

Dissecting Morocco's Local and Regional Elections

Introduction

On September 4th, 2015, Morocco held historic elections that advanced the process of devolving power to the local and regional levels as mandated by the reformed Constitution of 2011. For the first time, Moroccan voters directly elected representatives to their regional councils; and now both regional and local councils will have greater independence in managing and budgeting their respective affairs.

While elections themselves were a major step in the regionalization process, voter turnout was seen by observers as a crucial indicator of citizen buy-in for both regionalization and the democratization and reform trajectory as a whole for the country. After the votes were tallied, a turnout of **53.67%** demonstrated a resoundingly positive response by citizens choosing to engage in a credible process. Morocco was able to avoid the mass boycotts and voter apathy that have stymied polls in other democratizing countries.

This is an exciting result for both Morocco and the region. Morocco is the only country in the region that has even begun the experiment of giving more power to its citizens through decentralization. Recognized as an oasis of stability in a turbulent region, Morocco has consistently demonstrated its commitment to continue pushing towards reform and progress, albeit at its own particular pace. While some uncertainty remains as to how this new distribution of power will look and function moving forward, this process merits further attention as it surely offers lessons for both Morocco's neighbors and for US policy in the region.

Background

The September 4th election consisted of two distinct polls, with candidates listed for both local and regional councils. Local (also referred to as municipal) councils were previously popularly elected but now exercise more authority in their respective municipalities. Regional councils also will have expanded authority and were for the first time directly elected by citizens. These reforms suggest that local government is intended to be focused on development, environment, and economic growth. Local governments will compete to attract and foster private enterprise and public investments in infrastructure, education, utilities, and health, among other things.

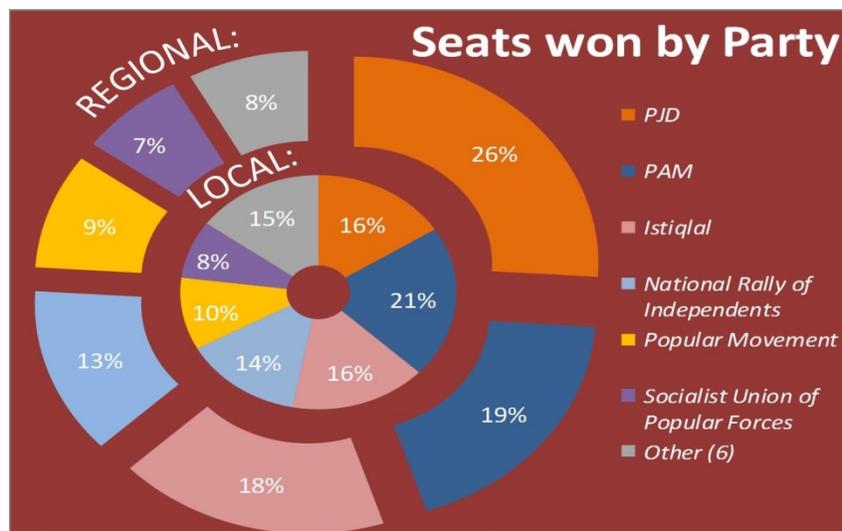
This devolution was set in motion by the 2008 [announcement](#) of a national regionalization plan to shift central authority towards regions, prefectures and provinces, and communes. Following the results of the September 4th election, the new municipal councils convened on September 17th to select members of provincial councils. On October 2nd, electoral colleges representing the regions and professional associations will elect the House of Councilors, which constitutes the upper chamber of Morocco's parliament.

With the election, Morocco has wagered that citizens would be drawn to the ballot box by a genuine belief in the new authorities granted to the councils as well as the capacity of governance by the candidates put forward. King Mohammed VI has played a strong role in supporting this atmosphere. In order to address the significant challenge of redefining the role of local representatives, in January 2010, King Mohammed VI created an [Advisory Commission on Regionalization](#) to conduct a participatory dialog among key stakeholders – including political parties, civil society, unions and professional organizations, and NGOs. As campaign season began, the King devoted much of his speech on Revolution of King and People Day to instilling in citizens the idea that they hold a very real power and responsibility at the ballot box. These inclusionary efforts played a strong role in inoculating against boycotts and voter apathy despite the uncertainty around how these new councils would function in practice.

Results

By the numbers, this election featured 138,000 candidates fielded by 30 political parties, aiming for seats in Morocco’s 12 regions and 1,503 municipalities. 4,000 trained [election observers](#)—both domestic and international—monitored the election which was deemed free and fair. The get-out-the-vote push, which was aided by the King, yielded 1.1 million new voter registrations, of which 46% were women.

On the regional side, 38% of those elected were women—even more than the 1/3 reserved for women candidates by law—and 68% have a tertiary-level education or higher. Although those elected for local positions comprised fewer women and possessed relatively lower levels of education, 20% of this group is under the age of 35, which is a promising number for invoking youth interest in politics and building experience for a new generation of elected officials.



