

MERIA

MOROCCO'S 2007 ELECTIONS: A SOCIAL READING

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This article discusses the social and political context of Morocco's 2007 parliamentary elections, which brought surprising results. It attempts to explain why the moderate Islamic party, the PJD, did not achieve an overwhelming victory as was expected. It also explores why the formerly undefeatable socialist party, the USFP, lost popularity. Finally, it examines the remarkable comeback of the historically conservative Independent Party, the IP. The article points out that while the PJD may have lost on the national scale, it won in most of the big cities--the political, economic, and intellectual capitals of Morocco. The IP, on the other hand, succeeded mainly in the rural areas, where voting is largely influenced by state propaganda, notables, and family alliances.

The end of summer 2007 marked three important events in Morocco: the beginning of the academic school year, Ramadan, and elections for the lower chamber of parliament.¹

While under normal conditions elections alone are not a cause of concern for citizens, the new school year and Ramadan presented a considerable financial burden to the average Moroccan family. Parents deliberated between heading to the bookstores to buy school supplies for their children and going to the markets to buy the traditional Ramadan fare for *iftar* (the point at which the fast is broken) and *suhur* (the last meal before the fast).² Worse, the prices of basic food items—sugar, tea, flour, cooking oil, and the traditional *khubz* bread—gradually increased. The population grew irritable; a few sporadic (but spontaneous) demonstrations were reported, prompting the state to react quickly with new subsidies for bread.³ While Moroccans were more concerned with the price of bread than that of gasoline, the increase in gas prices resulted in a general strike against the public transportation system.⁴

All summer long, Morocco's national television station, RTM, attempted to persuade the MRE (Marocains résidant à l'étranger or Moroccans residing abroad) to send

remittances to their families, to invest in Morocco, and even to come back "home." It is important to note that there exists a second generation of Moroccans, which was both born and resides abroad. First generation Moroccans and recent Moroccan immigrants who still hold their Moroccan passports are denied the right to vote in Moroccan elections from their new countries of residence. A number of Moroccan NGOs in France have been critical of this policy and requested the right for Moroccan citizens to participate in Moroccan parliamentary elections by casting ballots from the Moroccan consulate in France.⁵ Morocco has yet to respond to their request but in the meantime has continued its campaign to persuade Moroccan expatriates to invest in the country and to send money to their families there.

From mid-August 2007, the state began to promote the elections scheduled for September 7. As the elections neared, RTM was flooded with commercials urging youth to fulfill their "national and social duty." While prior to this, official discourse had qualified the voting as a "national" duty, now for the first time it was also being referred to as a "social" obligation. In line with this, the main theme of the TV talk-show *Hiwar*, hosted by the popular Mustafa Alawi, became the elections and the youth's national conscience. In addition, RTM,

along with the Interior Ministry, artists, local organizations, members of civil society, and other well-known figures, led a national campaign to mobilize voters around the kingdom, especially in the rural areas.

In an effort to reach out to the people and to connect the capital, Rabat, with the citizens of remote villages, a traveling caravan was organized by the 2007 Daba association (*daba* meaning "now" in Moroccan dialect), which trekked across the entire country. Notably, for the first time a written *Tamazight* (Berber) and colloquial Arabic *Darija* were used to address a large part of the population that does not understand literary Arabic or French. Customarily, for such official events as election campaigning, the state has either used French or literary Arabic; Tamazight and Darija have been exclusively reserved for folkloric themes, popular festivities, and soap operas.

Youth and old oppositionists of Hassan II's regime collaborated with Moroccan rap artists to declare: "The old time is over, now we have to act, we have to vote," alluding to the previous autocratic *ancien régime* of Hassan II. On the eve of the elections, both the official and the independent press managed to create an impression that the rate of participation in the elections was expected to reach about 90 percent and that the contestable winner would be the Islamic party, the PJD (the Justice and Development Party, or Hizb al-Adala wa-Tanmiyya). Even on the eve of the elections, the French press, which showed increased interest in the Moroccan elections, anticipated a huge victory for the PJD.⁶

Street polls indicated the same projections: The PJD was likely to increase its representation in parliament from 42 of 325 seats to 70 or more.⁷ Yet other voices in the mainstream press,⁸ civil society (2007 Daba), as well as some anti-mainstream newspapers—such as *Le Monde Amazigh*, the organ of the Cultural Amazigh (Berber) Movement—predicted a very low voter turnout.⁹ After all, it was the predicted low

voter turnout that prompted 2007 Daba to organize the "citizenship caravan"—equipped with a radio and TV station—with the aim of mobilizing voters. However, this effort did not produce the intended results, and the voices of the representatives of civil society were not heard.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the prevailing attitude on the eve of the elections was that the Moroccan electorate had acquired a significant degree of political consciousness and was ready for transparent democratic elections more than ever before.

