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# Pseudo-Democracy and Voter Absenteeism in the 2021 Moroccan General Elections

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# Pseudo-Democracy and Voter Absenteeism in the 2021 Moroccan General Elections

Ben Shipp

SIT Study Abroad | Morocco: Multiculturalism and Human Rights

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## **Abstract**

Despite a long, complex process of democratization, the Moroccan regime can still be primarily categorized as a pseudodemocracy in which primary executive power lies with the King. At the same time, young people in urban areas in Morocco, a demographic that is traditionally understood to be more supportive of democracy, have recently had dramatically high levels of voter absenteeism. My research seeks to understand how pseudodemocratic practices have been publicly presented to the Moroccan people, and how this has influenced their decision to or not to participate in elections. My research consists primarily of case studies into individuals, their perceptions of Moroccan democracy, and the reasoning behind their voting practices.

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I would also like to thank my project advisor Dr. Mourad Mkinsi. The resources that he guided me to early on in my research challenged my preconceptions of the Moroccan political system and significantly shaped the trajectory of my research.

I would like to thank my peers in the SIT community in Rabat, for their support, friendship, and for exposing me to new perspectives that I would not have otherwise considered.

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# Introduction

In the 2021 Moroccan general elections, voter turnout reached 50.53%. While this was a significant increase from 2016, it still lags significantly behind the relatively high voter turnout that Morocco enjoyed closer to the turn of the 21st century. Moreover, particular groups were significantly less likely to vote. Of Moroccans just 18-24, just 33.6% were registered on the electoral lists. While the data is not yet available, it is likely that a much smaller percentage of those youths registered actually voted. Furthermore, the registration rate in urban areas (56.7%) lagged significantly behind that in rural areas (94.3%).<sup>1</sup> Among urban youth in Morocco, there seems to be a quantifiable culture of voter absenteeism. This could be written off as a result of baseless apathy and irresponsibility, but as I began to discuss voting with individuals around Rabat, I found that many had more substantive grievances with the electoral system as a whole.

In the aftermath of the elections, the Justice and Development Party released a statement calling the results of the elections “incomprehensible and illogical” and condemning perceived “electoral violations”. They furthermore alleged that electoral laws were deliberately used to stifle their power while in office and crush their influence during elections. It is likely too soon to evaluate the truth of these claims in the 2021 elections but even unfounded perceptions of pseudodemocratic practices in Morocco could potentially discourage voters from showing up to the polls in the first place. This relationship could work through a number of means, ranging from deliberate election boycotts to individual political cynicism. In my research I set out to discover whether a lack of confidence in the legitimacy of democracy in Morocco was a significant inhibiting factor for voter participation rates. In this paper I will explore the

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<sup>1</sup> Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies. (2021). The Electoral Data. In *How Did the 8 September Election Transform the Political Map in Morocco?* (pp. 2–3). Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep35913.4>

mechanisms and history of Moroccan democracy and then utilize case studies into individual citizens to see how this has translated to public opinions about voting.

## Literature Review

### Pseudodemocracy and Related Terms

In order to understand electoral practices in Morocco, it is worth defining the term “pseudo-democracy”, as well as related terms that have been used to describe the modern Moroccan state. First, however, it is necessary to briefly define the term “democracy”. In *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, Samuel Huntington defines democracy as a state in which the “most powerful collective decision makers are selected through fair, honest, and periodic elections in which candidates freely compete for votes.”<sup>2</sup> Huntington uses this term within the context of a “third-wave” of democratization in which states around the world have transitioned from authoritarian to democratic systems.

In “Elections Without Democracy: Thinking About Hybrid Regimes”, Larry Diamond complicates Huntington's definition by attempting to classify regimes that occupy some grey area between authoritarianism and democracy. Broadly, Diamond refers to these states as “hybrid regimes.” Typically these regimes began the transition to democracy by adopting multiparty elections, yet fail to clearly satisfy one or more aspects of Huntington's definition. Hybrid regimes are therefore, defined more by their ambiguity than by their satisfaction of specific requirements. It is often unclear, for example, who the “most powerful collective decision maker” is or whether an election is fair in a hybrid regime.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Huntington, S. P. (1991). *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*

<sup>3</sup> Diamond, L. (2002). Elections Without Democracy: Thinking About Hybrid Regimes. *Journal of Democracy*, 13(2), 21-35.

