The Sense of Elections in the Maghreb Countries

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Questioning the sense of the elections in the central Maghreb countries – Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia – seems relevant, but somewhat incongruous at the same time. It is relevant as it enables the present state of the political systems to be assessed, albeit imperfectly, questioning above all whether the elites have the capacity to share the power, particularly with the Islamists, on the basis of the Turkish model. At the same time, even though the significant progress made over the last 20 years as regards transparency and electoral competition is genuine, it has not had any effect on the formation of governments, the rotation of the elites in power or the defining of public policies.

In reality, these parameters of democracy are extended in environments that remain fundamentally marked by political authoritarianism and conservatism. We could thus be tempted to wonder, as Guy Hermet did in the past with regard to Latin America, "Why hold elections?"

Political Legitimacy Regardless of the Elections

Since the independence of the three countries in question, elections do not make a great deal of sense in terms of the popular will. The sense of representation has been distorted as the idea of legitimacy has remained separate from political representation. Those with a mandate to exercise power did so in the name of their struggle for independence: legitimacy was not obtained by going to the polls.

This historical legitimacy linked to the struggles for independence has been monopolised in Tunisia and Algeria by the single party, and symbolised in all three countries by a leader whose charisma was similarly linked to the fight against the French colonisers.

In Tunisia, Habib Bourguiba personified the father of the nation, and in Algeria, Houari Boumediene established a strong State resting on a structured army that was to become the country's main political actor. In Morocco, although the monarchical institution embodied historical legitimacy, it has been linked with the country's construction around the Crown since independence was attained in 1956, at the same time favouring political pluralism. Here, the choice of a multi-party system was dictated by the monarchy in order to prevent the Istiqlal party from taking over the political arena.

Up until the 1980s, the entire political discourse in all three countries revolved around maintaining national unity and the country's development. The question of elections was considered a marginal affair, with the countries' leaders highlighting a legitimacy that had been hard to come by in the fight for the country's liberation, and which would give them, as they put it, a mandate for representing their fellow citizens.

At the time, this concept of representation was based on the idea of delegation, with the political elites constituting themselves as representatives.[1] However, these legitimacies inherited from the countries' independence were to become progressively depleted, and from the mid-1970s – and even more so in the 1980s – numerous crises were to reveal this disintegration of the former legitimacies. Both here and there, a

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[1] The expression was coined by Michel Camau, at the round table debate, "The sense of electoral consultation in the Maghreb today". Ifri, Paris, 11 October 2002.

wave of workers' and students' strikes occurred, riots brought about by the increase in the price of bread, progressively widespread retaliatory action, and, in Morocco, two coups d'état against the King. The younger generation, born long after the advent of independence, caused the image of a state expected to blend in with society and the nation in a single national unity to stress the construction rather than the reality, giving rise to a serious rift between them and the leaders. This calling into question of the state's distributive function was coupled with a crisis in political representation: many citizens did not identify with the political elites.

Institutional planning was implemented during the 1980s in order to overcome this growing distance between the leaders and the citizens. In Tunisia, from 1981, Bourguiba resolved to put an end to the single-party era. The elections did not constitute a real democratic transition, however, as they were marked by reciprocal mistrust. The Tunisians witnessed how the proliferation of parties failed to create any real competition, as the former single party (PSD) simply became the dominant party; and although President Bourguiba showed he was willing to make some changes in his style of government, he was by no means prepared to accept the verdict of the polls. The authorities did not appear to have mastered the pluralist struggle, fearing claims and revindications from the parties in the opposition.

The 1989 elections were yet another missed appointment for democratic transition. In the first general elections of the "new era", marked by President Ben Ali's ascent to power, the dominant party, renamed the Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique (RCD), continued to merge with the State, personified in its leader.

In the mid-1980s in Algeria, the abandonment of the socialist model and the sharp drop in oil prices led to the traumatic experience of October 1988. The political leaders opted for pluralism and abandoned the single party, the FLN.

The grounds for a democratic system were implemented with real freedom of press and political pluralism, and the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), an Islamist party, was recognised and stood for the general elections, obtaining a landslide victory. The Algerian High Command's refusal to acknowledge the victory of the Islamists at the polls led to the legislative elections being cancelled, and the suspension of the electoral process plunged the country into civil war lasting over 7 years and causing some 200,000 deaths.

In this precise context, as shown by Luis Martínez (2000), the election had the opposite effect from that intended. Instead of stabilising the power, renewing the elites and providing the authorities with internal regulation, it destabilised the regime, contributed to the collapse of the national community, destroyed the elites and, above all, installed long-lasting violence in the country. Martínez equates this failed election to violence, bloodshed and war.

In spite of the background of civil war, the army, concerned with maintaining the system whilst remaining in the shadow, held a series of polls between 1995 and 1997. The smooth running of these electoral consultations and the fact that they were held on regular dates, as scheduled, showed that they were intended to progressively normalise the country's political life, while providing the regime with a legal structure.

