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Local Elections in Morocco: The Challenge of Abstention

*Hameed Bohkak**

A The local elections scheduled for June 12th, 2009 face the same challenge as those of September 2007. Two years ago, the elections were marked by significant levels of abstention, as reflected in the voter turnout rate, which, at just 37%, was the lowest since Morocco achieved independence in 1956. This low level of participation reflects a crisis of confidence in the political and electoral process as well as in the political forces involved. Strategizing and alliance-making revolves around how to overcome this danger, which threatens to weaken the legitimacy of the entire political process. Thus the regime and political parties alike view abstention as a threat. These elections are the second to be held during the reign of King Mohammed VI, and the ninth communal elections since 1956. They constitute a test for the ten years of reform efforts (1999 – 2009), and will provide an opportunity for debating development at the local level and how local democracy has evolved, in the era of the new King.

Another key feature of the election is the sudden emergence of the new “Authenticity and Modernity” party founded by Fouad Ali el Himma known for his links to the royal court. The emergence of this new player might well provide the incentive for other political forces to seek to stand in its face, possibly by uniting to confront it, thus giving the elections unexpected attractiveness for the voters.

Barring the symbolic significance of these achievements, the one unanswered question remains the extent to which such developments have really impacted women’s overall condition and daily lives.

Does the Charter of Honor solve the problem?

In preparation for the local elections, the Ministry of the Interior drafted the “Charter of Honor,” which aims to combat election abstention, and calls on the political parties and

some civil society organizations to play a role in organizing citizens and encouraging them to participate. A mobilization and awareness-raising campaign was launched, targeting young people in particular and the citizenry at large. The authorities inserted amendments to the communal charter to strengthen the role of

local (municipal) communes and expand their responsibilities. The ministry also launched a media campaign that urged citizens to register on the electoral lists, in accordance with a new system that uses the criterion of residency within the electoral district. A special review of the lists was undertaken, and amendments were made to the election code, consisting of the use of the national ID card as proof of identity in the registration process, or, in case it cannot be provided, the family record book. The minimum threshold of votes that any party list must obtain was also raised from 3% to 6% of the total, in order to reduce political fragmentation. In addition, the minimum age for standing for office was lowered from 23 to 21 years of age, and the representation of women in the localities was increased through the creation of a “Fund to Promote the Representation of Women in the Elected Councils.” The code, as approved by the Chamber of Representatives (*Majlis al-Nuwwab*), will increase the representation of women, especially in the countryside, to 12%, a development that is a result of demands made by the women’s movement, including *The Feminist Movement for a Third of Elected Seats for Women in the Prospect of Equality*, which comprises around a thousand associations.

The elections cover 1,500 municipalities, or urban and rural districts called “communes,” and candidates are elected for a six-year term. These communes contain nearly 23,367 seats, including 2,822 seats allocated to women under the new Communal Electoral Law, i.e. 12.08%. As a result of the amendments, 1,640,000 more people have become eligible to vote, raising the total electorate to 13,876,346 voters. The elections are to be conducted according to a system of voting that is a combination of party-list ballots (in urban areas) and a nominal, individual voting (in rural areas).

Around 33 parties are expected to take part in the elections, some of which are recently-

formed splinter parties that range in political orientation from leftist and liberal to Islamic.

However, not all the leftist and Islamic forces will participate in the elections. The banned Justice and Charity Association, which according to observers is the largest popular, political Islamist organization in the opposition, is not running in the elections, on the grounds that they are being held within an “unfair” political and constitutional framework and constitute an extension of previous elections and contests, and therefore there is nothing to be gained from participating in them. Leftist forces have also announced a boycott, the most prominent of which is the Democratic Path Party, an avowedly radical left party. Finally, there are some organizations within the Amazigh movement that called for a boycott of the elections during the “National Coordination of the Amazigh Cultural Movement in the Moroccan League”, in addition to the dissolved Amazigh Democratic Party.