Within this understanding of hybrid regimes, Diamond also uses the term “pseudodemocracy” to define regimes in which “the existence of formally democratic political institutions, such as multiparty electoral competition, masks (often, in part, to legitimate) the reality of authoritarian domination<sup>4</sup>” Diamond acknowledges the international and domestic pressure on states to adopt democratic practices, and argues that regimes have responded by holding elections as a facade for an authoritarian system. Pseudodemocracy may serve to inform the autocratic leadership of popular attitudes and it may offer a space for limited political opposition, but it does not truly give significant political power to voters.<sup>5</sup>

In “Multi-Party Elections in the Arab World: Institutional Engineering and Oppositional Strategies”, Marsha Pripstein Posusney expands on the concept of pseudodemocracy and applies it to the context of Arab legislatures including the Parliament of Morocco. Posusney argues that many Arab executive leaders use contested legislative elections as evidence of a democratic government. At the same time, the executive position itself is either not legitimately contested, or is entirely unelected as is the case of the King of Morocco. This executive position is typically the ultimate authority with the ability to check any opposition from the legislature or judiciary.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the executive is able to manage elections to generally bring about favorable results. Many Arab pseudodemocracies utilize covert techniques to manipulate elections. In Arabic, “tadakhkhul” and “tazwir” are used to refer to schemes to respectively coerce voters and outright fabricate votes. Increases in international and domestic election observers have possibly curbed the use of these illegal techniques in recent years, but that has not necessarily made regimes more democratic. Posusney argues that “ [a]s regimes' resort to tadakhkhul and tazwir is

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<sup>4</sup> Diamond, L. (1999). *Democracy in developing countries*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.

<sup>5</sup> Diamond, L. (2002)..

<sup>6</sup> Posusney, M. (2002). Multi-Party Elections in the Arab World: Institutional Engineering and Oppositional Strategies. *History and Social Sciences Faculty Journal Articles*. 34-62.



restricted, electoral institutions will take on greater importance, and more struggles over election rules should result.<sup>7</sup>” Posusney specifies a number of typical techniques for openly manipulating elections including restricting unapproved political parties and instituting electoral apportionment systems that tend to penalize opposition parties.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the tendency for manipulation and marginalization, Posusney argues that opposition groups still can benefit from participating in pseudodemocratic elections. While these elections do serve to legitimize authoritarian rulers, they can also support public perception of the idea that citizens have the right to determine their own government. Furthermore, it can give media attention to opposition voices, even if those in parliament have certain restrictions on the degree of their opposition. Finally, Posusney argues that the challenging of manipulative electoral practices can help erode the legitimacy of authoritarian regimes. For all of these reasons, Posusney argues that the most effective challenge to pseudodemocracy is not boycotts, but rather participation, voting, and incremental change towards a more democratic system.<sup>9</sup>

In this paper, I will demonstrate how Morocco can be classified as both a hybrid regime and a pseudodemocracy and utilize the theories of Diamond and Posusney . First, however, I will briefly address two terms that have at times been incorrectly used to classify the Moroccan regime: “illiberal democracy” and “competitive authoritarianism”.

In “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy,” Fareed Zakaria defined the titular term as a system in which “[d]emocratically elected regimes... are routinely ignoring constitutional limits on their power and depriving their citizens of basic rights and freedoms.”<sup>10</sup> Key to this definition is

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid 37

<sup>8</sup> Ibid 35

<sup>9</sup> Ibid 51-55

<sup>10</sup> Zakaria, F. (1997). The Rise of Illiberal Democracy. *Foreign Affairs*, 76(6), 22.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/20048274>

democracy. Under Zakaria's definition, an illiberal democracy still holds mostly fair elections that grant a democratically elected government the authority to violate civil right. This distinguishes an illiberal democracy from a hybrid regime or a pseudodemocracy. While Morocco does face allegations of illiberal practices, it is not an illberal democracy as the Parliament of Morocco does not hold complete sovereign power.

