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Podcast: Women and Political Life in Morocco

Women and Politics in Morocco

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The recent parliamentary elections in Morocco have led to the creation of the first-ever elected Islamist government in Morocco's history. After winning more than forty percent of the votes in the November 25th elections, the Party of Justice and Development (PJD) led by Prime Minister Abdelilah Benkirane formed a coalition government with the socialist Parti du Progrès et du Socialisme (PPS), the nationalist Istiqlal party and the royalist Mouvement Populaire (MP). In this new government one noteworthy aspect has received much attention: the fact it includes only one woman minister, Bassima el-Hakkawi, in a cabinet of thirty.

It is indeed a change in what was achieved concerning women's representation in the last decade. In the former Moroccan government, which ruled from 2007 to 2012, seven women served as ministers, the highest number of women in post ever in the Kingdom. This "record" was set after twenty years of activism, during which a lot of changes occurred in the Moroccan political system regarding women's right and representation.

The first Moroccan Constitution gave women the right to vote and be elected or appointed to official offices. Nevertheless, it was not fully implemented as long as society as a whole was not willing to make a consciousness change in accepting the possibility of being represented by women. There were many organizations and associations of and for women, some of them titled 'feminist organizations', which devoted their work to promoting women's rights and their representation in the public and political sphere. Women did take part in political activities during the 70s and 80s, mostly as part of the political opposition. Some of them were political prisoners under the reign of Hassan II (1961-1999). But the possibility of having a woman in parliament – as an example – never occurred before 1992. At this point, an initiative of several women's organizations, under the title of "Women's Spring," focused on convincing the King to change the constitutional articles concerning women's representation in parliament, as part of a more impressive demand to change the Family Law (*Mudawwana*) which determine women's rights within the family and society in general.

In 1993, King Hassan II signed the first constitutional change allowing women to be elected to parliament. Following the elections that took place that same year, only two women were appointed members of parliament. Five years later they were seven, and in 2003 a quota was set for women in the parliament: 10%, or in numbers: 33 women became members of parliament following the election. The political system and the political parties changed their proceedings in order to be able to propose appropriate representation of women within the current system. Most of

them had an active 'women's section' since their creation, only now the women-activists could perform a much more important role in the field: for the first time they could serve as members of parliament and ministers of cabinet. This was a part of a much bigger change in Moroccan society: the modification of the *Mudawwana*, which included many effective improvements in women's rights.

Since 2003, the number of women in political positions, parliament members and ministers, increased. Even though there is only one woman in the current cabinet, the number of women in the parliament is higher than 10%: there are as many as 47 women, from all parties, out of 397 members of parliament. But more important is the fact that the Moroccan women are taking part in the political life of the kingdom: More than 1000 of them were candidates in the last elections. The cognizance of the importance of being an active member of the political sphere, and the possibilities that the political system offers them, is now a part of the lives of those women.

