



Morocco

Morocco: Electoral Reform with Public Relations Value

Geoffrey Weichselbaum, Michael Meyer-Resende June 2, 2009

“More women elected,” “Higher Voter Turn-Out,” “Fewer Seats for the Islamic Party” may well be the headlines after Morocco’s local elections on June 12. Such outcomes would not mean, however, that Moroccans are becoming more egalitarian, eager to vote, or secular. They would be a direct result of electoral reforms in December 2008. While the changes were generally positive, they focused on issues that will improve Morocco’s image rather than on long-standing deficits in the transparency of elections.

The 2007 elections to the lower house of parliament were marked by a low turnout of 37 percent of registered voters. Given that many of those eligible do not register, the actual turnout was estimated to be a dismal 25 percent of the electorate. Even if voter apathy persists in the local elections, a technical change will give the impression that more voters went to the polls. Recent changes to registration regulations resulted in three million voters being taken off the lists for a variety of reasons, including failure to respond to inquiries by the administration or double inscriptions. With 1.6 million new voters registered this year, there are 1.4 million fewer voters than in the 2007 elections. The total number of registered voters is now close to 14 million out of an estimated 20 million eligible. Given that turnout is measured against registered voters, the percentage would be higher if the same number of people went to the polls in June as in 2007. The Ministry of the Interior estimates an automatic statistical increase in turnout of 8 percent.

The recent electoral reforms also introduced mechanisms that will favor the election of women to local councils, notably the introduction of lists reserved for female candidates. This may propel the percentage of women in local councils beyond 11 percent, up from less than one percent in the 2003 local elections. While this will be a positive change, an increased number of female council members should not be understood to be the result of societal change. It is rather a top-down attempt to effect such change.

These local elections will be the first test for the new Party for Authenticity and Modernity, founded by former Deputy Minister of the Interior Fouad Ali Al-Himma. The party champions better policy performance, and good results in the local elections will be decisive to gain momentum, with the next direct parliamentary elections due in 2012. The Islamist Party of Justice and Development (PJD) will also be looking to perform well; its results in the 2007 parliamentary elections (10.9 percent) fell short of what many analysts had expected.

The election law uses two different electoral systems: a proportional list-based system in larger municipalities and single member constituencies with the first-past-the-post system in smaller municipalities in the countryside. The latter (used in 1,411 municipalities throughout the country compared to 92 larger municipalities) favors those parties that are strongest in rural areas, such as the conservative Istiqlal party and the Popular Movement. For parties with more support in the cities, such as the PJD, it will be difficult to win seats in the countryside.

The recent change of the law increased from 25,000 to 35,000 inhabitants the threshold that divides small from large municipalities. The government says that this change ensures that municipalities use the same electoral system they used five years ago, even if their population grew in the meantime. In terms of seats won across the country, this law change favors the traditional conservative parties.

While the recent changes to the electoral law are positive, they conspicuously avoid any of the long-demanded steps that would make the elections overall more transparent. The aggregation and publication of polling station results countrywide

remains difficult to follow for anybody except the administration, which does not publish these data. There is still no legal framework for non-partisan election observation. The lack of a framework resulted in frictions between the domestic observers and the administration in the 2007 elections and deterred domestic groups from launching a large observation effort for the June 2009 elections. Observers report on shortcomings, and when detailed results are promptly published it may turn out that they do not always add up. That would not be the story that Moroccan authorities hope the media will tell about the elections: higher voter turn-out, more women elected, and no dramatic increase in support for the PJD.

Geoffrey Weichselbaum and Michael Meyer-Resende are associates at Democracy Reporting International, a Berlin-based group promoting political participation.