Another term that has incorrectly been applied to Morocco is "competitive authoritarianism". In "Competitive Authoritarianism: The Origins and Dynamics of Hybrid Regimes in the Post-Cold War Era," Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way define the term as "civilian regimes in which formal democratic institutions are widely viewed as the primary means of gaining power, but in which fraud, civil liberties violations, and abuse of state and media resources so skew the playing field that the regime cannot be labeled democratic."<sup>11</sup> Competitive authoritarian regimes are a specific type of hybrid regimes as they hold competitive multiparty elections, yet still grant primary power to an authoritarian ruler. The two terms are not interchangeable, however. The authoritarian ruler in many hybrid regimes, like the King of Morocco, does not purport themselves to be democratically elected. Levitsky and Way even specify in their article that competitive authoritarianism requires, "the absence of non-elected "tutelary" authorities ... that limit elected officials effective power to govern."<sup>12</sup>

## A History of Moroccan Elections since 1997

In "Rituals of Power and Political Parties in Morocco: Limited Elections as Positional Strategies", Mohamed Daadaoui analyzes the strategies of both the Monarchy and various

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<sup>11</sup> Levitsky, S., & Way, L. (2010). The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism in the Post Cold War Era. In *Competitive Authoritarianism: The Origins and Dynamics of Hybrid Regimes in the Post-Cold War Era*. essay. 4

<sup>12</sup> Ibid 4

oppositional parties in their contest for control. Through his exploration of Moroccan electoral history, Daadaoui demonstrates how the monarchy has maintained a system of “manipulated pluralism. This history is critical to understanding current Moroccan attitudes towards democracy, as it informs current potential voters on their attitudes towards voting. Daadaoui ultimately describes the Moroccan electoral sphere to be regulated by two things: the state and public cynicism.<sup>13</sup>

In “Parliamentary Elections and Authoritarian Rule in Morocco”, James Sater identifies four strategies that have been consistently used by the Moroccan monarchy to retain control over electoral politics while “de-politicizing” the electorate. First, the monarchy has bolstered the electoral strength of groups that have traditionally been loyal to the monarchy, particularly rural Amazigh tribes. This strategy goes back to the first elections under King Mohammed V and draws on the Islamic concept of *bay'a*, defined in the Moroccan context as the symbolically demonstration of allegiance to the King in his capacity as Commander of the Faithful. Second, the monarchy has encouraged divides in any opposition movements and supported electoral laws that diminish the ability of the opposition to cooperate. Third, the monarchy has created political parties in order to align Morocco’s economic elites with the royal interest. Fourth, the monarchy has used its control of the Ministry of the Interior to allow certain vote fabrication (*tazwir*) or coercion (*tadakhkhul*) schemes to continue and to investigate and shut down others. Sater also notes that while more egregious *tazwir* schemes were prevalent before 1997, they have mostly been replaced with the somewhat milder *tadakhkhul*.<sup>14</sup> Before returning to Sater’s work to explore

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<sup>13</sup> Daadaoui, M. (2010). Rituals of Power and Political Parties in Morocco: Limited Elections as Positional Strategies. *Middle Eastern Studies*, 46(2), 195–219. 197

<sup>14</sup> Sater, J. N. (2009). Parliamentary Elections and Authoritarian Rule in Morocco. *Middle East Journal*, 63(3), 381–400. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20622927>. 385.

how this manipulation has influenced the public, I will first address how they have persisted throughout successive waves of democratic reform in recent Moroccan history.

