

PolicyWatch #1282

The Moroccan Parliamentary Election: More Gains for Islamists?

By Emma Hayward
September 6, 2007

On September 7, Morocco will hold its first parliamentary election since 2002. That election ended with the Justice and Development Party (PJD), an Islamist faction, just eight seats short of becoming the largest party in parliament. Despite several years of significant political and social reform -- or perhaps because of those reforms -- the PJD has a chance of emerging even stronger after this week's vote.

A Pattern of Reform

In the five years since the last election, Morocco has witnessed a series of important reforms. The most far-reaching ones modified the family code to endorse a liberal interpretation of Islamic law on key issues such as divorce procedures, marriage age, and inheritance. These were put in place shortly after the May 2003 suicide bombings in Casablanca, which triggered a nationwide rejection of terrorism. In addition, since ascending the throne in 1999, King Muhammad VI has overseen an expansion of press freedoms and greater social and cultural liberalism. Even his wife appears on television wearing Western-style attire. In addition, Morocco signed a controversial free trade agreement with the United States in 2003.

Islamist Appeal

Although most Moroccans have embraced the recent changes, a sizable percentage of the population rejects such reforms. Before their enforcement, the proposed family code changes sparked massive demonstrations in Casablanca, and many judges in rural districts have reportedly risked their appointments by refusing to acknowledge the new laws. In recent years, there has also been a popular backlash against Morocco's longstanding relationship with the United States. Islamist parties have taken advantage of the political momentum to highlight their claim to be the most legitimate and consistent custodian of the country's Islamic tradition.

Campaigning for tomorrow's election opened on August 25, and several areas -- including Fez, Rabat, and Casablanca's poorer suburbs -- have shown signs of strong support for the PJD. Ordinary Moroccans cite criticism of the queen's immodest dress, concern for the deterioration of Islamic values, and inadequate levels of sympathy for the Palestinian situation as reasons to support the party. Through its mosque network and door-to-door grassroots campaigning (often deploying friends or relatives to reach out to specific target audiences such as poor neighborhoods), the PJD has been more successful than other parties at mobilizing voters.

Although a large majority of Moroccans reject the Islamist politics of the PJD and other similar parties, election results tend to be determined by voter turnout. Morocco may have the appeal of a Westernizing, modernizing country, but it is also home to high levels of poverty, illiteracy, and political apathy, all of which limit turnout. According to the U.S. Agency for International Development, 35 percent of Moroccan men are illiterate, while "illiteracy rates for women average 60 percent, with up to 80 percent illiteracy among rural women." Moreover, a significant portion of the electorate is alienated from all parties. In 2002, for example, 17 percent of ballots were left blank, reflecting popular frustration with the perceived corruption of the

political class. If these and other factors significantly affect turnout among ordinary Moroccan voters in the current election, Islamist factions will have a greater chance of making further gains in the legislature.

The Election

More than thirty parties will participate in tomorrow's election, but only three are strong enough to attain a majority: the Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP), which currently holds fifty of the parliament's 325 seats; the Isteqlal (Independence) Party, which holds forty-eight seats; and the PJD, with forty-two. The rural-based Isteqlal Party, which played a primary political role in Morocco's movement toward independence from France, dominated Moroccan politics until the more urban-oriented USFP emerged as a main force in recent elections. But the most significant advance between the 1997 and 2002 elections was made by the PJD, which went from nine to forty-two seats.

Technically, ultimate authority rests with the king regardless of the parliamentary outcome. The palace appoints and dismisses the prime minister; currently, the post is occupied by Driss Jettou, a former finance and interior minister. Although Jettou is not a member of any party, he leads a coalition government that includes both the USFP and Isteqlal. Regardless of the king's authority and the prime minister's affiliation, however, a victory for the Islamists tomorrow would make it difficult to keep them out of government altogether.

Given his political inclinations, the king is wary of the Islamists. In addition to the PJD, which is a legal political party, Morocco is home to a larger, illegal Islamist movement called "Justice and Charity." The movement's leader is Abdesslam Yassin, author of a book denouncing the monarchy as un-Islamic. The government has used various tactics over the years to limit Islamist electoral gains, including redistricting and lowering the voting age to encourage younger, ostensibly more liberal voters to go to the polls.

The key question for tomorrow's election is whether the palace and the secular parties will be able to stem the rise of Islamist politics. Although the PJD traditionally appeals to an older and financially disadvantaged sector of the population, there is evidence that a sizable percentage of Moroccan youths are becoming more conservative, perhaps as a reaction to difficult economic times. If the PJD is able to score gains among young voters, draw on its established support among the urban poor, and mobilize other supporters on election day, the Islamist party has a strong chance of boosting its parliamentary representation.

Post-Election Prospects

If the PJD emerges with a plurality in parliament, the country's rulers will find themselves in a delicate balancing act. On the one hand, Morocco has benefited from its role as a model of progressive and deliberate reform. As a result, the palace is unlikely to reject an Islamist role in government if all the election rules have been respected. On the other hand, the regime will be wary about ceding control over critical areas, such as foreign policy and certain domestic issues. Nor will the regime want to endanger achievements -- such as the free trade accord with the United States -- that are critical for the country's long-term economic health.

The king's dual role as head of state and source of religious authority in Morocco endows him with unique means of accommodating a potential PJD victory. But that role alone will not be enough to address the long-term implications that such a victory would represent. A PJD victory would be viewed as a successful challenge to the monarchy and as part of a regional Islamist electoral trend. The long-term repercussions could affect not only the balance between secular and religious parties inside the country, but also the role of the monarchy itself.

Emma Hayward is a research assistant at The Washington Institute. Previously, she completed a Fulbright research program in Morocco, where she lived for fifteen months.

Copyright 2008 The Washington Institute for Near East Policy