The Staging of a Formal Democracy

During the 1990s, the elections held in each of the countries took place against a background of change to which the executive aspired: *Changer la vie* was the slogan popularised by President Chadli Benjedid; the Tunisians talked about the *Nouvelle ère* embarked on by President Ben Ali, and in Morocco, King Hassan II's *Alternance* was the key word – a controlled, consensual political opening bringing an opposition party into political play.

In this context, the elections were intended to lead to a political opening and express the renewed political link between the voters and the political leaders. These polls were different from those that had been held previously, as the ruling class made a considerable effort for the schedule to be observed. This concern for formal legality contrasted sharply with the people's questioning of the sense of the elections. In the three countries contemplated, the authorities highlighted a multi-party political framework and held elections on a regular basis, scrupulously respecting the electoral schedule. They also multiplied the mechanisms of political control, showcasing transparency as if in a bid to break with past periods while surrounding the polls with a multitude of procedural guarantees. All these precautions were intended to provide the authorities with symbolic coherence, while showing concern for constitutional legality.

This legalist aspect was highlighted to such an extent that it became a genuine political programme in

itself, and the electoral campaigns stressed the procedures more than the actual political issues of the campaign. In actual fact, these elections indicated a desire for a top-down transformation; in spite of the concern for transparency and openness, they were controlled by the authorities.

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In Algeria, the construction of an institutional edifice with a democratic façade between 1995 and 1997 was censured once again by dissensions arising within the army and which were at the origin of President Zéroual's resignation. Despite this crisis and the fact that it forced the presidential elections to be brought forward, the army did not relinquish the de facto power it had held since 1965. In 1999, it used the same method as it had tried out after the death of Boumediene: that of a candidate being designated by the High Command. The outgoing President did not keep his promise of free, transparent elections: Abdelaziz Buteflika was elected by default in April 1999, the other six candidates having withdrawn on the eve of the polls to condemn the fraud and manipulation.

In this case, despite procedural guarantees and a discourse hailing transparency, the leaders had difficulty in keeping their promises as regards the elections. By allowing the people to express themselves freely, they ran the risk of a landslide Islamist victory taking place, as had been the case in Algeria in 1991. This lack of competence in dealing with unknown quantities led them to a continuous "patching up" of the results. Change resided in less manipulation and the fact that it was not visible. As for the voters, they were much more attentive to the existence of fraud than to the actual political programme put forward by each party. This game of reciprocal mistrust was revealed by record abstention figures and the refusal to vote of entire regions, such as Kabylie.

In reality, this staging of a formal democracy distracted the citizens' attention from the real issues that should have been on the table at election time.

For example, the day after the September 2002 general elections in Morocco, the debate was monopolised by the government party and the idea of electoral transparency, two factors seemingly less important than the breakthrough of the Justice and Development Party (PJD) Islamists, who obtained 42 seats in Parliament but did not form part of the government.

The Deceptive Nature of the General Elections

However, just as pluralism did not bring about a true democratic opening, neither was transparency able to constitute a genuine end in itself. It concealed the basic debates that could have focused on the change in the political systems, the efficiency of Parliament, the autonomy of the political parties, mobility, the rejuvenation of the political elites, and so on.

As a result, the high abstention rate recorded did not necessarily mean a lack of interest in politics in general, but very probably a rejection of the form of governance. The voters did not identify with these tactics of deception, intended to give the impression of an incipient democratisation, particularly as their priorities were totally left out of the electoral campaigns. The general elections held in Algeria and Morocco in 2002 in fact showed a very significant abstention rate (54% in the case of Algeria and 50% in Morocco), due to various reasons. First of all, in both cases, the National Assembly did not symbolise the seat of political power. Also, in Algeria, the party leaders in the running had been more concerned with convincing the voters to go to the polls than with actually putting forward any real electoral programme. Apart from the Prime Minister Benflis, the candidates did not succeed in rallying the population. The Algerians were aware of the logic of power underlying these polls, i.e. President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's pursuit of popular support in order to reinforce his position with respect to the generals, and the latter's concern to give the false impression of an outwardly democratic system. On a national level, the high abstention rate certainly owed a lot to the Kabylie region, where the movement of the *arouchs* or village committees – Kabylie's active voice since 2001– had called for an "active boycott." It was therefore not a question of a refusal to vote, but rather of the elections being prevented by physical threats to the voters.

Also in Morocco, the 2002 general elections showed the Islamists of the PJD to be the third largest political

force in the country, when they won 42 seats in Parliament as opposed to the 14 they had held before. Five years later, the challenge posed when general elections were held again in these two countries was not the profound transformation of the political landscape, but rather the display of the pursuance and consolidation of institutional democratisation, with the consequent modernisation of the political systems. In both cases the abstention rate was even higher than in 2002 (over 65%). There were two basic reasons for this disaffection: the lack of, or weakness of, the parties' electoral programmes, and the fact that the National Assembly did not yet symbolise the real seat of power.

