

# Morocco: whitewash and resignation

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In July 2007, FRIDE published a background document on the Moroccan legislative election of September 7th ('An Islamist Government in Morocco?'), analysing the prospects of the moderate Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD) to form part of the next government, and the possible implications this might have for Moroccan democracy. Many of the concerns identified in this backgrounder were borne out when the elections were held.

No Moroccan election before has generated such excitement and international attention as the 2007 legislative elections. Election observers, foreign correspondents and analysts alike headed to Rabat to witness what was expected to become the day that would seal Morocco's shift to an 'Islamist government'. But polls and forecasts were proven wrong: while the PJD did gain a few seats, it achieved anything but a 'raz de marée' and did not see its expectations of becoming the strongest political force in the country come to fruition. No less surprising, the old, established Istiqlal (Independence) Party overtook the PJD in a leap of popularity that analysts are having trouble explaining.

The most striking feature of this election, however, has been neither the PJD's relative failure nor Istiqlal's sudden boost, but the miserably low voter turnout of 37 per cent, according to the official figures. Real participation, however, is estimated to have been even lower (around 24 per cent), given that the official figures refer to registered voters and still include void and blank votes, which account for 19 per cent of the vote cast. In other words, at least two-thirds of Moroccans abstained, and of those who did cast the ballot, one out of every five was blank or void. In addition, Moroccan media report that many of the blank votes were adorned with protest messages blatantly expressing disenchantment with the governing elite.

After learning about the results of the election in their neighbouring country, Spanish media let out a big sigh of relief after having been spared the frightening prospect of an Islamist-run country on the other side of the Strait of Gibraltar. Largely echoing the Moroccan government's rhetoric, most of the media coverage focused on the technical aspects of the election, the PJD's surprising result was proscribed to the party's ultimate failure to gain the confidence of the voters, and hardly anybody wondered how the dusty, co-opted Istiqlal had suddenly managed to overhaul a popular, untainted party that had been topping the polls for months. The political message of the lowest voter turnout in Morocco's short electoral history was largely dealt with in a footnote. Such evaluations miss the point, for several reasons.

First of all, the PJD's failure to secure its participation in government is not necessarily a reason for relief at all. A lot of adjectives can be used to characterise the party led by secretary general

Saad Eddine El Othmani, but 'radical' is certainly not one of them. In the Moroccan political landscape, the PJD could be said to represent the moderate, flexible branch of an increasingly split Islamist community. Throughout its political trajectory since 1999, the PJD has been gradually adapting not only its rhetoric and appearance but also its political demands and consensus-building capacity to the requirements of democratic governance and competition – and, of course, to the Palace's rules of the game.

An Istiqlal-led government will basically mean more of the same, changing the face but not the course of the political elite in a largely powerless parliament, and a governing coalition composed of co-opted, lethargic parties which do not even think of challenging the unofficial but well-known rules of the game, set by the King's entourage. Arguably, PJD participation in the governing coalition (which due to the fragmented party landscape always requires a composition of four or five parties at least) would almost certainly have failed to bring about substantive change, too. However, as a fresh, untainted opposition party with the wish to prove its ability to govern and deliver, the PJD might at least have blown fresh wind into the ranks of the established elite, including at least a slight chance of providing new impetus for political change.

Secondly, in terms of political momentousness, the most significant feature of this election has not been the distribution of seats. One can be disappointed by the fact that there will be no fresh wind in the Moroccan governing coalition. By contrast, the low voter turnout and the high percentage of blank votes can only be called worrying, because they display how very disconnected the Moroccan government is from its electorate. The Moroccan authorities did express their concern over the low voter turnout, but showed no sign of self-reflection. On the contrary: as if to pre-emptively shake off the blame, they point towards the considerable effort of voter information and awareness campaigns that had been undertaken in the run-up to the elections. To be sure, these activities have been valuable and constitute an important effort by both government agencies and civil society to enhance awareness about the electoral process and citizen's rights in a country where almost half of the population is illiterate. However, seen in the light of the evolution of voter participation during the last three elections (dropping sharply from 58 per cent in 1997 to 52 in 2002 and 37 per cent in 2007), the figures suggest that the low turnout in 2007 is not mainly an issue of information but rather has deeper structural reasons. First and foremost, what lacks is not information, but trust.

The increasing alienation between the ruling elite and the people, and the apparent impossibility of breaking into the established power structures, may have even further reaching implications for both Morocco and its international partners. To the extent that the continuity of the existing power structures remains cemented, checks and balances remain entirely ineffective and meaningful change that establishes a separation of powers is not even to be hoped for, increasing popular disenchantment with the ruling elite is likely to push moderates, and particularly the youth, towards the radical edge of the Moroccan Islamist spectrum. Today, the de-facto outlawed Islamist movement Al Adl Wal Ihsane (Justice and Charity), which is by no means afraid to challenge Makhzen and the Monarchy, is already considered the true opposition in Morocco, and by far more influential than the PJD. The defeat of moderate Islamism gives Europe no reason to cheer. On the contrary: denying radicalism its platform by strengthening the moderates and helping them to deliver should give neighbouring Spain far more reason for relief.

It would be misleading, however, to put all the blame on the Palace and its entourage for the voters' apathy. The political parties, both government and opposition, also have their share

as they have been largely absorbed by the power apparatus, do little to push for change, are strained by an image of corruption and have thus been suffering from eroding credibility for quite some time. So maybe, with two-thirds of the population casting a silent vote of disapproval, resignation, or at best indifference, the Moroccan leadership and political parties, as well as those European media that so readily echo the regime's rhetoric, might want to start asking certain questions. For example, whether the harshly dropping participation levels might not be connected to the lack of government accountability that derives from the parallel existence of formal democratic procedures and informal de-facto rules of the game? Whether in a slowly but increasingly liberalising society, respect for the almighty Makhzen power apparatus – the country's true decision makers in all strategic areas, regardless of elections, seat distribution or government composition – will not slowly give way to growing civil disobedience? And whether abstention in many cases might not simply display an unwillingness to indirectly support an unaccountable regime by providing it with formal domestic and international legitimacy through the cast of the ballot?

The most important question for the Moroccan regime should of course be how to stop the decline and enhance voter turnout in the elections to come. A mere focus on the formal and technical aspects of elections, however, is not going to solve the issue. Election observers have acknowledged the Moroccan authorities' advances in transparency, freedom and fairness of the elections, which is doubtlessly a respectable development. As great an achievement as that is in itself, however, what difference does it make if an election is free and fair if the body that is elected does not rule the country? On the contrary, elections without true representation can serve to provide semi-autocratic regimes with a convenient democratic gloss. The Moroccan leadership has tangible reasons for wanting to maintain its hard-won image as the relative leader of political liberalisation in the region, and has little interest in openly displaying any lack of democratic commitment. European policy-makers and media should not, therefore, provide external legitimacy to the Moroccan regime's apparent attempt to replace a debate on democracy with one on elections.

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