While there were a number of significant developments in Parliament prior to 1997, the monarchy effectively prevented any opposition governments from forming, using both the strategies identified by Sater as well as a complete suspension of Parliament from 1965-1970. Despite this, the democratic reform oriented Koutla bloc used electoral participation to build public awareness of their cause over the long term. In 1991, Koutla brought several demands for democratic reform to King Hassan II, and over the next 5 years was able to implement many of these demands into law. Notably, an article was passed to prevent the King from dissolving Parliament. This reform effort eventually culminated in an amended Constitution in 1996 that established the modern Moroccan bicameral legislature. The previously mixed Assembly of Representatives was converted to a fully directly elected body and the indirectly-elected Assembly of Councilors was created. At the same time, new policies were implemented to support and regulate the party system including government grants for parties receiving over five percent of the vote, mandating that parties hold internal congress', and banning references to social identity groups in party platforms. Finally, the prime minister was granted a limited assortment of executive powers, while still keeping central sovereign power with the King.<sup>15</sup>

Under these amended rules, the 1997 general elections yielded unprecedented results for Morocco. Voter turnout was uncommonly high at 58% of the electorate.<sup>16</sup> The Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP) won the largest amount of seats, and King Hassan II invited the minister and human rights lawyer Abderrahmane Youssef to form a new government. This government consisting of USFP and its Koutla bloc allies was the first ever opposition government to take

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<sup>15</sup> Daadaoui, M. 2010

<sup>16</sup> Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies. (2021). *How Did the 8 September Election Transform the Political Map in Morocco?* Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies.

power after an election not just in Morocco but in the whole Arab world. Youssef, who had previously been imprisoned for his human rights activism, was now encouraged by the monarchy in his push for certain human rights reforms. At the same time, however, democratic reform efforts were less successful.<sup>17</sup>

Just over a year after Youssef was appointed Prime Minister, King Hassan II died and his son Mohammed VI took the throne. According to James Sater, there was great hope at this moment that King Mohammed would democratize the country. The results of the first election during his rule in 2002, however, proved otherwise. Once again, the USFP won the largest amount of seats with a turnout of 52%. Following the longstanding tradition of “alternance” in which the King appointed a member of the party receiving the most seats to Parliament, Mohammed rather appointed the unaffiliated technocrat Driss Jettou as Prime Minister. Sater argues that this appointment was intended to send the message that “the Monarch sought autonomy from any constitutional constraints and political expectations.”<sup>18</sup>

At the same time other changes in royal policy were also introduced that indirectly diminished the role of Parliament. The Palace sought to address a wide range of issues including human development, womens rights, and the promotion of Amazigh culture. By publically taking on these domestic policy issues through royal commisions and initiatives, Mohammed expanded the scope of the Kings role from that of his father. The King faced some criticism for the lack of democratic reforms, primarily from the USFP. At the same time he also received praise from many in the general public for his expanded role, being called the “Citizen King” or “King of the Poor”.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Daadaoui 2010

<sup>18</sup> Sater 286

<sup>19</sup> Ibid

The next chance that the electorate had to react to these changes was through the 2007 general elections, yet only a record low 37% of registered voters cast their ballots. Sater suggests a number of possible reasons for this, but turns to a June 2007 survey conducted by Al Akhawayn University. The survey found “a lack of understanding concerning the political process” but it also indicated that “the long history of neo-patrimonial practices at the local level mean that people seek to realize their immediate, material interest when voting for a candidate and not abstract political ideas.”<sup>20</sup> While a local political patron, or *zain*, could provide tangible benefits, ideas of democratic reform at the national level ultimately made little difference to the everyday lives of much of the electorate. These results are particularly worth considering when attempting to understand the rural-urban disparity in voter participation. Residents of more rural areas may benefit more from traditional political networks and representatives that they personally know.