A glance at the Party for Authenticity and Modernity and its party allies

The Party for Authenticity and Modernity appeared recently in a political and media coup, by holding its inaugural party congress, under the slogan of “Morocco tomorrow in all confidence,” just under five months ahead of the date of the upcoming communal elections. 5,000 delegates attended the congress. The founding of the party is considered the crowning moment of a course of events set in motion by the resignation of the Minister Delegate in the Ministry of the Interior, Mr. Fouad Ali El Himma, in 2007 to allow him to run as an independent candidate in the legislative elections in his region. His party won a full victory (all three seats), the only party to do so, and took the highest percentage of votes. This victory can be attributed to the fact that Mr. El Himma is a friend and former

classmate of King Mohammed VI, and previously occupied the position of Secretary of State, and subsequently Minister Delegate in the Ministry of Interior. The press has described him as the second most powerful man within the Moroccan political regime. In a surprised move, and following this overwhelming victory, El Himma launched his entry into politics with a media attack on the Islamic Justice and Development Party (JDP) in his first television interview. Channel Two gave the party the right to respond, and the exchange of blows in the media between the two sides continues. Within the two houses of the bicameral parliament (the Chamber of Representatives and Chamber of Counselors) El Himma formed a 36-member team of independents and deputies who have switched from other parties. He then went on to create a united parliamentary coalition with the National Rally of Independents named "Rally and Modernity," which, following the defection of the People's Movement party to the opposition, has ensured a majority for the government. At the outset of 2008, El Himma announced the establishment of the Movement of All Democrats, which brings together figures from various professional backgrounds, and intellectual and cultural movements, and with different political and communal sensitivities. Its official objective is to rehabilitate political action, reconcile the citizenry with politics, and combat the culture of despair created by the low levels of voter participation in the 2007 legislative elections. Another of the movement's goals is to uphold the reforms and "great workshops" led by King Mohammed VI within the framework of the "Modern, Democratic Society Project." However, observers saw the nucleus of a future party in the formation of the movement, something that was recently confirmed by the merger of five parties in an alliance known as the Party for Authenticity and Modernity (PAM). The

member parties are the Alliance of Liberties, the National Democratic Party, Al Ahd, the Environment and Development Party, and the Civic Initiative for Development. All have poor representation on the Moroccan street. The merger took place in August 2008, and the party's inaugural congress was convened in January 2009. The congress unanimously elected Cheikh Biadillah as Party Secretary (former Minister of Health and an independent), with Fouad Ali El Himma remaining in a leadership position in the party's national bureau.

The PAM has announced that it will seek to "rationalize" political party action and the Moroccan political landscape by calling for the creation of political groupings that compete on the basis of substantial political programs. The King has been making this demand since the beginning of his reign, as it stands to lend credibility to political action, as opposed to the fragmentation that characterizes the Moroccan political party landscape (which is made up of over 33 parties). The new Political Parties Law of 2005 (which came into effect in 2006) set forth the principle of inter-party alliances and mergers, and it is in this context the merger of the five aforementioned parties took place. The PAM is also in consultations over forming alliances with other parties it views as close to it, including the People's Movement Party and the Constitutional Union Party. In addition, it has increased levels of electoral participation by broadening its electoral base and mobilizing to ensure widespread participation, in order to move beyond the setback of September 2007. The Movement of All Democrats has remained "independent" from the PAM, despite the fact that its leading members are leaders of the party.

The Justice and Development Party is seen as a political adversary by the PAM (which did not invite the party to attend the opening of its inaugural congress). Confronting the

party in the field is one of the objectives of the PAM, as Fouad Ali El Himma has emphasized in his meetings with his supporters and interviews with the press. The PAM seeks to preempt the victory of any political power that is not in favor with the regime, specifically the Islamists who are running in the elections, and in particular the JDP, whose participation in the elections from 1997 to 2009 raised fears in local and international circles that it would disturb the political balance, which is dominated by the Ministry of the Interior.

The left-wing parties, first and foremost the Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP), view the PAM as a “newcomer,” or the “new administrative party,”¹ and a continuation of previous political and electoral maneuvering by the authorities aimed at creating a “state party” (as is the case in Egypt and Tunisia). This occurred in the elections of 1963, when advisor to the late King Hassan II Ahmed Rida Kadirah founded the Front for the Defense of Constitutional Institutions, in 1977 with the establishment of the Rally of Independents party, and the Constitutional Union Party in 1984. These experiments ended in failure, something which also spells failure for this latest experiment. In response to the process of party mergers being undertaken by the PAM, the Moroccan left is calling for a merger of its own scattered forces by convening meetings and seminars on the unification of the left. Indeed, one of the leaders of the Socialist Union of Popular Forces, which is considered the linchpin of the Moroccan left, announced a possible alliance with the Justice and Development Party in order to safeguard democracy and fight corruption. This rapprochement

¹ The term “administrative party” is employed within the literature of the Moroccan Left to refer to parties that are loyal to the authorities or created by the authorities.

