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## **Morocco's women set for historic power play**

EL ARJAT, MOROCCO // Every day, Fatima Azim walks half an hour through the fields to bring water from the nearest well; enough time to think about making history. "It used to be considered shameful for women to be above men," said Mrs Azim, 31, a petite woman with horn-rimmed glasses and a quick smile. "But now voters feel that a rural woman understands their problems." Mrs Azim wants running water, decent roads and better schools for families like hers in Sohoul district, north of the capital, Rabat. Now she has joined the thousands of women standing for election to local councils, an unprecedented number spurred by a new female quota and their conviction that they are the right people for the job.

Mrs Azim has long dreamed of a career in local politics. "Now I feel that have a chance," she said. The vote on Friday will boost councilwomen from the current 127 to more than 3,300, giving Morocco the most female elected officials of any Arab country. For many, it is their first attempt at breaking into a political world long ruled by men. "They're coming from a society largely dominated by a patriarchal mentality that reserves the public space for men," said Aicha el Hajjami, a law professor at the University of Marrakech who specialises in women's issues. "Politics has functioned like an all-male club."

Moroccan women began asserting themselves during the four-decade reign of King Hassan II, who steered the country towards the West following independence from France in 1956. As modern cities have expanded, women have emerged from their homes to enter universities and the workplace in growing numbers. In 2004 Morocco amended its family law to grant women legal equality with men in key areas. The reform won international praise and helped burnish King Mohammed VI's reputation as a moderniser.

But the country's political parties have been slow to embrace women, prompting top-down initiatives aimed at tipping the scales. Women across the country have responded in droves to a new quota reserving 12 per cent of nearly 28,000 local council seats for them. More than 20,000 have registered as candidates in Friday's election. Enthusiasm has spread even into conservative pockets of the countryside, said Jamie Tronnes, Morocco director for the International Republican Institute, a US non-governmental organisation that has held workshops on campaigning across northern Morocco. "Our trainers were calling in to report

that the spaces we had rented were overflowing."

"I'm standing to make sure we reach that 12 per cent," said Nadia Rahmani, a teacher in Rabat who is venturing into politics for the first time as a candidate for the reformist Authenticity and Modernity Party, or PAM. "We have women raising families and flying aeroplanes, so why not politics?" Last Friday evening Mrs Rahmani marched with about 40 other PAM members through the poor quarter of Diour Jamaa, chanting slogans and talking with locals.

Diour Jamaa has the crumbling look of a neighbourhood that has grown up too quickly. The pavements are cracking, the cafes advertise non-existent pastries and the streets are crowded at night with idle youngsters. "Women must take part in politics, especially at the local level," said Khadija el Haddadi, a PAM candidate campaigning in Diour Jamaa. "The local district is like the house, and it needs to be well-ordered."

"Women tend more towards dialogue and, in official roles, are often more honest than men," said Prof el Hajjami, from the University of Marrakech. These arguments have resonated with political parties, who are recruiting female candidates, Mrs el Haddadi said. While voting is by party, Moroccans base their decisions "on the person, according to his or her credibility", she said. That has women such as Mrs Rahmani and Mrs el Haddadi working hard to get their names out.

As the PAM supporters advanced down the street, they paused to approach an old woman sitting against a wall, showering her with leaflets. Next, they briefly overran a cafe terrace, chatting with customers and depositing literature on the tables. Studying a leaflet over a glass of mint tea, a computer technician named Mohammed remained sceptical. "Parties talk a lot before an election, but once it's over you never hear from them," said Mohammed, who declined to give his last name.

Similar disenchantment led Moroccans to achieve an official voter turnout of just 37 per cent at parliamentary elections in 2007, the last time the country went to the polls. "It's not a question of men versus women," Mohammed added. "We just want someone who knows our problems and hardships." That is what Fatima Azim is offering voters in Sohoul district, where she is standing as a candidate for the centre-left Popular Movement party.

Like many of her neighbours, Mrs Azim lives in a one-room house with a detached kitchen and latrine. Every evening, after her shift at a textile factory, she goes house-to-house to talk to voters while her husband looks after their two-year-old son. "It will take patience to balance work, public duties and family," said Mrs Azim. "This job is not for everyone."