In “Mobilizations in a hybrid regime: The 20th February Movement and the Moroccan regime” Thierry Desrues addresses the nature of the Moroccan hybrid state and how it fared during the next major Moroccan political conflict over democratic reform: The February 20th Movement in 2011. This movement was not directly sparked by internal events, but rather by protests against incumbent regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, and other Arab countries. As protests spread around the country, one of the key demands was democratization through constitutional reforms. Specifically, the Movement called for a democratically elected constituent assembly to form a new constitution.<sup>21</sup> Some activists went further, calling for the proposed assembly to

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid 391

<sup>21</sup> Desrues, Thierry. (2013). Mobilizations in a hybrid regime: The 20th February Movement and the Moroccan regime. *Mediterranean Politics*. *Current Sociology*.

“write a new social contract that puts allegiance to the monarchy aside if real democracy is to be established”<sup>22</sup>

While calls for a democratically elected Constituent Assembly were unequivocally rejected, and any proposals that questioned the centrality of the King to the Moroccan state crossed a “red-line” that would not be tolerated, the Monarchy did respond to the protests by appointing a committee for constitutional reform. While many of the more ardent members of the February 20th movement were not satisfied with this result, it did placate many citizens who feared mass repression, as had occurred during the years of lead, or revolutionary change, as other Arab countries were beginning to face.<sup>23</sup>

The resulting Constitutional reforms were a step in the direction originally called for by the February 20th Movement, but also fell short in many ways. While the Prime Minister received some new powers, including the power to dissolve Parliament, the King still remains the most powerful collective decision maker. Key powers like amending the Constitution and appointing the head of government still lie with the King. Notably, meetings of government chaired by the King, referred to as a “Council of Ministers” can veto any decisions made in meetings of government chaired by the Prime Minister, referred to as a “Council of Government”.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, many people considered the protest movement to be a finished victory, and prepared to vote in the early elections to form a new government under this Constitution.

In November 2011, the elections were finally held. Voter turnout increased somewhat from the record low 2007 elections to 46%. Despite the increase, the lack of higher voter

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<sup>22</sup> Madani, M., Maghraoui, D., & Zerhouni, S. (2012). The 2011 Moroccan Constitution: A Critical Analysis. *International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance*. 7

<sup>23</sup> Desrues, Thierry. (2013)

<sup>24</sup> Madani et. al.

mobilization may have demonstrated that popular enthusiasm for the new Constitution was not as significant as expected, atleast in comparison to the Constitution of 1996.<sup>25</sup> The results, however, were significant for one group: the previously oppositional Justice and Development Party (PJD). For the first time, they were able to form a government. Due to the new constitution, the pact of “alternance” had been formalized, meaning it was certain that party leader Abdelilah Benkirane would be appointed Prime Minister.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, the PJD took leadership of nearly every major city in Morocco. The party’s urban base would turn out to be both a strength and a liability due to the limited voter registration rates in Moroccan cities. Despite this challenge, the PJD would now be seen as responsible for living up to the demands of the protesters and shaping a new role for Parliament in the eyes of the people.

In “Reforms in Morocco: monitoring the orbit and reading the trajectory”, Mohamad al-Akhssassi evaluates the 2011 Constitutional reforms and their implementation over the next several years. He particularly identifies how the PJD struggled to resolve many of the economic issues that the public now believed Parliament to be responsible for. al-Akhssassi particularly points to the growing fiscal deficit in Morocco as an issue that the PJD received significant criticism for. In the sphere of democratization, the PJD also faced great criticism for the rate at which they were able to add and ratify the laws that would fulfill the constitutional reforms. According to al-Akhssassi, however, many of these criticisms were unfounded. The PJD did ratify most of the organizational laws in a timely manner, and continued to work on those that were more complex to pass in Parliament. Still, perceptions that the power of Parliament had increased, in turn increased the expectations put upon them by the Moroccan people.<sup>27</sup> Despite

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<sup>25</sup> Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies. (2021)

<sup>26</sup> Desrués, Thierry. (2013).

<sup>27</sup> al-Akhssassi, M. (2017). Reforms in Morocco: monitoring the orbit and reading the trajectory. *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, 10(4), 482–509. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48599912>



these criticisms, the PJD generally maintained favorable support, and gained 12 additional seats during the 2016 elections. Once again, however, voter turnout in this election lagged to just 43%. Some of this can be attributed to boycotts from several left-leaning and smaller Islamic parties who were disgruntled with the continued executive authority of the King.<sup>28</sup> Regardless of the cause, these results demonstrated that the path to democratization in Morocco was far from simple.