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The “Islamist” Forces

The participation of Islamist forces in the elections is limited to the JDP and the Party of Renaissance and Virtue. The Civilizational Alternative Party is an Islamist party that ran in the 2007 legislative elections but failed to win any seats. It was then prohibited by law on January 18th, 2008, after the Moroccan Ministry of the Interior uncovered a “terrorist cell” that was referred to in the press the “Belliraj cell,” after the cell’s leader. The cell was comprised of 35 people including the Secretary General of the Civilizational Alternative Party, al-Mustapha

Moatassim, and its official spokesperson, Mohammed al-Amin al-Rikala, both of whom are in custody.

- For the JDP, the upcoming elections will be its third round of communal elections. The party's participation has been gradual: in 1977 it participated in its first round of elections on an unofficial basis, on the "unaffiliated" list. In the 2003 elections, the party competed in 18% of electoral districts, and would have run in 40% were it not for the terrorist acts that struck the city of Casablanca on May 16th, 2003, for which the party was held morally responsible by its political and ideological enemies. The party currently intends to run in 40% of electoral districts in the upcoming elections, i.e. to put forward 10,000 candidates. This gradual increase in nominations reflects the party's desire to reassure the conservative political elite over the arrival of Islamists on the electoral arena. It can also be attributed to caution within the party, since this will be the Islamists' first major experience of running in the elections, and thus is in some sense a founding experience.

Despite the official endorsement of the JDP's participation in the legislative and communal elections, the party's relations with the regime remain uneasy. And notwithstanding the flexibility and pragmatism that the party has displayed, and its efforts to avoid any clash with the regime, particularly after the events of May 16th, the rule nevertheless remains the "trial of intent". For although Justice and Development came in at second place to the winners, obtaining 46 seats, directly after the Istiqlal (Independence) Party, which won 52 seats, it was not called

for consultation during the formation of the government after the 2007 legislative elections, as mandated by the constitution. This "marginalization" has pushed it into opposition.

The JDP began making preparations for the upcoming communal elections, believing it had a good chance of running some of the municipal councils headed by its members, including the council of Meknes, the municipalities of Temara, al-Qasr al-Kabir and Khenifra. It also showed flexibility in the way it approached certain activities, such as music festivals, and a "beauty contest" in the town of Safro (located close to Fez), dealing with them with the logic of a political party, not a preaching movement. Thus its criticism was based on technical and administrative grounds, such as rationalization of expenditure, process, transparency and not only on moral grounds. This approach was part of a policy of differentiation between the political and preaching or between the party and the movement, adopted by the party in response to criticisms leveled at it by its political and ideological enemies, who accused it of having a dual discourse and of attempting to impose a certain moral code hostile to personal freedoms.

In addition, it was active in the demonstrations that were staged against Israeli crimes in Gaza. It played a major role in leading these demonstrations in terms of mustering large numbers of people, alongside other political parties, Islamist, leftist and independent, both pro- and anti-government.

The party has stolen the limelight before and after every stage of elections in which it participated, and has enjoyed special media attention domestically and abroad. This has been the case in the run-up to the upcoming

municipal elections, too, as a result of the following set of events:

- The dismissal of the mayor of Meknes, a member of the JDP, and the transfer of his case to the judiciary due to violations recorded by investigators from the Ministry of the Interior and considered grave. This investigation took place within an investigatory process carried out by the ministry in several communes and provinces, which led to the dismissal of three mayors.
- In the same period, the withdrawal of around 71 members of the JDP in the towns of Safro, Nador and Casablanca, and of the regional secretary of the trade union associated with the party in the city of Tangier, and his defection to another left-wing union due to the lack of internal democracy, attracted an inordinate amount of media attention.
- The Prime Minister issued a strongly-worded communiqué against the Secretary General of the JDP, in which he criticized the party for exploiting the Palestinian issue and the events in Gaza, which he stated was an issue of all Moroccans, King, government and people alike.
- The authorities' demolition of the "Green Mountain" project, located in the suburbs of Temara, without providing an explanation, despite the legality the project, which was implemented by the urban commune of Temara, led by a member of the JDP.

