



What Morocco's Elections Mean

September 27, 2021 **Ilan I. Berman** *Al-Hurra Digital*

Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Israel; North Africa

When Moroccans went to the polls earlier this month to elect a new parliament, the result was a massive repudiation of Islamism – and a resounding affirmation of the North African nation's current geopolitical trajectory. The implications, for the Kingdom itself and for the role it plays in the greater Middle East, are liable to be far-reaching.

The biggest winner of the September 8th poll was the liberal National Rally of Independents (RNI), which managed to secure 102 of the Moroccan legislature's 395 seats. The centrist Progress and Modernity Party, or PAM, came in a close second, obtaining 86. And the conservative Istiqlal Party came in third, with 81 mandates. But the most striking outcome of the election was the near-total rout of the Justice and Development Party (PJD), the Islamist political faction which has dominated Moroccan politics for the past decade. It garnered just 13 seats – a staggering net loss of 112 from the country's last legislative contest five years ago.

That represents a clear "vote of no confidence" in the party's agenda and outlook on the part of the Moroccan people. A decade ago, the PJD rose to power as part of the broader political currents of the "Arab Spring," securing 107 parliamentary seats in Morocco's November 2011 elections and becoming the country's ruling party. But in the decade since, its lackluster handling of the economy, and a traditionalist moral code at odds with the country's dynamic, freewheeling society, increasingly rubbed the electorate the wrong way. All this was made much worse over the past year by the coronavirus pandemic, which put the PJD on the back foot and further exposed its social and economic failures.

The electoral results were simultaneously a vote in favor of the foreign policy priorities of the Moroccan Crown. In recent years, Morocco's monarch, Mohammed VI, has pursued an ambitious – and controversial – international agenda designed to expand the country's foreign policy horizons and carve out a leadership role in the broader Muslim World. This effort has included, among other things, concerted attempts to enhance the Kingdom's standing on the African continent, improve trade competitiveness with Europe, and a very public rapprochement with the State of Israel.

These initiatives all involve exceedingly high stakes, and at least some have rubbed against the grain of establishment Moroccan politics. For instance, domestic detractors (including many from the PJD) railed against normalization with Israel as "deplorable" when it was announced late last year. Moroccan voters, however, don't appear to share the sentiment; the electoral results reflect broad agreement with the monarchy's foreign policy vision, as well as confidence in its ability to navigate new, and increasingly contested, regional waters.

Finally, the election was a proof of concept of sorts for how the Kingdom has handled its single most important domestic issue: the Western Sahara. The former Spanish territory has been administered by Morocco since the mid-1970s, complete with massive investments in the area's infrastructure, connectivity and development. Rabat has also embraced broad political autonomy for the territory under its administration – a formula that was affirmed publicly last year, when the Trump White House recognized Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara as part of the Abraham Accords.

Morocco's vision for its "southern provinces" has been criticized by opponents like regional rival Algeria, the leftist Polisario movement, and assorted European diplomats, all of whom have argued that the Sahara's status needs to be decided via a negotiated international process. But on the ground, a very different reality prevails. For residents of the Western Sahara, Moroccan sovereignty isn't a burden but a vibrant, pluralistic and inclusive political project – one they are ready to support.

Accordingly, the final electoral results showcased a high degree of participation from all three of the regions that make up the Western Sahara. In Laayoune and Goulmim, 66.94% and 66.67% of eligible voters took part in the election, while 58.30% in Dakhla did. In other words, although the debate over the disposition of the Sahara may continue to rage in some quarters, among the locals it has largely been settled in favor of Rabat.

All of which should be seen as an affirmation of the Kingdom's current geopolitical trajectory. A decade ago, Morocco still saw itself largely as an "exception" in the region – a nation apart from, and mercifully unaffected by, the turmoil that beset many of its neighbors. These days, officials in Rabat talk more and more about their country being a political "model" whose example can help bring a measure of stability to a turbulent Middle East. The latest electoral results should give them even more confidence that it can.