

Moroccan elections reveal gulf between regime and the population

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Following the parliamentary election on September 7, a new government was formed in Morocco in the second week of October. It consists of parties that already constituted the last government, one of them, the social democratic USFP (*Union Socialiste des Forces Populaires*—Socialist Union of Popular Forces), having suffered heavy losses in this last election. The Islamic PJD (*Parti de la Justice et du Développement*—Justice and Development Party), which had been predicted to win the election by a large margin, came in first by a fraction of a percent, but came in second in the number of seats in parliament.

The new prime minister, the leader of the Istiqlal (Independence) party, Abbas El-Fassi, nominated by King Mohammed VI to form the government, is now heading a coalition of four parties that were in office from 2002 to 2007 under former prime minister Driss Jettou. This coalition consisted of the Istiqlal, the oldest nationalist party, the USFP, the former-Stalinist PPS (*Parti du Progrès et du Socialisme*—Party of Progress and Socialism), the RNI (*Rassemblement National d'Independents*—National Rally of Independents), a centre-right bourgeois party, and the Mouvement Populaire (MP). Only the MP, a liberal conservative Berberist party, eventually refused to join the new government.

It took El-Fassi, who has occupied many ministerial and ambassadorial posts under the present regime and that of Hassan II, more than a month to form the new government, due to the intense haggling for ministerial posts. Its composition was only announced on October 15—that is, after the opening of the new parliamentary session (October 12).

The September 7 legislative elections witnessed a massive turn away from the polling stations by the electorate. In spite of a campaign supported by the authorities and the political and economic establishment to obtain a level of participation of over 50 percent, the vote finished up with a massive abstention rate of 63 percent. According to the Interior Ministry, the level of participation was 30 percent in the cities and 40 percent in the countryside. In Casablanca, the country's biggest city, only 27 percent of voters participated; in Tangiers, 22 percent. In addition, 19 percent blank or invalid votes were recorded.

The elections had been presented by the Moroccan monarchy, the political establishment, and the national and international press as an important step towards “democratisation” and “modernisation” of the country and a commitment to more accountability and reliability by the administration, conditions demanded by countries seeking to increase their presence in Morocco. The elections were supposed to be a break from a political and economic system that, in the view of investors, had become too unpredictable due to endemic “corruption.”

There had been appeals by the king, the political establishment, countless TV commercials, leaflets, meetings and electoral billboards calling upon people to vote, but to no avail.

The Moroccan elite also hoped that strong voter participation, whatever the results for the different official parties, would help stabilise a more and more unstable regime and provide it with political legitimacy for its future plans. This failed.

Under conditions where any real opposition to the regime is gagged, the massive abstention expresses not only a profound social discontent among the Moroccan population but also dissatisfaction with the political regime and the political parties that support it. Some articles in the press speak of “a political repudiation” of the present system. The French daily *Le Monde* wrote the day after the election: “The level of participation has reached a historically low level,” calculating that “the disaffection is a blow for the Moroccan authorities and political parties taking part.”

A total of 33 political parties took part in the elections, which are based on proportional representation. As none of the parties were sure of obtaining a majority, the frontrunners were obliged to form a governing coalition. None of the parties taking part obtained more than 11 percent of the vote.

Other parties, like the Islamic Justice and Charity Party (not authorised, but tolerated) and the “far-left” Voie démocratique (Democratic Way) party, called for an election boycott.

Although the Islamists of the Party of Justice and Development (PJD) obtained the biggest share of the vote (10.9 percent) and 46 seats, this party obtained less seats than the conservative Istiqlal party, which attained the highest number of seats (52) and 10.7 percent of the vote. This is due to the constituency boundaries. The Mouvement Populaire (which represents the Berber vote) obtained 41 seats; the centre-right RNI, 39 seats; the social democratic USFP, 38 seats; the Union Constitutionnelle, 27 seats; and the former-Stalinist PPS, 17 seats. The Moroccan parliament has 325 seats.

All the parties that had participated in the coalition government since the 2002 election lost votes and seats this time. The Democratic Bloc, composed of Istiqlal, the USFP and the PPS, and which constituted the core of the outgoing coalition government, has fallen from 134 seats to 105. The USFP and the PPS lost the most support in these elections. The USFP, which raised hopes when it was in opposition, entered the government to support an aggressive policy of privatisation and attacks against social welfare. Moreover, this party supported the repression of journalists by the regime. On September 7, the USFP went from being the leading party in 2002 (50 seats) to being the fifth largest, with 38 seats.

The Moroccan political establishment had also envisaged and

perhaps hoped, as a possible alternative to the discredited traditional parties and the Islamic radicalisation of a section of the population, a victory for the Islamic PJD. The media had predicted a great victory for the latter, which failed to materialise. Although the PJD came out ahead of the Istiqlal in the cities, it managed to win only just over half of the seats that it counted on (80). The PJD is not considered to be a threat by the Moroccan regime.