In terms of overall results, Prime Minister Abdelilah Benkirane’s Justice and Development Party (PJD) won 26% of the seats in regional councils and 5 of the 12 regions. The Party of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM), a liberal opposition party led by Mustapha Bakoury, won 19% of the seats and three of the regions. The Independence Party (Istiqlal), came in third with 18% of the seats and two regions. On the local side, PAM led the way with 21% of local seats, followed by the PJD and Istiqlal with 16% each. This disparity was the result of PAM’s relative strength in rural areas and the PJD’s successes in cities.

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Voter participation was especially important in the three most southern regions, which include the Western Sahara. In the end, those three regions had an average participation rate of 58%, which was above the national average. The result demonstrates that the increased local and regional autonomy present real opportunities, and that engagement is both meaningful and worthwhile. This seems especially true among the youth, as the two most southerly regions had by far the highest proportion of elected officials under the age of 35 (23% and 27%, respectively).

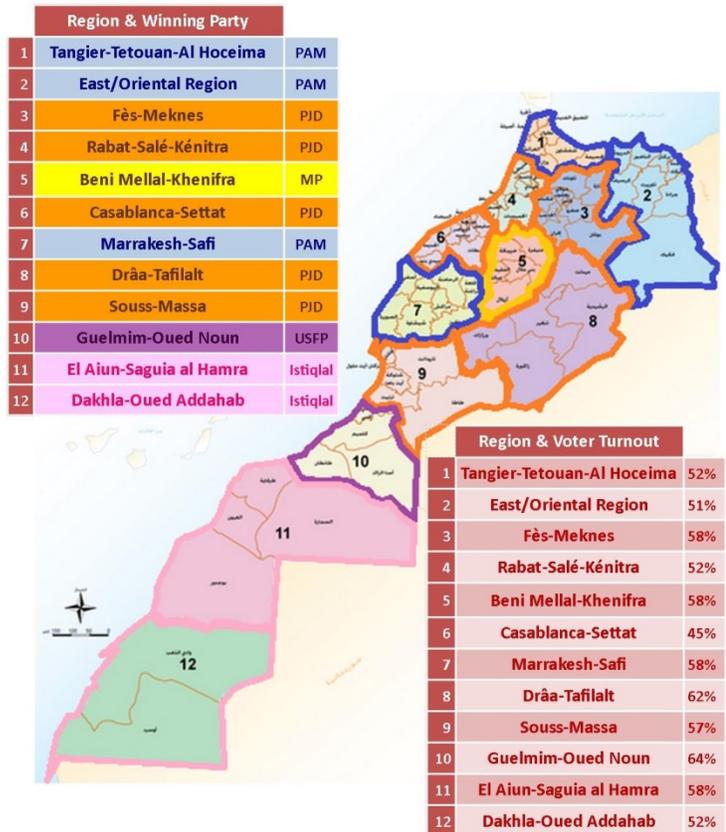
Campaigns, Candidates, and Parties

In general, the campaigns focused on economic development, public services and environment, and the expanded authority of regions and municipalities. One significant feature of the election was the infusion of new participants in Moroccan politics: of all candidates put forward, 78.8% in local elections were new and 64.3% in regional elections were new. Additionally, many of the candidates were young: 29% of local candidates and 27% of regional candidates were under the age of 35, indicating a strong level of youth interest in engaging with their government.

A great deal of the media attention on these elections has focused on gains made by the PJD, the Islamist party that came to power via national legislative elections in 2011. The PJD has generally considered religion as a

guiding source of values rather than a strict code to be imposed by the government. While in power, the PJD has focused on such topics as subsidy reform and anti-corruption—the party’s campaign in this election followed a similar policy-based focus and generally avoiding religious topics altogether.

Technology played a big role in this election and demonstrated an encouraging level of sophistication among the administrating officials, candidates, and citizens. A full 70% of newly registered voters did so online, and an innovative text messaging form prevented confusion by linking voters to their designated polling stations. Parties went to YouTube and live-streaming sites to better disseminate their message. For their part, entrepreneurial citizens helped sprout myriad informative tools for voters. Nouabook.com, which translates to ‘My MPs,’ was launched as a platform for citizens to receive answers to their questions from government officials. Meanwhile, various videos and infographics popped up online to explain the regionalization project and the stakes of the election.



Conclusion and Outlook

Morocco has cleared another hurdle in its path towards reform, democratization, and the decentralization of authority towards its citizens. Regardless of the results, voters have expressed their support for the overall trajectory of the country and their belief in the veracity of the new authority bestowed upon them. In the end, this is only a step, however. Morocco's election was a precursor to a very real shift in authority that brings with it the very real burden of governance that is migrating from its normal center of operation. It remains to be seen how exactly these powers will be exercised at both the local and regional levels, and how citizens will respond.

The bottom line is that the election itself can be seen as nothing other than encouraging. Voters across the country registered and showed up to vote, and Morocco demonstrated a level of electoral sophistication with entrepreneurial and tech-driven innovation employed by all stakeholders to ameliorate both citizen access and the general spread of information. Morocco set this step in its evolution—and the others to follow—in motion through a sustained commitment to reform that will foster success throughout all of its future hurdles.

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