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Will the Arab Spring influence Moroccan Women Participation in Politics and Decision Making?

The constitutional referendum, called for by King Mohamed VI and voted on July 1st as a response to the Arab Spring and February 20 movement demonstrations, mentioned for the first time in Moroccan history the principle of parity.

Article 5 of the 1996 Constitution guaranteed equal rights for all Moroccan citizens, but the new constitution is clearer on gender equality, as well as other rights related to treaties, international laws and conventions ratified by Morocco.

In addition, another major innovation is the constitutional obligation for governmental bodies to achieve parity goals. The new constitution states that "The Moroccan government is working to achieve parity between men and women".

This constitutional requirement for parity and gender equality was to be followed at every stage of government structure, then public policies would be more gender-oriented, and women's stand in society would improve and with it their social and economic condition as well.

Although this constitutional reform has been celebrated by many Moroccan feminists' movements as a great achievement and leading the way to a more affirmative representation of women in politics, another fight starts with parliamentary elections scheduled for Nov 25th, 2011, with the issue of a larger national ballot for women, mainly by increasing seat slots from 30 to 60 over 395 (from 325).

Quota (in)efficiency

The new adopted quota system has generated wide-ranging debates on its efficiency given past experiences. Now with election results showing up, fears and skepticism expressed by many feminist movements and political actors have been confirmed: the quota system in Morocco harms more than it benefits women's

representation in politics.

During the last decade, public policy in getting women into politics focused mainly on regulatory parliamentary quotas and sacrificed many elements of a long fight of feminist movements for gender equality and women rights:

The 2002 parliamentary elections were to this effect the culmination of these efforts. This strategy of affirmative action was essential to force a wider representation for female candidates and promote their presence inside parliament house. In addition, legislation on political organization also introduced the concept of voluntary quota set at 20% for female representation in the governing bodies of political parties.

This strategy did allow for a positive introduction of women in politics as the participation moved from only two women in parliament to 35, five of which have been elected on local ballots.

In 2007 the quota experience has been maintained with the hopes that it might create even more dynamics and open the door for a renewed and effective women's participation.

The results of those elections were overall unsatisfying for two major reasons:

- The participation decreased as only 4 women have been elected on local ballots while the quota has remained flat (the outcome of the elections in 2007 must not yet be recognized as a trend; for such a conclusion, more elections need to be analyzed)
- Female candidates for the national ballot in 2007 were for the majority running for reelection through the same channel: the parliamentary quota. This underlines some of the biggest limitations of the current quota system. It was supposed to act as an introductory experience to politics and a way to get more legitimacy and broader access to media. This system has been unfortunately used as a lifetime guaranteed access to the parliament. Also, most of the women candidates were relatives to powerful men in their parties which influenced negatively the overall perception of women in politics.

The experience of the last election, the first to be organized within the new constitution, doesn't differ much from previous ones. Arguing that constitutional reforms underlined the principle of parity, the state introduced a new parliamentary quota, doubling the number of national ballots seats to 60 without accompanying measures and leaving it completely to political parties on how to handle the selection of their national list candidates and even worse, no gender regulations were introduced for the local ballot lists.

As a result, among a total of 7102 candidates, women's participation has recorded a figure of 1624 indicating a percentage of 22.87%, but only 5.24% were at the top of their parties' local lists.

Actually, the electoral system in Morocco and the big number of political parties competing for elections makes it very difficult for others than the head of the list to win the elections.

The final results came then as expected: 60 women were elected through the national list but only 7 were elected directly. What we may consider as an "organic" growth of parliament women's representation – i.e. the percentage of women elected in local lists vs. the national reserved ballot - has decreased after each election: 16% in 2002, 13% in 2007 and 11% in 2011 elections. Election after election the women representation trend is therefore negative.

Perception of women participation in politics

Going beyond the numbers, an essential question emerges: how do Moroccans perceive women participation in politics?

In the last decade and despite the introduction of women to the political arena in 2002, either through the parliamentary quota or increased nominations for cabinets, very few women have emerged as political leaders on their own right. In fact, be it inside their political parties or the parliament, women actions to influence public policies and overall political directions remain, if not minor, overall unnoticed and therefore inefficient.

This is due mainly to two factors. First, media discourse excludes a majority of political women and do not reflect the diversity of their participation and second, it seems women themselves aren't very keen to interact with the media due to cultural barriers and lack of experience. Women's absence from the media is undermining a lack of recognition of their competencies and legitimacy in the political field.