## Legal and Political Context of the 2021 Elections

The political situation in Morocco during the 2021 Elections was primarily defined by two things: a new electoral law and a worldwide economic crisis. In *Elections in Morocco: Containing Political Islamism with Mathematics*, Rania Elghazouli explores the mathematics and motives behind the parliamentary electoral law amendments that were approved by nearly every party in Parliament outside of the PJD. Previously, parliamentary seats were distributed by dividing the number of votes received by a party by the total number of votes. As the PJD in 2017 received 1.6 million votes, primarily from urban voters, out of a total of 5.8 million votes cast, they proportionally received 125 of the 395 Parliamentary seats. Under the new amendments, votes received would instead be divided by the total number of eligible voters. This would penalize both large parties and parties that rely on urban voters, both defining characteristics of the PJD. As Elghazouli proves using mathematical analysis, “a party who obtains 40 000 votes in one electoral district could gain just as many seats as a party who obtains 100 votes”<sup>29</sup> The PJD opposed this change as an example of “democratic regression”, but could not stop it from being passed by their smaller rival parties.

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<sup>28</sup> Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies. (2021)

<sup>29</sup> Ibid

While having to contend with this new policy, the PJD also had to respond to an unprecedented crisis in Morocco. While the COVID-19 pandemic decimated the tourism and service industry, a drought caused major problems in the agriculture industry. All of these factors put the PJD in a difficult position as it needed to win over significantly more voters in a wider range of areas just to hold on to its existing seats. Voter turnout was up slightly from recent years at 50.18%, but as results came back it was clear that it was a landslide defeat for the PJD. The PJD won just 13 seats, constituting the biggest defeat of a political party in independent Moroccan history. At the same time, two “administration parties” with connections to the King gained power, the RNI and PAM. The Doha Institute report cites a number of factors leading to this including “electoral law changes and royal interference, the role of electoral money, ..But all this cannot hide the fact that a widespread punitive vote took place against the party.”<sup>30</sup> Still, the report notes that the nature of the Moroccan hybrid regime in some ways led to these defeats. Even though the PJD nominally led the government, they had no choice but to go along with many policies opposed by their base, including normalization of relations with Israel and the legalization of medical cannabis.

In the wake of the PJD’s defeat, the RNI formed a new government under RNI leader Aziz Akhannouch. This has brought parties close to the King back into power, while leaving the PJD back into the opposition.<sup>31</sup> It is yet to be determined just what impact this has had on the public perception of democracy in Morocco.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid

<sup>31</sup> Ibid

# Methodology

## Goals

As I began this research, I sought to understand how the Moroccan electoral system is perceived by individuals, and how that informs their attitudes towards voting. I particularly wanted to focus on the citizens who are demographically least likely to be registered voters: urban residents between 18 and 24 years old.

## Constraints and Limitations

I faced a number of anticipated and unanticipated constraints in my research. First, I knew that I was asking people to share their opinions on sensitive topics including government corruption, electoral politics, and the role of the King. This meant that surveys, one-time focus groups, and other short term research methods would likely yield unsatisfying results. I needed to hear from people who trusted me enough to share their personal opinions on these subjects. I also chose to leave my participants anonymous in order to make them more comfortable in sharing their opinions.

With the need to develop longer relationships in mind, I also had to consider my geographical constraints. Coronavirus related travel policies as well as my limited time in Morocco restricted my ability to form long term connections of this sort in communities outside of Rabat. While this constraint did prevent me from interviewing a broader range of Moroccan society, it did allow me to focus my research on residents of Rabat.

Language was also a significant barrier. If I only interviewed research participants in English, I knew I would be getting a highly skewed view of the population. I interviewed one participant who spoke limited English primarily in a blend of Fusha and Darija Arabic. This

required great patience on the participants part as we attempted to communicate complex issues through my limited Arabic, but ultimately was very informative.