THE ELEMENT OF SURPRISE: A POSITIVE SIGN

The predictions of the results of the September 7, 2007 elections proved inaccurate and were certainly unexpected. For the first time in Morocco's electoral history, the results came as a surprise to all—the 50 foreign election observers, the 3,000 Moroccan observers, the public at large, and even the state. In the past, the elections had been "a sold game" (in the Moroccan context expressed as a *match mabyu*, or "c'est du cinema"). Yet the fact that the results were surprising was in fact a positive development. This was in fact "the first time that the Ministry of Interior published detailed results of an electoral campaign," reported *Telquel*.¹¹

The era of fabricated elections results at the hands of the all-powerful minister of interior, Driss Basri, had passed. This time, it only took two days for the results to be announced. Contrary to all expectations, the winner was the Independence Party (Hizb al-Istiqlal)—the socially conservative, economically liberal, and historically nationalist party, known by its French initials as the IP.

The majority of observers who had predicted a landslide victory for the PJD in the 2007 elections based their analysis on two factors: First, unlike in 2002 when the PJD had been limited to running in only half of the constituencies, in 2007 the party was allowed representation in all constituencies. Second, on the eve of the elections, the zeitgeist both in

the public sphere and in popular discourse was ostensibly in favor of the PJD.

In 2002, the USFP, the Socialist Union of Popular Forces (Hizb al-Ittihad al-Ishtiraki li al-Quwwat al-Sha'bia) had won 50 seats, the IP 48, and the PJD 42.¹² In the 2007 elections, however, the IP won 52 seats; followed by the PJD, which secured *only* 46 seats; and the USFP, which came in third with 36 of the chamber's 325 seats. Also deserving mention were the MP, or Popular Movement (Haraka al-Sha'biyya) with 41 seats, and the RNI, or National Rally of Independents (Tajammu al-Watani li al-Ahrar) with 39 seats; these two old parties have traditionally occupied fourth and fifth place, thus creating an interesting electoral fragmentation preventing a landslide victory by any party, no matter how popular it may be.

How can the results of the 2007 elections be explained? Why did the PJD, which had been expected to win 70 seats, fail to achieve an overwhelming victory? Why did the undefeatable USFP lose its popularity? How did the IP make such a comeback?

While it is too early to answer definitively, one speculation is that the PJD's proposed version of Islam frightens Moroccans. For example, due to what the PJD perceives as promiscuity, which is promoted by encounters between the sexes, it is openly hostile towards the popular yearly summer music and cultural festivals. Such festivities are the only opportunity for the majority of the Moroccans to enjoy themselves in a mixed sex forum without arousing suspicion. Moreover, admission is free of charge, an important factor considering that more than half of the population is under the age of 30, and over 50 percent of this particular sector is unemployed and/or does not have a bank account. Among this generation, the majority live with their parents until the age of 35 to 40. Moreover, youth--excluding a very small rich elite--do not go out on weekends. The situation for unmarried girls who have no choice but to live with their parents is even more complicated. If

they are allowed to go out at all, they have a 6:00 p.m. curfew for fear of their safety after dark. For these "suffocated" youth, the July-August festivities are the only opportunity to socialize more or less freely. This is the only time of the year when young girls are permitted to stay out late and stand shoulder to shoulder with boys without breaching the public moral code.