Therefore, civil society and women's movements have remained as such the main actors in favor of women's rights and their social and economic prosperity, while political women remained for their majority distant from the media, social debates and policy making processes.

Today, the perception of political women is still ambiguous. On the one hand women are seen as victims of the discriminatory political sphere:

- In parliament's commissions women are mainly "confined" to sectors either perceived to be women's duties such as the social committee or reserved committees (related to the so called "sovereignty ministries", managed historically by the monarch and therefore, their strategies are not broadly discussed in parliament) such as those on exterior affairs, defense and religion.
- Inside the political parties, women's representation in executive parties committees is very limited and does not exceed 20% in best cases.
- In the newly formed government after the recent elections, only one woman has been appointed as minister responsible of social development and family affairs, which is a reinforcement of the cliché that women can only take care of family issues.

On the other hand, some of the female politicians in Morocco emerged as strong leaders in mainly two cases: women close to powerful political male leaders, the king's advisor for instance, and women in the opposition be it Islamic opposition groups, the pro-democracy movement or the political parties that boycotted the elections.

From a society perspective, Moroccans in general are open to women participation in politics as long as they are educated and showing leadership skills, but they can be skeptical, accusing women for instance of being no different from men when it comes to openness to corruption and abuse of power or to being too emotional to be able to manage hard situations such as social conflicts and demands.

Women participation in politics: towards reforms

The quota system in Morocco as previously stated had no big impact on Moroccan women's effective participation in politics. For more effectiveness in the short/long run, the quota system should be combined with

broad measures, ranging from an education system that works on cultural stereotypes to policies, legislations and media regulations.

Legislative changes should support more voluntary actions by parties and state institutions instead of legislated quotas only, adopting an inclusive strategy that builds more on self-awareness, willingness and education as bases for a long-term change.

In that sense some of the voluntary legislative changes that can enhance women representation would be:

- Parties' Act:
 - Increasing incentives for women participation inside the party, for example by providing more financial aid to the parties executing training programs, media skills labs and public affairs workshops for women.
 - Part of the legislated financial aid for political parties is based on the number of its parliament members. This part should take into consideration for instance a certain weight for women's representation.
 - Quotas for women representation in the executive offices of the parties were promulgated in the new Parties' act. There is an obligatory quota of 30% of women in executive offices. This should be taken further beyond the obligatory amendments by introducing another voluntary quota of women in the total number of parties' members. This can have a great impact.
- Parliamentary and regional elections: the parliamentary quota should go hand in hand with other measures in this area. For instance, a quota of local lists' representation, especially concerning heads of lists, should be applied to make sure parties invest genuinely in enhancing female members' skills and exposure. The same strategy should be applied to regional elections.
- Media regulations: diversity representation regulations in public media should be enhanced and furthermore monitored, which is not the case today.

Of course, all these measures to be effective should be announced and applied way before the actual elections. Political parties, if adopting voluntary and obligatory quotas and legislations, should be able to build their own strategies and establish efficient mechanisms to reach the targets. Otherwise, the results would be the same as those of parliamentary quotas. When announced last minutes before the elections they lead in major cases to unethical practices and therefore corrupt the whole process of women's representation.

[Will the new constitution lead to more equality?](#)

The first constitutional real test in Morocco was the elections that failed to bring the new constitution's spirit to life which has been confirmed with the elections results.

Another major test was the nomination of the new government. While all parties declared in their electoral programs the parity as an objective, only one woman has been nominated as a minister by the elections' winning parties forming the government, which is a big failure for the so called democratic process built on a new democratic constitution.

Also, the new constructional reforms on gender equality are one of the major topics that the Islamic Party of Justice and Development (PJD), winner of the elections and leading the new government, has a very clear position on. Inheritance equality demands, for instance, that rely on the constitutional economic rights equality,

is a topic that the PJD refuses to discuss or to reform, arguing that this is a religious matter that in no case should be reformed as part of constitutional and law advancements.

As a conclusion and despite the deceiving results of last year's reform process for women's representation in politics, the symbolism of a newly formed government as a result of the Arab revolutions, the existence of a local popular pro-democracy movement and the introduction of constitutional reforms in Morocco that led to an Islamic party winning elections for the first time in Morocco's history, are important but they also show one reality.

They show that when the country faces important issues and dangerous situations, the feminist cause, women issues and their representation in politics and in society as a whole is of less importance.

The new constitution today faces huge challenges to be correctly and inclusively applied. It is urgent that civil society takes the lead once again to make sure that the advancements reached for women's situation in Morocco continue on the right track, hand in hand with efforts to resolve social issues and the popular unrests.