Finally, and most significantly, was an unforeseen constraint on my research. In the middle of the night I was abruptly informed that due to the Moroccan flight restrictions my cohort and I would have to leave the country early. This restricted my ability to find new sources and unfortunately caused me to have to cancel a handful of planned interviews. Nevertheless, through WhatsApp I was able to maintain existing connections with certain research participants and complete an amended research plan.

## Methods

Given my goals and constraints, I chose to intensely focus my research. Rather than gather limited data from a wide range of participants, I chose two specific research participants to biographize and contrast. These individuals had a few qualities that made them particularly helpful. I had met them multiple times over a longer period in my research. We spoke regularly about their political opinions both through formal interview questions and regular discussions. I was then able to stay in contact with them over WhatsApp after I had to leave Morocco. Through all these interactions, I believe I developed a solid understanding of their beliefs. Furthermore, I believe these two individuals represented two very different backgrounds and held two very different sets of opinions. Collectively, I believe they represent many of the ideas I heard expressed in other short term interviews and offhand conversations. Of course two people can never be fully representative of an entire demographic group, but I believe that their beliefs and reasoning is helpful for broadly understanding certain common political sentiments among young Moroccans in Rabat.

# Findings

## Two Citizen Profiles - To Vote or Not to Vote

**Participant 1** is a 23 year old student at Mohammed V University in Rabat. He is originally from a smaller town in the East of Morocco where his family still lives. He considers himself to be politically involved and generally supports the PJD.

*“Everywhere you hear that its very useless and nothing will change, I dont believe in that. I dont believe it will change the world, but I’m maybe in between. I believe we do some impact. It’s a small impact but we do it. We try atleast to choose a man that we trust and try to put them at the top in a small region. Even a neighborhood. If we succeed to put the right man at the head of just a small neighborhood I believe that that is an impact. But if we choose to not vote that is a negative decision that I wouldn’t take.”*

### **Did you vote?**

Participant 1 intended to vote, but was not able to get on the Rabat voter rolls. He explained that in order to be able to vote away from your hometown, you have to file a request to be added to the local rolls. His request was received, but rejected and he is not sure why. He explained that in order to appeal this decision, he would have to return to the court in his hometown. This was not an option for Participant 1 in the timeframe, so he was unable to vote.

Beyond his own situation, Participant 1 told me that many other people he knows faced this same problem during the elections, including two local leaders in the PJD. He thinks this

could have been an act of manipulation, but he ultimately doesn't think he can definitively say so without proof. Regardless of the intent behind it, he believes this is a significant problem for democracy.

### **Do you think the reported vote counts are true?**

Participant 1 is reluctant to draw any conclusion without evidence. Still, he finds it hard to believe that the PJD went from 125 seats to just 13 in one election. He says he anticipated the PJD to lose a significant number of seats, but says that the most pessimistic reasonable estimates would still leave them with around 40 seats in Parliament. He acknowledges that the PJD has legitimately lost the support of many people, and he personally has criticism of them. He doesn't think any one cause can be blamed for their loss.

### **Is the electoral system fair for all parties?**

He believes that the new electoral law is a strategy to get the PJD out of Moroccan politics by dividing their base into many much smaller parties. He argues that this ultimately makes Parliament less powerful as it is harder to have one unified organization pushing for laws.

### **Does voting matter?**

Participant 1 says that voting generally does not make a huge impact in Morocco but it is still important. He gives the example of his home city in which one family was in power for more than 20 years. He alleges that this family was corrupt and did little with their office besides enriching themselves. He says that the city has noticeably changed for the better since the PJD took leadership of the city in 2011. This had an important impact on his and his families life. He

hopes to be able to continue to vote for the PJD in his city, although he is not sure if he wants to continue to support them in national elections.

**Participant 2** is a 24 year old employee in the service industry in Rabat. He is originally from a rural area in the South of Morocco where his family still lives. He holds a degree in Islamic Studies. He does not consider himself to be politically involved or affiliated with a certain party.

