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Morocco's Parliamentary Elections: The Enduring Political Impasse

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Morocco's September 7th parliamentary elections provided an important window into the state of Morocco's much-heralded policies of liberalization and democratization, as well as the place of Islamist parties in the political process. In the end, though, the most important message may have been the public's apathy towards the entire exercise.

King Muhammad VI ascended to the throne in 1999. Under his stewardship, Morocco has taken a number of steps to expand political pluralism, liberalize public life and improve its human rights record. This process has been closely watched and supported by Morocco's allies in Europe and the United States, who are eager to see it become a model of a democratizing and moderate Muslim state, in sharp contrast to the failures of American-endorsed Middle Eastern democracy projects in Iraq and the Palestinian Authority.

Thirty-three parties and numerous independent candidates competed for the 325 seats in the Moroccan Chamber of Deputies. The outgoing governmental coalition, led by the center-left Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP) and the more conservative Istiqlal (Independence) party, was mainly concerned with preserving the political status quo. However, many Moroccans were disenchanted with the government's performance, feeling that the country's deep-rooted socio-economic ills had not been adequately addressed. The ruling parties were also accused of corruption and of exploiting the political system for their own material gains. Despite the regime's ostensible efforts to expand the government's role in the decision-making processes, most Moroccans

understood that the true source of political power lay in the well-imbedded interlocking machinery of the Moroccan bureaucracy, security forces and the economy, led by the palace, and thus displayed little interest or trust in the veteran governing parties and their leaders. Hence, their prospects at the outset of the campaign did not appear very promising.

The one exception to the rising public mistrust of political parties appeared to be the Islamist *Parti de la justice et développement* (PJD). Unlike the even more potent Islamist *Justice and Spirituality* movement, which refrains from involvement in electoral politics and is not recognized by the authorities, the PJD actively participates in Moroccan political life, accepting the rules of the game dictating recognition of the monarchy's pre-eminence in political and religious matters. The PJD had managed to win an impressive number of seats in the outgoing parliament (42), despite the fact that it had exercised a high degree of political restraint by fielding candidates in only a portion of the electoral constituencies, in order not to risk arousing fear among the general public and the authorities of an Islamist takeover of power.

PJD leaders have repeatedly underscored their party's non-violent character. The party is highly regarded for its transparency, discipline, and lack of corruption. In the outgoing parliament, its members constituted a vocal and articulate opposition force, attentive to the public's grievances. Accordingly, the party was almost universally expected to attain significant gains in the 2007 elections and become the largest single party in parliament, and most probably join, and perhaps even lead the new government.

The prospects of a PJD victory overshadowed what was otherwise a lackluster election campaign. Local and foreign observers closely followed the PJD's activities and statements by party leaders. Their intentions were difficult to discern, particularly on key questions such as the monarchy's position in Moroccan public life, which dominates any discussion on the possible enhancement of the power of parliament vis-à-vis the executive. Some of the PJD's leaders openly subscribe to the consensus surrounding the monarchy's centrality, while others are more reticent, either on principle, or for fear of being co-opted by the monarchy. PJD leaders quietly wrestled with the advisability of joining, or even leading a coalition government and assuming governmental responsibility following their expected electoral success.

However, the outcome of the election came as an unpleasant surprise to the PJD. The venerable center-right Istiqlal party obtained the highest number of seats (52), a modest 4-seat increase, while the PJD also attained only a four-

seat increase (46). The Berber-based Mouvement Populaire registered a 14-seat increase (41), while the USFP was the biggest loser, losing 14 seats (26). Overall, the Moroccan political system remained fragmented, with seven parties receiving 80% of the vote, led by Istiqlal's 16% share. Disappointed PJD activists accused the Istiqlal of bribing voters and resorting to other forms of pressure tactics. While it was difficult to verify these allegations, it was clear that Istiqlal's success was partly due to its ability to bring its supporters to the polls, while the PJD's expected protest voters did not turn out in large numbers. The initial post-election consultations seemed to indicate that the makeup of the new Moroccan government would broadly resemble the outgoing one, and not include the PJD. Whether the Istiqlal's head will be appointed as prime minister, or whether the King will perhaps repeat his behavior in 2002 and appoint a non-party personage close to the palace, remained to be seen.

Apart from the PJD's failure to become Morocco's leading party, the main story of election day (which was deemed by foreign observers to have been largely free of fraud) was the extremely low voter turnout of 37 percent - the lowest ever in Moroccan political history. The fact that so few Moroccans bothered to go to the polls at all suggests the extent of public dissatisfaction. One conclusion from the election's outcome is that the imbalance between a powerful, overarching monarchy and weak political parties remains very much in place. Another is that Morocco's limited political pluralism under the monarchy's strong hand provides an adequate counter-balance to the Islamist political current, at least for the time being.

Although the monarchy will continue to lead the country, there are many unanswered questions concerning the country's long-term political future. Without a greater degree of public involvement and more vitality in parliament and other public institutions, achieving significant political reform and addressing Morocco's deeply-rooted social and economic problems will be extremely difficult. Moreover, political stagnation, apathy and disaffection might also open the way for radical political forces seeking to undermine Morocco's path of controlled political evolution as it searches for a balance between the local and the global

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