The National Assembly did not yet symbolise the real seat of power

In Algeria, the population has a negative image of the National Assembly itself and, consequently, of the members of Parliament. It consists of 20 parties, although this does not mean it represents political diversity. On the contrary the candidates are uniform, almost all of them from the presidential majority. The real opposition has been marginalised by the authorities, and many political parties, such as the Socialist Forces Front (FFS), led by Hocine Aït Ahmed, regularly call for boycotts of the elections. Consequently, the 20 parties making up the Assembly are actually artificially maintained in order to give the impression of a democratic, pluralist system.

These parties have no real political programme and no real base, and their leaders are the figures referred to in Algiers as the "political intermittents."

Without a programme or any issues capable of mobilising public opinion, during the electoral campaign these individuals spent their time convincing the electors that they should vote, so much so that it could lead us to believe that the mere fact of placing a voting paper in a ballot box has become a genuine programme in itself.

The National Assembly is not totally devoid of constitutional powers, however: it has the means of censoring and controlling the government, and of installing investigation and ministerial interpellation committees. Nevertheless, in the last two general elections it has shown itself excessively submissive to the executive power. By concentrating all the pow-

ers in his own hands, President Bouteflika has finished up reducing the National Assembly to a mere registration room.

In Morocco, the issues dealt with in the legislative consultation of the same year, 2007, were of differing importance, as the PJD, who represented Islam and was keen to compare itself to the party of the same name in Turkey, were expected to win the elections. But this party of the masses, with its sound electoral base, did not achieve the results it had expected for itself, forecasting twice the number of parliamentary seats it actually won. These merely increased from 42 to 46, and it was even superseded by the long-standing conservative party Istiqlal, which won 52.

For the PJD, which had positively imposed itself on the Moroccan political landscape within the short space of ten years, this feeble advance represented a setback essentially due to the way in which the count had been made (according to the highest remainder rule), with a system favouring dispersion so that the winning party would not totally dominate the political scene.

Also, as had been the case in Algeria, the electors could not have found a better response to this consultation than their mass refusal to vote, as in the Moroccan political system all the major decisions are taken by the King, and not by Parliament.

The PJD's leaders were even more embittered by these lacklustre results as they felt that their career had been faultless. In fact they had overcome many political challenges, particularly their being blacklisted after the Casablanca terrorist attacks of 2003. To blend in with and form a long-lasting part of the political landscape, they provided the monarchy with proof of good conduct by reconsidering their position on a number of issues, for example the reform of the Personal Status Code (*Mudawana*), the free trade agreement signed by the USA, and even by accepting a downward negotiation of their number of National Assembly seats with the Royal Palace (2002). (Mohsen-Finan and Zeghal, 2006).

In doing this, the PJD probably ran the risk of disappointing those who saw it as a protest party able to deal with the problems in society that were not being faced by the authorities. The near-sightedness shown with regard to the monarchy perhaps blurred the party's identity, their main vocation being that of a negation party (Mohsen-Finan and Zeghal, 2007).

For the PJD's leaders, their lack of success was due to the vote-buying that had been practised by the other parties when the King had promised free, trans-

parent elections. In actual fact, the two factors coexisted perfectly. The elections were indeed transparent, in accordance with the monarchy's desire for political opening. Also to the monarchy's credit was the fact that the PJD found its niche in the Moroccan political landscape. While profiting from this transparency and winning 4 seats, however, it did not escape the authorities' instrumentalisation of the political parties, particularly as regards constituency redistricting.

The PJD did not escape the authorities' instrumentalisation of the political parties

In reality, the political opening was just as carefully measured and orchestrated by the monarchy as ever. This concentration of power is in clear opposition to the democratisation advocated by the King. At the same time it puts the sense of the elections and the sense of political pluralism into perspective, as what is really essential is not a party's actual presence in Parliament or in the government, but whether it has enough manoeuvring room to be able to influence the political decision-making.

Today, these countries showcase democracy while refusing to recognise the verdict of the elections. But while the electoral rendezvous and ballot transparency undeniably constitute progress as regards political opening, in themselves they are insufficient for us to be able to speak of any real democratic functioning. This democracy hailed by the authorities and to which they regularly refer requires substance. It cannot be constructed without taking into account the group of citizens forming its base. It must also be supported by unifying schemes allowing the consensus obtained during the struggle against colonisation to be renewed. When democratic issues are stressed but a demo-

cratic government is not actually installed, in a way, discussing it is simply a form of escapism (Hermet, 2007), geared to avoiding facing up to the problems that really exist: unemployment, uncontrolled youth with no ambition and no future, radical Islamist networks increasingly able to recruit "volunteers" for suicide, the wear and ageing of the political systems and politicians, the difficulty in avoiding nationalism and fully accessing internationalisation, and so on.

In this context, when elections are held without the citizens being consulted and taken into account, they simply make use of their privilege of not taking part in something that could represent a strong, comfortable consensus for the creators of this deceptive democracy.

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