*“It does not matter which party wins because all parties are the same. The important thing is to change people, not parties”*

### **Did you vote?**

Participant 2 did not vote, citing a lack of time. He also says, however, that he would not know who to vote for if he did. According to Participant 1, no matter which government holds power the same problems still persist. He particularly thinks of the new Prime Minister Aziz Akhannouch as an example. In the previous government, Akhannouch served as Minister of Agriculture. Participant 2 cited a number of specific food items that became vastly more expensive during Akhannouch’s tenure. For many Moroccans, he argues, food prices are the main ways the government can affect their lives. The fact that Akhannouch is a billionaire makes it all the more discouraging that he failed to protect poorer Moroccans from rising food prices. This system, according to Participant 2, makes voting effectively pointless. Whether the government is controlled by the PJD or the NRI, elite figures like Akhannouch will remain in power.

### **Do you think the reported vote counts are true?**

Participant 1 does not think the reported vote counts are accurate, but he does not make any claims of specific fraud. Rather, he has no confidence in the Moroccan electoral system and says that election manipulation is a common occurrence. Participant 1 told me about a friend of his who went to the polls and selected every single option on the ballot in order to invalidate it. His friend did not want to vote, but believed that doing so would prevent his ballot from being used for fraudulent purposes. Participant 1 does not personally follow this practice, but he understands his friends motivations.

### **Is the electoral system fair for all parties?**

Participant 1 does not have a strong opinion on the new electoral law or the electoral system. As we continued to discuss the new law he did agree with sentiments that it could be motivated by opposition to the PJD, but he does not independently hold these views.

### **Does voting matter?**

Participant 1's beliefs on this topic are somewhat nuanced. He believes that Parliament has a significant impact on the lives of citizens and that it is important who is in Parliament. At the same time, however, he does not believe that voting is an effective way to bring the right people into Parliament.

## **Conclusions**

I sought out to determine how pseudodemocratic practices have affected young Moroccans decision to or not to vote. Ultimately I found that this demographic is not monolithic, but can primarily be analyzed in two groups. First, people like Participant 1 have actually been



encouraged to participate in the democratic process due to practices that they see as corrupt or unfair. While they do not have revolutionary expectations for their votes, they believe that it is their best chance at pursuing a slow path to reform. These voters are usually particularly politically informed, and have strong opinions on a variety of political issues.

On the other hand, there are many young Moroccans who have been so alienated by the electoral system that they have nearly completely disconnected from it. People like Participant 2 also have strong opinions about political issues, but usually do not follow the political process as closely. While I cannot claim that my interviews reached a truly representative sample, I did find that far more young Moroccans I met fell into this second category.

Between the two groups, however, there does seem to be a shared consensus that the Moroccan electoral system is more of a facade for other influences than a legitimate democracy. Many young Moroccans are very aware of the political history within their lifetime, with many having been born around the seminal 1997 elections. Ultimately, continued controversy, secrecy, and shortcomings in the process of democratization have left young Moroccans with low estimations of their own democratic power. They differentiated themselves, however, in how they chose to respond.

## Recommendations for Further Study

I intend to expand this study when I have the opportunity to return to Morocco and see several opportunities to further explore this issue. Beyond continuing with the research methods I pursued already, I intend to reach out to young Moroccans regularly involved in protests. I would like to investigate whether these protests are a replacement for or a supplement to electoral

participation. Beyond this, there are ample opportunities to expand this research into other demographics. The urban-rural divide in voter registration is a particularly interesting issue. I came across a number of hypotheses for this in my research, including more comprehensive “political machines” in rural areas as well as the prevalence of vote buying. I also would like to further investigate the barriers in registration faced by Participant 2 and see if challenges related to moving to the voter rolls in urban areas is a contributing cause to this discrepancy. Finally, future action, or inaction, related to democratization by the new Akhannouch government will make it worthwhile to revisit this ongoing issue in several years.

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