



Volume 5, Number 22

November 24, 2011

Morocco's Upcoming Parliamentary Elections: Promoting a Top-Down "Arab Spring"?

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On November 25, Moroccan voters will go to the polls to elect a new parliament. Originally scheduled for fall 2012 (in accordance with Morocco's election laws, which call for parliamentary elections every five years), the vote was advanced as part of a broader government effort to introduce political reforms. These proposed changes were the outcome of protests that broke out in Morocco in early 2011, in emulation of what was occurring in Tunisia and Egypt. The elections mark another step in the country's halting process of creating greater transparency and accountability in its political life. Their outcome will underscore the extent of Morocco's success in discarding the old hallmarks of political maneuvering, which largely left a negative imprint on local politics and in the past tarnished election results, owing to voting irregularities, party corruption and royal interventions. While some of these features may no longer be widespread, the public's general apathy towards electoral politics is expected to produce a low voter turnout, thus casting a pall on the regime's much trumpeted reform measures.

The upcoming vote also carries broader ramifications that extend beyond Morocco. If successful, the elections could present a new model of political change during the "Arab Spring" era, instituted from above but in response to pressure from below, without significant episodes of violence or domestic turmoil.

The organized protests that spurred the regime to action, a loose coalition of leftwing Amazigh movement and Islamist activists, acting under the rubric of the "February 20 Movement", carefully targeted its rhetoric against "political corruption" while refraining from airing any grievances against King Mohammed VI. The only references made to the role of the palace were

occasional calls for a "parliamentary monarchy", without specifying the details. Although the protests never reached a critical mass in terms of participants, the monarchy nonetheless moved quickly to retake the initiative by introducing a plan for political reforms in line with his standing commitment to liberalize Moroccan political life. While few dispute that substantial changes have occurred since Mohammed VI ascended to the throne in July 1999, skeptics argue that the king does not in fact intend to voluntarily devolve substantive powers or decrease his involvement in political life.

In any case, beginning in March the king initiated a process of constitutional reform which promised to strengthen the role of Moroccan political parties and the parliament by emphasizing that future governments would be headed by a member of the largest party in parliament, thus limiting the king's previously unrestricted ability to choose someone for the post. At the same time, the king's inviolable status as the "Commander of the Faithful" and symbol of national unity was left essentially untouched, and he retains the right to appoint officials to head the all important defense, interior and religious affairs ministries, as well as judiciary appointments. A national referendum held in July overwhelmingly approved the new constitution. Nonetheless, critics argued that despite the monarchy's professed intentions, little would change, contending that the initiative amounted to little more than cosmetic measures designed to co-opt critics and defuse the atmosphere of protest.

Discussions regarding the reform process are entangled by a number of longstanding issues that have overshadowed Moroccan elections for decades. At the top of the list is the Moroccan public's general attitude towards the vote. Under Mohammed VI, the voting process in parliamentary elections has been largely purged of the corruption and irregularities which marred earlier elections. By most accounts, the 2002 and 2007 parliamentary elections were far more transparent and drew praise from foreign monitors. But the Moroccan public has kept its distance from the polls (37 percent participated in the 2007 parliamentary elections), indicating widespread skepticism regarding the efficacy of the process. If the upcoming elections are intended to provide a public endorsement of possible change, voter turnout will be crucial.

Overall, the Moroccan public's response to the month-long election campaign was tepid, raising concern among the parties regarding the size of the turnout. The "February 20 Movement", for its part, has called for a boycott of the elections, arguing that they amount to very little and will not yield genuine reforms — effectively dismissing the notion of introducing "top-down" reforms. A more powerful call for boycotting the elections came from the February 20th-affiliated Islamist "Justice and Charity" movement, which is officially banned but reluctantly "tolerated" by a regime forced to accept the movement's influential position among the public. The movement has always refused to participate in Moroccan politics, and in that sense their call is not new.

At the same time, the legally-sanctioned Islamist party, Justice and Development (PJD), which stands in the top tier of Moroccan parties with

seats in parliament (14 percent), is expected to fare well in the vote, underscoring another question that bedevils Moroccan politics — the position of the Islamist current. The PJD has over the years presented itself as a moderate Islam-oriented party inspired by Turkey's ruling AKP, and one that does not wish to overthrow the existing political system. It stands out among voters as an authentic opposition voice that has not been tainted by corruption or been entirely co-opted by the monarchy. It has promised voters to raise minimum wage, reduce poverty, and increase economic growth. These promises, however unlikely they may be fulfilled, are warmly welcomed by many voters. The PJD may also benefit from a positive bounce stemming from the success in Tunisia of the Islamist *Ennahda* party, and the expected victory by the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt's forthcoming elections. The PJD's projected gains, however, may not fully materialize. District regulations have affected its ability to field candidates. The party is also less popular in rural areas than in urban centers. Moreover, it confronts a recently established coalition of eight palace-oriented parties: according to its platform, the "Coalition for Democracy" (CPD) aims to establish a "modern and progressive society", seeks to restore public confidence in Morocco's political institutions, and render political action more meaningful. Coalition members have pledged to fight poverty and improve the daily lives of ordinary Moroccans. One member is the Party of Authenticity and Modernity, led by a one of the king's close associates, Fouad Ali al-Himma. Joining these parties is the veteran "royalist" RNI (National Rally of Independents) party, which dates back to the King Hassan era and is viewed as a palace-oriented party with a conservative bent.

Given the strong monarchy-oriented profile of this coalition, it could very well serve as "bloc of the king". As one of its constituent parties could end up as the largest party in parliament, the king would be able to pick one of its members, for example the RNI's Salaheddine Mezouar, who is currently the Minister of Economy and Finance in the existing government.

It remains to be seen whether "ordinary" Moroccans will subscribe to such promises, or view the coalition's last minute appearance as merely another political exercise by a co-opted political class. In any case, while the Palace's reform initiatives clearly have bought it time, the prospects of promoting genuine transformation of the political system are unlikely to be advanced by the upcoming vote.

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The Moshe Dayan Center publishes TEL AVIV NOTES, an analytical update on current affairs in the Middle East, on the 10th and 26th of every month, as well as occasional Special Editions.

TEL AVIV NOTES is published with the support of the V. Sorell Foundation.

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