If these withdrawals appear to be a part of the course of any political party, particularly in the run-up to elections, when there is much switching between political parties, primarily on personal and electoral grounds, the exaggerated official and media attention given to these events, which all occurred concurrently, has made the party suspicious

of the circumstances behind them. The party has taken them as a political message aimed at exerting psychological and moral pressure on it, as part of a policy of containment and control, to keep it within the boundaries marked out for it.

The "Leftist" Forces

The leftist forces were the biggest losers in the legislative elections of September 7th, 2007. The USFP was relegated to fifth place, and leading figures in the other left-wing forces failed to take any seats. The fragmentation that has come to characterize the left (there are eight left-wing parties, most of which have splintered off from each another) is perhaps the primary reason for this setback. One of the most striking manifestations of this fragmentation has been the entry of leftist forces into competition with one another in certain constituencies, which resulted in a splitting of the vote. This reflected negatively on the outcome of the elections and the position of the left, which has lost much of its luster since the "consensual alternation" experiment of 1988, led by Prime Minister Abdul Rahman al-Yousifi (of the USFP).

In addition, electoral abstentions caused the leftist forces to sound the alarm, and to hold seminars that aimed at diagnosing the problems of the left and the political situation in general, in order to arrest its decline.

The following factors have all acted as incentives to the forces of the left to merge, overcome their fragmentation and begin to form alliances: the upcoming communal elections, the entry of the Authenticity and Modernity Party into the fray, through a policy of political party mergers and forming a major political axis, the increase in the number of nominations put forward by the Justice and Development Party, and the setting of the electoral threshold at 6%.

The United Socialist Party, the National Congress Party and the Socialist Democratic Vanguard Party entered into the Democratic Left Alliance. The alliance drafted a charter of honor, in which it set out criteria for nominations to local elections, and standards for selecting candidates on behalf of the alliance. It also obliged its members to sign the charter.

The Socialist Union of Popular Forces party, which has been the most prominent party of the Moroccan left, has yet to determine its position towards the issue of alliances, or whether it will remain within the Democratic Bloc that it formed with the Party of Progress and Socialism (a left-wing party) and the Istiqlal Party (a party considered to be on the conservative right). These are the three parties that make up the ruling coalition, together with other parties and technocrats. Will it open up to other leftist parties within the Democratic Left Alliance, or will it cause an upset by allying itself with the JDP, as has been suggested by one of the party's leaders? Its delay in establishing its strategy is indicative of the deep crisis it is undergoing and its internal conflicts, which have exploded into the open.

Conclusion

In the upcoming elections, the risk remains whether widespread participation by the electorate can be ensured, so as to avert a repetition of the scenario of the April 7th, 2007 elections. Low rates of voter turnout were a sharp slap in the face for the political parties, the political process, and the elections as a whole. This issue is of concern to all the participating political parties and to the authorities, since strong political and electoral participation lends legitimacy to the existing political regime and is a mainstay of its stability and continuity.

The risk for the various political forces is determined by their immediate conflicts and electoral ambitions for the 2012 legislative elections. The left views these elections as a station for gathering its forces, in order to recoup their position and restore lost effectiveness. For the Islamists, they are crucial for the normalization of their political presence and preservation of their electoral base, which has retreated somewhat.²

For as long as each party is unable to cover every electoral district single-handedly, and because the election law prevents any party from winning more than 50% of the vote, the option of forming party alliances will remain open to the political dynasties, be they ideologically close or distant, and as long as the running of local affairs is not subject to ideological alignments, as was the case in the 2003 communal (municipal) elections, when the distinctions between right and left, and between the opposition and the majority vanished.

*** Research fellow, Centre d'études et de recherches en sciences sociales, Rabat.**

² The Justice and Development Party won 100,000 fewer votes in the 2007 legislative election than in the 2002 legislative elections.