By repeatedly conveying its opposition to these gatherings, the PJD both alienated many and revealed its ignorance of the basic principles of the art of governing: It demonstrated that it likely intended to rule through edicts forbidding or limiting social behavior and that it did not recognize the importance of permitting the population "to breathe" even once a year. The state, on the other hand, has apparently internalized this strategy. During the summer of 2007 there were many night festivals that were mainly, if not entirely, sponsored by the state.¹³

The new political map is most instructive in evaluating the situation.¹⁴ It was predicted that if the PJD were to receive strong support in most of Morocco's big cities (Casablanca, Rabat, Salé, Tangier, and Meknès),¹⁵ Marrakech would go with the Islamic party, as would other important urban centers. Unexpectedly, however, the PJD saw its worst results in the cities of Marrakech and al-Hoceima, both cities "notorious" for their summer night festivals. The income of the majority of the population in these cities comes from Western tourism, and the PJD wishes to limit such interactions with Westerners. The *Attajdid* newspaper, the organ of the PJD, frequently warns against the deterioration of mores in Marrakech stemming from sexual freedom and contact with the Western tourists.¹⁶

On the other hand, the USFP's version of Islam is equally threatening. Its secular orientation is a matter of concern for the majority of the people. Moreover, most of the leftist intellectuals who are partisans or sympathizers of the USFP express their

vanguard ideas in a high academic language--either in French or literary Arabic--which is unintelligible for the average Moroccan. Moreover, their abstract ideas, for the most part, do not reach the masses, and if they do, they are perceived as too secular and sometimes even borderline atheist. Generally speaking, the socialist "theorists" of secularism are *persona non grata* in Morocco,¹⁷ despite the fact that the practices of everyday life have a number of secular aspects.

THE ROAD TO THE PALACE

It seems that between the USFP's secularism and the PJD's Islamism, the IP has discovered the road leading directly to the palace. The IP's conservatism, nationalism, and most importantly, its affinity for the fundamental values of Islam intertwine with a "secular" way of living.¹⁸ All of these factors give the impression that it is a well-balanced party, and thus it appeals to many. Its pragmatic attitude toward the celestial and the temporal is particularly suited to the world vision of the majority of Moroccans, and it complements their way of practicing Islam.

Since the colonial period, the IP has been deeply rooted in Morocco's religious and political landscape. It is associated in the Moroccan collective memory with liberation and freedom, as it was the IP (with the king's blessing) who led the country toward independence in 1956. It thus holds a special place in the hearts of Moroccans, especially among the older generation. Consequently, the IP won the majority of its votes not only in the rural areas of Doukala and Abda (an Arabic-speaking tribal region), but also in the Berber/Amazigh speaking areas--in Boulman and the region of Sous around Agadir, the Bastille of the Amazigh/Berber activists, traditional IP enemies. Most significant is the triumph in the Saharan cities, including Guelmima, Smara, Laayoune, Sakia al-Hamra, Oued al-Dahab, and Lagouira--the entire southern desert, from the region of Sous to the border with Mauritania.¹⁹ The IP's victory in

the Saharan cities is significant; there the tribes' leaders hold the founder of IP, Allal al-Fassi, in high esteem.²⁰ Abbas al-Fassi, leader of the IP, is Allal al-Fassi's son, and this resonates in the minds of the voters of the Sahara. Thus, the IP won most of its votes in the tribal and rural milieu, where propaganda is still strong and where democracy bends more to local rules than to the values of universal suffrage.

The IP has realized its "victory" in the regions where it has a strong historical clientele network of support and a traditional tribal system of commitments, loyalties, and reliance. It is conventional wisdom that in these regions one does not vote for an ideology but rather according to tribal affiliation. For some Moroccan intellectuals, the IP's comeback at the beginning of the twenty-first century is in fact a reaction, if not a regression, to the "Hassanian era."²¹ The party reminds Moroccans of the *alternance* "reform" enacted by Hassan II in 1997, when in the name of democratization, the king coopted the two oppositionist parties, the USFP and the IP. He converted them into "governmental parties" (*ahzab hukumiyya*), thereby denying Moroccan citizens the illusion of a political opposition.²² In light of this, considering the IP "victory" an achievement for Moroccan democracy is questionable.

BETWEEN VOTER TURNOUT AND BLANK BALLOTS

Perhaps the most significant factor of the 2007 parliamentary elections was the low voter turnout rate--among the lowest ever in Moroccan history.²³ Only 37 percent cast votes, of which 19 percent deposited blank ballots, or according to the Moroccan colloquial expression, "gave their voices [votes] to the wind." This meant that one in every five votes was in fact a blank ballot. The blank ballots combined with those who did not vote at all means that the overwhelming majority of voters did not express their political opinion. As Moroccan political

scientist Abdallah Turabi so ironically put it, "if you add those who did not vote to those who cast blank ballots, they would form the biggest political party in the country."²⁴

