongoing reform process.

ASSESSING 'ADVANCED REGIONALIZATION'

The idea of dividing Morocco into substate territories dates back to the era of French and Spanish rule (1912-1956), when authorities in both protectorates created administrative regions to more easily manage the population. In the postcolonial period, the idea reappeared in 1971, when the late King Hassan II created seven "economic regions" with assigned councils that remained largely consultative and devoid of legislative authority.

Constitutional revisions in 1992 and 1996 granted legal recognition to regions, provinces, and municipalities as distinct administrative units, and a 1997 decree increased the number of regions from seven to sixteen. Yet these regions still had only limited political autonomy.

In January 2010, a decade into his reign, King Mohammed VI announced an ostensibly more robust decentralization plan with the creation of the Consultative Committee on Regionalization (CCR). Over the next fourteen months, political parties, trade unions, professional associations, and government agencies held debates and seminars examining decentralization, and the CCR received 150 formal proposals from various sectors. Some of these proposals made their way into the committee's final recommendations, which were issued in early 2011 just as protests were gathering momentum against the backdrop of uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt.

Although the ensuing constitutional referendum and parliamentary elections diverted attention from the issue, Morocco's new charter committed the state to implementing advanced regionalization. Section IX called for the direct election of regional and municipal councils, broadly outlined the role of local governance structures, announced a process whereby citizens could petition their local councils, and stipulated that the central government be represented by regional and provincial governors.

Since then, the parliament has adopted a series of laws laying the groundwork for the upcoming elections and detailing the functions of local councils, the state's financial commitment to localities, the procedures for citizen petitions, and the powers of locally elected officials vis-a-vis the state. While it is too soon to issue a verdict on these reforms, three initial observations are warranted.

First, the reforms have emphasized local government promotion of private enterprise and public investments in areas such as environmental improvements, water and energy management, infrastructure, education, health, and transportation. This focus on development suggests that the central government views advanced regionalization principally as a tool of economic growth. Morocco's economy has fared better than most in the region, but policymakers know the country faces serious structural impediments to long-term growth, not least an overreliance on agriculture and labor market deficiencies that continue to produce more university graduates than available jobs. The extent to which regionalization alleviates such strains will affect not only Morocco's stability, but also other states in the region (e.g., Tunisia) looking to develop neglected localities and create jobs.

Second, the decentralization effort has implications for the ongoing dispute between Morocco and the Algerian-backed Polisario Front over the former Spanish colony of Western Sahara. As a result of the latest reforms, the kingdom's sixteen regions were consolidated into twelve, and Western Sahara now falls within three of these newly designated regions. Although this is not inconsistent with the state's 2007 proposal to grant inhabitants of the territory additional autonomy within the framework of Moroccan sovereignty, the new map will likely draw ire from the Polisario, its Algerian supporters, and international advocates of Sahrawi independence.

Third, the relevant constitutional provisions and derivative laws suggest that Morocco has opted for a middle way between full political autonomy for substate territories and complete central control. For example, the reforms give greater managerial responsibility and budgetary discretion to local council presidents, but they also condition implementation of most local initiatives on final approval from the relevant central government ministry. Such an approach is consistent with Rabat's longstanding preference for gradual, controlled political openings.

RAISING THE ELECTORAL STAKES

Across Morocco's twelve regions and 1,503 municipalities, thirty parties are fielding 138,000 candidates for 32,000 open council seats. Notably, one-third of all regional and municipal council seats are reserved for women candidates. The campaigns are focusing on advanced regionalization, rural development, participatory management of local affairs, amelioration of public services, and environmental protection. A moral discourse has

permeated some of the campaigns, addressing matters such as corruption and the political dominance of certain families. Yet religion is largely absent from the campaign rhetoric, including that of the PJD.

In the 2009 municipal elections, the top two vote-getters were the Party of Authenticity and Modernity (founded that year by a close friend of the king's and enjoying strong support in rural areas) and the Istiqlal Party (a largely urban-based faction with roots in the struggle for independence from the French). Both will likely compete for first and second place this year, with the PJD expected to come in third. This would be a major boost for the Islamist party, which came in sixth place in 2009 but scored important gains in this summer's professional association elections. Given that the House of Councilors will now include representatives from regions and professional associations, the stakes in the local elections have become national.

Winners and losers aside, arguably the more important outcome of these elections will be voter turnout, which will indicate whether the public is buying into the regionalization process and the reform trajectory more generally. Participation reached 52 percent in 2009, but independent observers reported numerous instances of vote buying, especially in rural constituencies. Since then, civil society groups have voiced concerns about apathy among the middle class and youths, while the nation's largest Islamist movement, al-Adl wal-Ihsan (Justice and Benevolence), has urged members to boycott the elections in keeping with its antimonarchist stance and aversion to political participation.

IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

While the elections may well devolve greater economic authority to local regions, critics will label them (with some justification) as a diversion from true democratization. Indeed, the upcoming votes are not about diluting the king's power, strengthening elected representatives, or enhancing personal liberties. Rather, the monarchy and its allies are hoping that the elections and reforms go far enough in responding to popular demands while sparing Morocco the chaos seen elsewhere in the region.

Whether this turns out to be a winning bet remains to be seen, but thus far the kingdom has weathered the post-Arab Spring storms relatively well and emerged as a valued U.S. counterterrorism ally. For example, the Moroccan air force deployed jets to Iraq and Syria to fight the "Islamic State"/ISIS, and the country has co-chaired the Global Counterterrorism Forum's Foreign Terrorist Fighters Working Group. Morocco's ability to conduct fair and peaceful elections will matter not only to its own long-term prospects, but also to U.S. policymakers keen on retaining a relatively stable ally in an increasingly volatile region.

Sarah Feuer is a Soref Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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