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Moroccan Elections Unlikely to Upset Status Quo

[*Dana Moss*](#)

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Although the world has been focused on the sensational politics in Lebanon and Iran, Morocco this week will hold its first municipal election since 2003. Higher voter turnout than in the 2007 legislative election is expected, and if it materializes, it will be attributable more to patronage than to democratic development. While more women will be seeking office, the real story of this election is that the usual trends in Moroccan politics are likely to continue -- surprisingly even for the scandal-embroiled Islamists, who have now joined other parties in pursuing "politics as usual."

The Elections

More than thirty parties are competing for 27,795 seats in 1,503 municipalities. The 2003 municipal elections saw the independence-era Istiqlal party win most seats, while the Islamist Party of Justice and Development (PJD) came in third. The upcoming elections will not significantly change the conduct of Moroccan politics, especially as post-election party alliances often decide who gets voted in. They may, however, provide an opportunity for a cabinet reshuffle in the near future.

Turnout will most likely be higher than the 2007 legislative election's 37 percent. In contrast to that contest, the vast majority of citizens today, particularly in rural areas, will cast their vote for candidates whom they know personally. Whether the turnout will approach the 54 percent voter participation of 2003 is yet to be seen.

The aim of the king and the makhzen -- the economic and political elite surrounding the palace -- appears twofold: to avoid the embarrassment of the 2007 voter apathy and to prevent the Islamists from gaining ground.

Parties and Participation

Despite the likelihood of a higher turnout, popular frustration with politics continues. In general, most parties are plagued with corruption, possess little internal democracy, and have ill-defined programs that fail to elaborate on how promises of reform and development can be achieved. Controversial projects are also rarely proposed; even the Social Union of Popular Forces' idea of reforming Morocco's constitution does not renegotiate the traditional power balance.

One obvious sign of patronage is the phenomenon of political nomadism -- candidates moving from one party to another, regardless of purported ideological leanings. Particularly in rural areas, elections are defined not by which notable wins, but by which party he or she represents. Consequently, criticism of local politicians is widespread, exemplified in a *La Nouvelle Tribune* editorial that laments those "greedy for power and recognition by means of universal suffrage."

Wary of a repeat of 2007, the state has employed a variety of tactics to increase voter participation, or at least the appearance thereof. One transparent tactic has been the removal of 1.4 million voters from the list of those eligible -- an 11 percent decrease from the 2007 elections -- hoping to create the perception of higher voter turnout. This has been coupled with a Ministry of Interior initiative that provides funds to cover party campaign expenditures.

New Democratic Life?

Another palace tactic designed to increase turnout and revive political life has been the emergence of the Party of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM), headed by former deputy interior minister Fouad Ali al-Himma. A close associate of the king, al-Himma established PAM in August 2008, no doubt with royal blessing. PAM's history is opaque, but its emergence after the 2007 elections suggests that it aimed to induce political involvement and serve as an additional bulwark against the PJD.

Recently, PAM withdrew from the governing coalition, following a disagreement over the implementation of a new law aimed at preventing nomadism, of which PAM is a prime example. Although PAM was not punished, it has nevertheless declared that it "positions itself with the opposition." Despite its protests, the friction may be simulated, engineered by the monarchy to allow al-Himma to burnish his democratic credentials. At the same time, by raising the nomadism issue, the palace signals that it is willing to constrain al-Himma's political ambitions.

PAM purportedly seeks to create, in the words of its former secretary-general, "a democratic Morocco rooted in modernity." Yet its political objectives appear no more controversial than that of other parties; it refrains from criticizing the king, the government's position on Western Sahara, and the role of Islam in Morocco. Moreover, its membership is also composed of many of the traditional elements of Moroccan politics. In sum, PAM has brought to the table little that is new.

Islamists Join the Status Quo

These elections signal business as usual in Morocco, including for the PJD, which is approaching the elections much like any other large party. The 2003 municipal elections were delayed for fear of an Islamist landslide, and the PJD was viewed as an unknown, omnipotent force holding back to avoid a crackdown. But when it underperformed in the 2007 legislative elections, the myth of its electoral power was shattered. Like other parties, the PJD has now been embroiled in a corruption scandal. Earlier this year, Aboubakr Belkora, former mayor of the royal city of Meknes, was accused of "mismanagement of municipal funds" and dismissed from his post, a development that was accompanied by much internal tension within the PJD.

The timing of this case led many to assume that royal tactics were at play: that Belkora's dismissal was a means of weakening the PJD's popularity and dissuading local notables from supporting the party. Similar political engineering was employed in 2003, when a proportional representation system was adopted in large districts to undermine Islamist support at the polls.

Election Outlook

Since the emergence of a multiparty system in Morocco, the palace has favored some political fragmentation to enable the king to keep control of national politics. Although the precise outcome is impossible to predict, these elections are likely to continue this tradition. In the municipalities, this fragmentation is a consequence of not only palace strategy, but also the need for extensive networks to cover rural areas, which most parties lack.

The elections will be watched closely to see how the PAM and PJD perform. PAM is predicted to do reasonably well, having recovered from its minor defeat in the 2008 by-elections and surprisingly fielding more candidates than the Istiqlal party.

Expectations are not particularly high for the PJD; the party has suffered from corruption scandals and electoral engineering, and the 2007 failure has damaged its image. Moreover, its erstwhile ally, the illegal Justice and Benevolence movement (al-Adl wa al-Ihsan), has ordered its adherents to boycott the elections. Meanwhile, the PJD's attempts to throw off the mantle of extremism may have made it too moderate for more radical constituents. Nevertheless, the party is likely to do well in its urban base, helped by internal discipline and a strong campaign.

The Role of Women

One important change is the increased role of women. In line with the royal strategy to promote women's rights, a 12 percent female quota has been set for the candidate lists. Although some observers have noted the difficulty in recruiting sufficient female candidates, this decision has not been controversial. It may also regenerate Moroccan politics in the future by creating some new faces (although some of the candidates do remain linked to traditional parties and families). Yet its ultimate impact is uncertain, as party democracy remains rare. As one skeptical journalist commented, "This could serve as a trampoline for the integration of women in political life . . . so long as others don't decide otherwise."

Consequences

The outcome of these elections will not affect Morocco's stability. Although Morocco has been performing well economically, it suffers from a seasonal economy and a large youth bulge. Morocco is also susceptible to periodic droughts, affecting an agricultural sector that sustains 40 percent of its population. Tourism may also be adversely affected by the global financial crisis. Real political reform could help insulate the monarchy from potentially tumultuous times and mend the existing widespread political apathy.

This is especially important since Moroccan jihadists have targeted both Morocco, as in the 2003 Casablanca bombings, and international targets, such as Madrid in 2004. Although no major attacks within Morocco have taken place in recent years, small jihadist cells, such as the extensive Belliraj network, have continued to operate and pose a threat, particularly to tourism.

The Obama administration has hailed Morocco as among Washington's oldest allies in the Middle East. The president's speech in Cairo, however, suggested few concrete plans for promoting reform and democratic development in the region. The municipal elections suggest that despite a helpful regional perspective and increased rights for women, in terms of reform, Morocco remains a work in progress. After the elections, Washington should take advantage of the three years before the 2012 legislative vote to help Morocco build a positive landscape for the kingdom's political life.

Dana Moss is a Next Generation Fellow at the Washington Institute.