How can this phenomenon be explained? How can it be that in heyday of liberalization and democratization, Morocco is witnessing an overwhelming plague of depoliticization?²⁵

Generally, in stable democracies the percentage of voter turnout is relatively low, as the citizens feel more or less satisfied with the political situation and trust that those voting will convey general opinion. In such a case, significant changes on the political map do not usually occur, and even if the government shifts its political orientation from left to right or vice versa, the general direction remains the same. In a healthy democracy, a low voter turnout is not necessarily a sign that the political establishment is in danger. In Morocco, however, this is not the case. Rather, in the young Moroccan democracy, this can only indicate a lack of democracy. Many observers, both within Morocco and abroad, believe that the results of the last elections have again proven the existing gap between the people and state.²⁶

The urban, educated, and unemployed in the 18 to 45 age range is a sector of potential voters with a political consciousness. In contrast to the peasants in the rural areas, a high percentage of this sector did not bother to vote on September 7, 2007. On the other hand, among this group, those who did go to the polling stations either cast empty ballots or most likely voted for the PJD or the USFP.

It this group of individuals--an integral part of the young Moroccan democracy--who boycotted the elections. Their casting of blank ballots and refusal to vote was an act of passive protest intended to penalize the regime and to express their general dissatisfaction. This is an urban middle-class that is not committed to rural notables, family alliances, or tribal loyalties. Had this middle class voted

properly, or at all, one can only wonder if the outcome would have been different?

Those who voted for the PJD were most likely urban and middle class voters, a point that explains the PJD's showing in the election. Note that in Casablanca--the city where the majority of the middle-class of the country is concentrated--the PJD won about 70,000 votes, 20 percent of the total; the IP, the winner of the elections, was far behind with only 47,000 votes, 13 percent of overall votes.²⁷

CONCLUSION

The election results have thus given the PJD "control" of the capital city of Rabat, the nearby city of Salé, and Casablanca, the country's economic center. In addition, it has come to dominate other important cities, including Tangiers--the gateway to Europe--and the region of Meknès-Tafilalet--where agriculture and tourism are concentrated.²⁸ The PJD cities--contrary to the villages and the frontier cities under IP control--are the country's economic and intellectual capitals. They constitute the stronghold of the PJD, which enjoys the support of both educated Moroccans and the residents of the *bidonvilles* (shantytowns).

The cities where the PJD prevailed are full of social conflicts. Both poverty and illiteracy exist there as well as a politically conscious urban educated youth. It is these youth, the possible future leaders of Morocco, who understand and respect the rules of the democratic game and who voted for the PJD. The Islamists' success among this sector is thus all the more significant. Moreover, while the PJD lost nationally, the party plays a significant role as an opposition force and thus does not run the risk of being coopted by the palace.

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NOTES

¹ The notion of the lower chamber is relatively new, dating back to the series of reforms enacted by Hassan II from 1992 until the eve of his death in 1999. His efforts led to the constitutional amendments turning parliament into a bicameral body. In the old system, only two-thirds of seats were directly elected. Now the new lower chamber is chosen completely by the voters. For a survey and analysis of these reforms, see Mohamed Tozy, "De l'action clandestine au parlement: qui sont les islamistes au Maroc?," *Le Monde Diplomatique* (August 1999), <http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/1999/08/TOZY/12315.html>.

For a more detailed study of the royal reforms, see Abdeslam Maghrawoui's, "Monarchy and Political Reform in Morocco," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (2001), pp. 73-86, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/journal_of_democracy/v012/12.1maghraoui.html.

² Latifa al-Arousni, "Ramadan in Morocco," *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, September 24, 2007, <http://aawsat.com/english/print.asp?artid=id10306>.

³ "Maroc: la hausse du prix du pain annulée à la suite de manifestations populaires," Associated Press, September 25, 2007, http://www.emarrakech.info/Maroc-la-hausse-du-prix-du-pain-annulee-a-la-suite-de-manifestations-populaires_a12540.html.

⁴ Adam Wade, "Grève du transport: Jettou soutient Ghellab, mais...," *Aujourd'hui Le Maroc*, April 4, 2007, <http://www.aujourd'hui.ma/thematiques-economiques-details53594.html>.

⁵ To view a video about the efforts of Moroccans living in France to participate in the Moroccan legislative elections from France, visit:

http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2xc5i_france24frreportageelectionaumaroc_politics.