All the parties forming the coalition support the monarchist regime. Although having spoken of constitutional reform in the past, they have all accepted the current constitution, which gives to the king the essential political power, parliament having a secondary role. The Moroccan constitution does not recognise the separation of powers. The king directly appoints ministers in the “sovereign” ministries, which are the Foreign Ministry, Interior and Justice Ministries and Islamic Affairs. According to this constitution, the king designates the prime minister, then the ministers on the suggestion of the prime minister.

Over the last 10 years, the Islamic parties had experienced a wide increase in their influence. They had increased their number of parliamentary seats threefold in 2002. In 2003, the governing regime postponed the municipal elections projected for June 2003 for fear of a strong showing by the Islamists. Following the murderous suicide bombings in May 2003 (Casablanca), there was talk of an Islamic “threat.” Suicide bombings have again taken place recently, in March and April of this year (again in Casablanca). The PJD was seen as a means of stemming the Islamic radicalisation of sections of the population, in particular the youth.

In connection with this, *Le Monde diplomatique* noted in its August 2007 issue: “As Moustapha Khalfi, member of the PJD National Counsel, explained: ‘The Americans must show that they are not hostile to Islam. They therefore encourage the PJD model, a moderate model which could be applied in other Arab and Islamic countries.’ Head of the political department of al-Adl wal-Ihsane [Justice and Charity], Mr. Abdelwahed Motawakil recognises this: ‘The Americans come regularly to see us. They are more intelligent than the French, who are subject to pressure and sometimes cancel their meetings with us. They know what we can do to counter the influence of terrorism.’”

The Moroccan regime has conspicuously supported American imperialism over the recent period, such as in the invasion of Iraq, while the great majority of the Moroccan population opposes the war. Mohammed VI, the Moroccan king, supported the “coalition of the willing” in aid of the war.

Morocco has often been referred to in recent years as an example of the Bush administration’s vision of a North African “free economic zone.” When Colin Powell, the former US secretary of state, went on a tour of the Middle East and the Maghreb to mobilise support for the Iraq invasion, he visited Morocco and thanked the country for its help in the “war on terrorism” and announced a doubling of military aid and a fourfold increase in economic aid.

Morocco provides prisons for the CIA and supplies torturers for the US “rendition” program for alleged terror suspects. In line with its pro-Zionist policy, the Moroccan regime has also openly supported Israel in its attacks against the Palestinians. The Moroccan population has for its part been one of the most visibly opposed to the Iraq war, organising some of the biggest demonstrations in the Arab world against the invasion and occupation.

The social crisis has severely worsened in recent years. This is reflected in growing social inequality and an ever greater social

divide. Poverty and unemployment, which stand officially at 30 percent, are growing. There are also big infrastructure projects financed by foreign investors (from the US, the European Union and the Middle East) and a 5 percent increase a year in GDP (8 percent in 2006). The rural exodus and the exodus of the youth from Morocco are a constant factor. Shantytowns, housing thousands living in poverty, surround the cities.

Morocco’s longstanding social problems persist. Illiteracy remains above 50 percent. Morocco is still the poorest country in North Africa. More than 5 million people live under the poverty line, of a total population of 30 million. One in four people in the countryside is affected.

The population has been severely affected by recent price increases, especially for foodstuffs like bread. Violent confrontations again took place recently in the town of Séfrou, in the centre of Morocco, between the police and demonstrators protesting against the price increases, leaving 50 injured.

The fact that the same parties make up almost the same coalition—under conditions where the great majority of the population has expressed its repudiation of them, and where none of the coalition parties obtained more than 11 percent of the votes—gives a measure of the gulf that exists between the Moroccan bourgeoisie and the population.

The last government pursued an aggressive policy of privatisation of public companies, as well as in training, education and health. This has been combined with deregulation, all for the personal enrichment of a thin layer of profiteers.

According to *Jeune Afrique* magazine, last December former prime minister Jettou, while on a visit to Medef (French employers’ organisation), had “proposed to French employers that Morocco serve as a platform for those who want to launch into the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa.” The magazine also noted: “Four hundred and eighty-five French companies are currently established in Morocco. France is the leading supplier, leading client and the first financial donor to the kingdom. Convinced that ‘a potential remains to be explored,’ Jettou wishes to go even further.”

The new government’s programme means a strengthening of measures promoting these aims and an intensification of the exploitation of the working class. Among its priorities will be “the improvement of the economic environment”—in other words, the creation of yet more favourable conditions for money to flow in from the EU, the US and Asia, to compete with other African and Middle East countries, such as Egypt and Turkey, which function as cheap labour production platforms.

The new coalition relies on a smaller majority in parliament than the last one and is predicted to be less stable. El Fassi’s policy statement was adopted on November 1, but by only a relative majority of 155 votes, deputies of parties forming his coalition having voted against it or abstained.



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