⁶ Christophe Ayad, "Les islamistes modérés sont donnés vainqueurs du scrutin de demain. Un exercice de démocratie borné par l'autorité de Mohammed VI," *Libération* (France), September 6, 2007, <http://www.liberation.fr/actualite/monde/276593.FR.php>; For more information on the subject, see: <http://oeil-sur-la-planete.france2.fr/17196318-fr.php>.

⁷ According to street reports from Rabat and Casablanca. See Naoufel Daqaqi and Mawassi Lahsen, "Morocco's PJD Confident Despite Detractors," <http://www.magharebia.com/>.

⁸ Mohamed El Hamraoui, "Elections du 7 Septembre du Maroc: bataille serrée pour les sièges," *Le Reporter*, March 2, 2007, http://www.lereporter.ma/article.php3?id_article=3285.

⁹ "Limada Yuqati'una Intikhabat 2007 Daba?" ["Why Are They Boycotting the 2007 Elections Now?], *Le Monde Amazigh*, No. 86-87 (July-August 2007), p. 4.

¹⁰ For the 2007 Daba association's efforts to increase political awareness among Moroccans, see: <http://www.2007daba.com/>.

¹¹ Driss Bennani and Karim Boukhari, "Spécial élections législatives. Les non-dits du scrutin," *Telquel*, No. 290 (September 22-28, 2007),

http://www.telquel-online.com/290/maroc2_290.shtml.

¹² It should, however, be noted that in 2002, the PJD took third place, despite the fact that that the party was allowed to present candidates in only 55 of the 91 constituencies (*dawa'ir intikhabiyya*).

¹³ For information on the music festivals, see a video report on the summer 2007 Casa Music Festival,

at: http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x8tgy_big

¹⁴ See the new political map in Morocco after the 2007 election, at:

<http://www.telquel-online.com/290/images/schema.pdf>.

¹⁵ Contrary to the popular belief, the PJD is a middle-class party, not a party of the masses.

¹⁶ Abed al-Rahman, al-Dawdi, "*Taraju al-Siyyaha fi Murrakush*" ["Degradation of Tourism in Marrakech"], *Attajdid*, No. 1754 (October 31, 2007), http://www.attajdid.ma/def.asp?codelangue=6&info=2&date_ar=2007/10/31.

¹⁷ Driss Ksikes, "Religion : les derniers laïcs arabes," *Telquel*, No. 119 (March 20-26, 2004), <http://www.telquel-online.com/119/sujet4.shtml>.

¹⁸ The IP is now officially declared a secular party.

¹⁹ See the new political map in Morocco after the 2007 election, at: <http://www.telquel-online.com/290/images/schema.pdf>.

²⁰ He was one of the founding fathers of modern Morocco and the legendary nationalist who advocated the idea of "Grand Maroc" ("Greater Morocco"), which includes the Sahara and its inhabitants as an integral part of the territorial unity of the kingdom.

²¹ Driss Bennani and Karim Boukhari, "Abbas premier ministre. Aïe!," *Telquel*, No. 290 (September 2007), http://www.telquel-online.com/290/maroc2_290.shtml.

²² For a good study of the *alternance* system enacted by King Hassan II, see Michal J. Willis, "Between Alternance and the Makhzan: At-Tawhid wa-al-Ihsan's Entry into Moroccan Politics," *Journal of North African Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (Autumn 1999), pp. 45-80.

²³ For the official results of the elections, see the Ministry of Interior website, at: <http://www.elections2007.gov.ma/>.

²⁴ Cited in Bennani and Boukhari, "Spécial élections législatives."

²⁵ For an interesting attempt to answer this question, see an article by Moroccan political scientist Abdeslam Maghraoui, "Depoliticization in Morocco," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (2002), pp. 24-32, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/journal_of_democracy/v013/13.4maghraoui.html.

²⁶ Francis Dubois, "Les élections au Maroc révèlent le gouffre existant entre le régime et la population," World Socialist Web Site, http://www.wsws.org/francais/News/2007/octobre07/111007_maroc.shtml.

²⁷ For further statistical details, see: <http://www.elections2007.gov.ma/elu/clean/CandNomREG.aspx?s=1>.

²⁸ See the new political map in Morocco after the 2007 election, at:

<http://www.telquel-online.com/290/images/schema.pdf>.